
Charming
ARTEMIS
TWO FAMILIES.
TWO SWORN ENEMIES.
ONE LOVE STORY TO
UNITE THEM ALL.
FROM USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
SARAH M. EDEN

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Covenant Communications, Inc.

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Praise for Sarah M. Eden

“Heartfelt, amusing and oh, so romantic, you don’t want to miss a single book of this series!”

—Regina Jennings, National Reader’s Choice Award winner, author of *The Major’s Daughter*

“Sarah M. Eden’s Jonquil and Lancaster books have provided me with so many favorites in the genre. They are the epitome of what a Regency romance novel should bring to the table: strong, lovable characters; charming historical detail; and, above all, a love story that makes us believe in happily ever after. Seeing the cover of *Charming Artemis* was wish fulfillment for thousands of fans; I join them in the thrill of knowing this story is finally going to be out in the world and in the sadness of realizing this is the final book for both series. *Charming Artemis* is going to take the world by storm.”

—Esther Hatch, Foreword INDIES award-winning author of the A Proper Scandal series

“Eden does a great job researching her facts, and she really brings Regency England to life in an enjoyable and accessible way. Sometimes Regency romances try too hard to sound Austenesque, but Eden adds just enough authentic language to keep the setting real without detracting from the story.”

—Julie Daines, author of *It Started in Budapest*

“Sarah Eden’s ability to portray real, raw emotions is incredible.”

—Karen Thornell, author of *To Marry an Earl*

“Sarah M. Eden’s characters are so real and so charming they linger in your heart long after her books end. The Jonquil and Lancaster families can be revisited over and over again without ever losing their appeal.”

—Sian Ann Bessey, Foreword INDIES award-winning author of the Georgian Gentlemen series

“Set in Nottinghamshire, England, 1785, *Forget Me Not* is the debut volume of author Sarah M. Eden’s new The Gents historical romance series, and it effectively showcases her narrative storytelling skills and total mastery of the Georgian romance genre. Fully developed characters, unexpected plot twists, nicely crafted background details, *Forget Me Not* is

especially and unreservedly recommended for community library romance fiction collections."

—Midwest Book Review

"The plot of this book is one that may have been seen before, but the way Sarah M. Eden writes the characters brings it to an entirely new level. The characters are immediately likeable and ones who readers will become attached to and be eager to find out what happens with them. Dialogue and descriptions are spot on for the time in which the book is set. Fans of the genre will love this book and lose themselves in the beautiful setting and romance!"

—*InD'Tale Magazine*, five star review

"*Forget Me Not* is everything I've come to eagerly anticipate from Sarah M. Eden! Lucas and Julia's story kicks off a new series sure to delight fans of Eden's Jonquil series (if you haven't read that series, what are you waiting for?) as well as win her brand-new readers. I adored every page of this story. My only complaint? I finished it in a day. Highly recommended!"

—Melissa Tagg, Carol award-winning author of the Walker Family series and *Now and Then and Always*

"Eden is a talented writer who makes historical, Regencies, Westerns, or whatever genre she tackles exciting and informative. I've no doubt readers will fall in love with her new Gents series, of which *Forget Me Not* is only the first volume."

—*Meridian* Magazine

"A heartfelt and captivating escape into Georgian England, *Forget Me Not* is everything I've come to love in Sarah M. Eden's novels. This first book in a brand new series is charming, immersive, and beautifully written, and readers will fall in love with not just Julia and Lucas, but all The Gents, and be waiting eagerly for all their stories."

—Joanna Barker, Whitney Award finalist, author of *Secrets & Suitors*

To Katherine, my Artemis

may you always know your own strength, love with all your heart,
and never stop fighting for what you want most in life

Acknowledgments

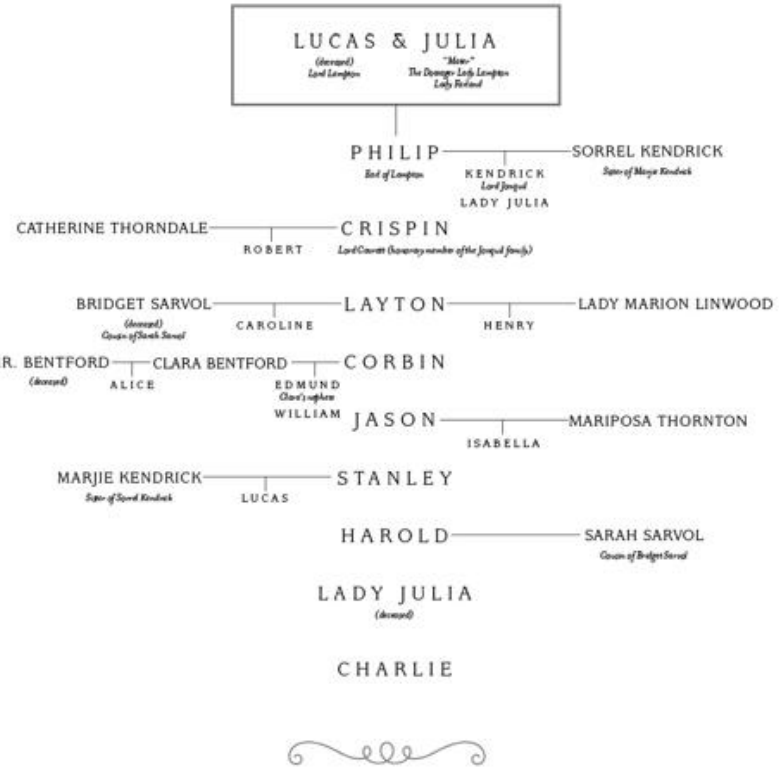
MY HEARTFELT GRATITUDE GOES TO . . .

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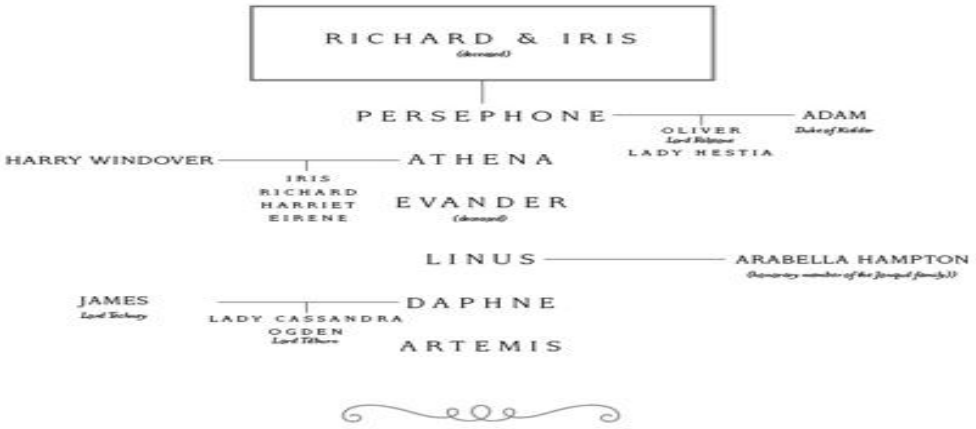
EARLY 1818

SIMPLIFIED FAMILY TREES

Jonquil



Lancaster


RICHARD & IRIS
(deceased)
PERSEPHONE
ADAM
Duke of Kidder
OLIVER
Lord Tilbury
LADY HESTIA
HARRY WINDOVER
ATHENA
IRIS
RICHARD
HARRIET
EIRENE
EVANDER
(deceased)
LINUS
ARABELLA HAMPTON
(honorary member of the Jessop family))
JAMES
Lord Berkley
DAPHNE
LADY CASSANDRA
OGDEN
Lord Tilbury
ARTEMIS

Chapter One

Shropshire, 1803

Artemis Lancaster didn't often go to the village with her older sisters. The family took in laundry for pay, requiring that they trek to the market square twice each week, once to retrieve their baskets and bundles and once to return them. But this time, Artemis had finally been allowed to come along.

Father was making the journey as well. He never talked to her. She knew he didn't like her, but she wanted him to. He was forever telling Persephone, her oldest sister, how grateful he was to her for working so hard and being so helpful. Persephone was eighteen years old now. She was quite grown up. Artemis was six, and though she seemed too little to be very helpful, this was her chance to show him *she* was a good girl and a helpful one. She would try. She always tried.

She carried one of the laundry baskets all the way to Heathbrook, though it was nearly too large for her to do so. Over and over, she looked to her father, hoping he would notice she was working without complaint.

He didn't look at her. Not once. He never did.

At the market cross, she gave Persephone her basket to place on the low wall, where they were meant to wait for those retrieving the laundry the sisters had collected earlier in the week.

"I'm for the bookshop," Father said.

Persephone nodded. She didn't look surprised. Did Father often go to the bookshop while the girls waited for the laundry to be claimed?

A large, stern-faced woman came over to them.

Persephone looked over their baskets. "It's that one." She motioned to the basket nearest Athena, the sister just younger than she.

The three of them talked through whatever it was they needed to discuss about the laundry. There was nothing for Artemis to do. Father might have something she could do. He would be ever so grateful if she were helpful and hardworking.

She hurried off in the direction he'd gone, rushing to catch up with him. The market cross was busy. The press of people on the high street was greater than she'd realized. But a hardworking girl would not give up easily. She wove around them. She picked herself up when the jostling left her sprawled on the ground. The second and third time it happened, she scraped her knees and hands.

The hem of her dress tore. Father would not be pleased. Clothes came dear, and the family had so little money. Of that she was absolutely certain. Few things were spoken of more often.

Artemis made her way to a shop front, away from the pressing crowd. Her heart was beating in her hands, and they were red and sore. One of her knees was bleeding.

Ought she to continue after Father? He might think her too horrible a sight and wish her gone. He'd never say as much. He never said anything to her.

Her shoulders drooped. Perhaps it'd be best to just go back to Persephone and Athena. They didn't need her help though. Father might. And he might be really happy to have her with him. For once.

She would try. She would be very brave and try.

She trekked down the road, ignoring the pain in her hands and knees, determined to show her father she was a good daughter. But she didn't find a bookshop. She turned down a different road. And didn't find it there either.

Long moments passed. The streets blurred together.

She didn't know where she was or how to find her sisters again. Or her father. Or how to get home.

She was lost.

Panic swelled in her throat, making her breaths jump and catch. Tears poured from her eyes with her deep, painful sobs. What if no one found her? What if no one even realized she was gone? Her family might simply go home and forget they had a little sister.

Artemis dropped to the ground, curled into a ball, and wept and wept. She was so very lost and alone.

"What's happened?" A man's voice, soft and gentle. "Why are you crying?"

She lifted her head the smallest bit. A man she didn't know knelt on the ground in front of her. He was near enough that she'd heard him even though he'd whispered, yet he was also far enough away that she felt calm despite his being unknown to her.

He smiled a bit. His was a very friendly face. "Are you hurt?"

She nodded and held up her scraped palms. "I fell."

"I am sorry to hear that." He shifted a little, sitting instead of kneeling. She'd not ever known a grown person who would sit on the ground and in

the dirt. They were always so very worried about getting smudges and mud on their clothes. “Did you injure yourself in any other way?” he asked.

She wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. “My knees. And I tore my dress.”

The man pulled a handkerchief from his pocket—a large square of very white fabric with tiny flowers embroidered along one edge—and gave it to her. “You are very young to be here all on your own.” He spoke with a look on his face and a sound in his voice that said he was worried about her. “Is your family nearby?”

“I lost them,” she said with a sniffle. “There were too many people, and I got knocked down, then I couldn’t tell where I was.”

“Dab at your nose and eyes,” he said. “I’ll help you find your family.”

“You will?”

He smiled tenderly. “I’ll not leave you until you’ve found them.”

It was a kind offer, yet it made her cry. She wasn’t sure why.

The man didn’t scold her or walk away in disgust.

“Cry all you need. Holding back tears only makes them fall harder.”

He understood. She knew he did. Oh, how she’d needed someone to see her, to understand the tears that sat on her heart all the time.

She scooted closer to him and rested her head against his chest. He set an arm lightly around her. His gentle touch, the kindness in his eyes reminded her of Persephone—comforting and reassuring—yet he was more of an age with her father. Her father, who never noticed her the way her sister did. She closed her eyes and cried ever harder. She held the man’s handkerchief to her face, too distraught to wipe or dab at the flowing tears.

“I am so sorry you’ve had a difficult day, Princess,” he said quietly.

“Every . . . day is . . . difficult,” she said, her cries breaking the sentence up in odd bits. “We have to do wash for people. And I . . . carried the basket, but my father didn’t notice. He doesn’t ever notice.”

“He doesn’t notice baskets?”

“He doesn’t notice *me*.”

The man’s voice somehow grew even kinder. “I am sorry.”

She took a deep but shaking breath. No matter that her heart and mind were spinning about faster than a top, she felt safe and protected. She never felt that way. Not ever.

“If you would like, Princess,” he said, “we can walk about the town and look for your family. Or we can sit here and see if they come down this road

looking for you.”

“Do you think they are looking for me?” she asked hopefully.

“I am certain they are.”

That brought her more comfort than she would have expected. “Do you think we should go look for them or wait here?”

He gave her a light, fleeting squeeze. “I leave that decision entirely to you.”

Artemis spun the man’s handkerchief around in her hands as she pondered. Walking up and down the roads of Heathbrook would likely be tiring. But if they sat on that spot waiting for her family to come looking and they never came, that, she knew, would utterly break her heart. “I think we should look for them,” she said.

“And so we shall.” The man got to his feet, then helped her to stand.

She slipped her hand into his, and he didn’t pull away, neither did he squeeze hard or yank her about. He allowed Artemis to determine their path, stopping her only once when she suggested they walk down a narrow and dim side alley.

“Best keep to the light, Princess,” he said.

They walked up and down the streets. He paused whenever their path crossed with anyone else. She eyed the person or people, but it was never her family. All the while, he asked her fun questions: what her favorite color was, if she had a favorite nursery rhyme, what she would eat if she could have any food in the world, what her favorite game was. Her tears dried as they walked about. The loneliness that usually filled her heart shrank away. She laughed when he was silly, and she held ever faster to his hand.

“That is the sweetshop,” she said, pointing to it. “My brothers would look in the window and imagine having a candy.”

“Could your brothers be inside?” her rescuing knight asked.

“They’re gone now,” she said. “They won’t be home again.”

“Would you like to pick a sweet, Princess?”

She looked up into his kind eyes. “Could I?”

“Of course you could.”

They stepped inside, but she’d never been in a sweetshop. She hadn’t the first idea what to choose. After identifying a dizzying number of candies, the man suggested she try a peppermint. He bought it for her, then they waved farewell to the shop owner.

Artemis licked her precious treat as they resumed their walk through Heathbrook.

"Do you have a house to live in?" she asked him.

"I do. I've lived in it nearly all my life."

"I've lived in my house all my life," she said.

He smiled. "We are like twins."

"Do you have a horse?" she asked.

He nodded. "I have several. I do like horses."

"We don't have a horse," she said. "But I have seen horses. They are very big."

"Yes, they are, Princess."

She liked that he called her that. Father never even called her by her name.

"Do you have children?"

"I do," he said. "But they are not here with me today."

"Do you miss them?" she asked.

"I always miss them when we are apart."

Did her father miss her? Likely not.

"I could be your little girl while you're here," she said. "Then you wouldn't be lonely."

"I would like that very much."

"May I—?" She stopped herself before she could finish the question. He'd only say no, and her heart would break forever and ever.

He stopped walking and hunched down in front of her. "Please do not be afraid to ask me anything."

She buried her head against his shoulder, somehow feeling braver without looking up at him. "May I call you Papa?"

"Of course you may."

That set her to crying again. She folded her arms around his neck. Something inside her had needed to cry all her life. He made her feel safe and loved and that, for reasons her six-year-old heart could not understand, made her cry.

He kept an arm around her while she wept. "Cry as long as you need to. We'll keep looking when you're ready." He held her and spoke kindly, her papa. A papa who loved her. It was all she'd ever wanted.

"I'm usually a happy girl," she said. "I don't cry every day."

"There is nothing wrong with crying when you need to. Or laughing

when your heart is happy. Or being very quiet when your mind is thinking about things."

She leaned her head against him. "I like to skip when I feel silly."

"Do you want to know a secret, Princess?"

"Yes, please," she whispered eagerly.

"Being silly is one of my most favorite things."

She leaned back a bit and looked at him. "But you aren't a little boy."

"One can be quite silly even when one is very grown up."

She liked that. She liked it very much. "I think I will be silly forever and ever. Even when I'm grown up."

"That would make me very happy, Princess."

"Would you be proud of me, Papa?" Her father said that to Persephone sometimes—that he was proud of her.

"Very, very proud," he said. "And if I mean to be silly forever and ever?"

"I would be very, very proud of you," she said solemnly.

His eyes danced about as his smile grew. "I would be honored to know you were proud of me."

She liked talking with him. "We can keep looking."

They resumed their search. She called him Papa. And he called her Princess. For the first time in her life, she felt truly loved and wanted and important.

He was proud of her. And they were going to be silly together. And he would adore her and teach her about sweetshops and not be upset if she cried. Maybe he would even skip with her.

Papa and Princess. She would never be alone again.

"Ooh. This is the market cross," she said.

"It is that." He looked at her. "Do you suspect your family might be here?"

She nodded. Her eyes searched the crowd, much smaller than it had been.

"Tell me if you see them."

After a moment, she did. "There." She pointed to Persephone walking through the market. "There. There."

He nudged her forward. "Catch up quickly, before you lose sight of her."

Artemis rushed toward Persephone. Persephone would like to meet Papa. He would be kind to her too; she knew he would.

"Artemis." Persephone whispered her name when she saw her and wrapped her in a tight hug. "Where did you wander off to? We couldn't find

you.”

“I fell, and I hurt my hands and my knees, and then I got lost.”

“Heavens.” Persephone eyed the state of her.

“But the man helped me get back. And he gave me a peppermint. He has a house and horses and children, and he didn’t get mad when I cried, and he told me it’s okay to be silly.”

Persephone looked around. “What man, Artemis?”

She turned back and pointed with his handkerchief to where he was standing—where he’d *been* standing. Papa wasn’t there.

She looked around, frantic. He’d left. He’d held her and loved her. Then he’d left.

Persephone took her hand and walked with her away from the market cross.

Artemis held her papa’s handkerchief to her heart and looked back over and over, hoping to catch sight of him. She didn’t.

Her heart sank to her toes. But the more she thought about it, the less she worried. Papa hadn’t talked like someone who didn’t want to see her again. He would look for her; she knew he would. And she would look for him.

She’d found him once. She could do so again. Here, in Heathbrook. She would see him again. She would. And so long as she knew he was there, somewhere, looking for her, she would know she was loved.

Chapter Two

London, Spring 1818, fifteen years later

CHARLIE JONQUIL DESPISED LONDON. UNFORTUNATELY, one of his closest friends, Newton Hughes, meant to get married there, and Charlie was too good a fellow to disappoint Newton or his soon-to-be bride. So, he found himself in the heart of that pulsing metropolis, wishing he were anywhere else.

"You look as though I'm forcing you to attend your own hanging," Newton said, eyeing him from across the carriage in which they, along with their friend Thomas Comstock, whom they all called Toss, were riding to Newton's betrothal ball.

"Might as well be," Charlie said. "You know I don't care for social occasions."

"And you know I know that's not entirely true."

"I don't care for *London*, then."

"A decidedly odd conclusion for one as logical as you," Toss said.

"Nothing could be more logical," Charlie countered. "Gather together every family and individual in the kingdom with ample time and money. Add to that a metropolis teeming with pointless ways to spend both. Multiply that—"

"Lud, not mathematics," Toss muttered.

"You set him off," Newton said.

Charlie was undeterred. "Multiply that by an unhealthy societal obsession with appearance and frivolity, and no other sum can be reached but one that speaks of—"

"Shallow insincerity," his friends finished in unison with him.

They all laughed. Charlie's tendency to wax long and impassioned on the subject of his exaggerated hatred of London was a well-established jest among them.

"I hope you'll find some means of being at least a little charming," Toss said. "You must live up to Caroline's name for you."

His niece had long ago, when pronouncing names had been a struggle for her, dubbed him Uncle Charming. "I suppose I could try." He pretended that doing so would be a burden.

"I certainly hope so," Newton said. "This betrothal ball is being held by the Duke and Duchess of Kielder, an honor only two other ladies have been

granted, and they were the duchess's sisters. I could not deny my sweet Ellie such an impressive introduction to London Society."

Charlie really did understand the reason they were there and the utter futility of expecting Newton to attempt to change the location of the prewedding events or the ceremony itself. Charlie had other objections. "Was there no means of uninviting Artemis?"

Artemis Lancaster was the closest thing to an enemy Charlie had ever had. They'd managed something of a cease-fire between them during Newton and Ellie's courtship, which they would have to reclaim to some degree after their friends were married.

"As the duchess is Artemis's sister and my Ellie is her particular friend and Falstone House is her London home . . . no."

Charlie sighed dramatically. "I hope the fact that I am not tossing myself from this carriage will afford me ample credit for the depth of my dedication to our friendship."

"I will see to it you are immortalized in verse," Toss said.

"Pentameter, if you would." Charlie nodded very soberly. "Nothing is more impressive than pentameter."

Toss eyed him with feigned confusion. "For one wishing to be a leading lecturer in mathematics, you have decided opinions about poetry."

"Pentameter is a very mathematical meter," Charlie said. "That is why I prefer it."

"You are going to be an insufferable don, you realize," Newton said. "All your students will groan on their way to your lectures and run out afterward, rejoicing in their hard-won freedom."

Charlie could laugh at that. "I happen to enjoy the mathematics lectures I attend. And I'm not the only one who does."

"You lot are strange." Toss shook his head.

Strange, perhaps, but Charlie wasn't embarrassed by his passion for numbers. He'd come to appreciate that he had a knack for something. He'd found purpose and focus in knowing, at last, what he was meant to do with his life. No one grew wealthy being a Cambridge don, but he would have an occupation and an income. That small influx of funds combined with the modest income he received from his late father's estate would be enough to live on quite comfortably. He would find himself a set of humble rooms somewhere near the university, hire on a housekeeper, and live a quiet and fulfilling life, sharing his love of mathematics with other "strange" people

like himself.

He would live out that life as a bachelor, but such was the trade-off one made when choosing a career as a don. It was not merely a matter of not having enough money to support a wife or family in any real comfort or ease. According to the university's rules, a don could not be married. That had bothered him at first, enough that he'd dismissed the possibility of pursuing the path. But no career open to him had ever proven the least appealing other than this one. More than being merely acceptable now, he was excited for it. He had been pursuing it with earnestness for almost two years, and he was growing ever closer to making it a reality.

"My father is quite beside himself that your oldest brother and sister-in-law will be in attendance this evening," Newton said. "He finds your family quite impressive."

"And you haven't corrected that impression?" Toss clicked his tongue. "Living a life of lies. I am so disappointed in you."

"Who am I to cast aspersions on the Jonquil name? I leave that in Charlie's capable hands." Newton was a good gun. If only he weren't done at Cambridge. The three of them, along with the fourth and fifth members of their gang, Duke and Fennel, had undertaken a lot of larks during their time at university.

"My sisters-in-law will have to save the family name, I suppose," Charlie said. "They could manage it."

"Your brothers chose well," Newton said.

Charlie offered his friend a smile. "As did you."

"Do you suppose you'll ever meet a lady who turns your head enough for you to consider giving up your career as a don?" Toss asked. "I struggle to imagine any lady capturing your affection as fully as mathematics has."

"I am not discounting the possibility," Charlie said, "but I would have to be entirely and life-alteringly in love, and she would not only have to feel the same way but also be willing to live a life of poverty. As that perfect combination likely does not exist, I find myself quite content and pleased at the prospect of a very academic bachelorhood."

"But if you did fall madly in love?" Toss pressed.

"I would pen you a letter written entirely in pentameter declaring my change of plans."

"Will I receive one as well?" Newton asked.

"Of course."

Toss gave Newton a look of amused comradery. “I will watch for the post every day with bated breath.”

“You’ll suffocate, mate,” was Newton’s typically dry response.

The carriage pulled to a stop in front of the Duke of Kielder’s town house. The place was not busy yet. Newton, being the bridegroom, was to arrive a bit ahead of the start of the ball. Charlie, given the choice between spending the evening with his friends or his brother, chose the former. He didn’t dislike his brother, any of them, but he never felt expendable amongst his friends.

They were ushered inside by the very proper butler and accompanied to the spot just outside the ballroom where the resident family and Newton would greet the guests at the beginning of the ball. The three of them sat on chairs in the large corridor, knowing they would be made to wait until their hosts and Newton’s bride completed their preparations for the evening.

“Are your future parents-in-law expected this evening?” Charlie asked as servants rushed about, finishing their preparations.

Newton nodded. “But they have been made to promise they would behave. The duke terrifies them enough that even Ellie is not worried they will cause trouble.”

“Will that fear be enough to keep them from causing you difficulties the rest of your life?” Charlie worried about that. He considered Ellie a friend as well and didn’t wish to see her made unhappy. “You’ll be family forever.”

“Do you truly think Artemis wouldn’t lay waste to half the kingdom to avenge Ellie if her family made her the least unhappy? Or that I wouldn’t do the same?”

For all Charlie didn’t like Artemis nor she him, he had to admit she was very loyal to her group of particular friends and did not hesitate to come to their defense. That one of her friends was soon to marry one of his meant he’d not be able to avoid her entirely over the coming years. But she could be endured now and then for Newton’s sake. And Ellie’s.

“I envy you a little,” Charlie said. “You’re marrying your perfect match.”

“A fate I wish on both of you,” Newton said. “A lady will cross your path, and you’ll lose your heart. I will attend your betrothal balls and be every bit as difficult as you are being.”

“Difficult?” Toss scoffed. “The word you’re searching for is *charismatic*.”

“No, no, no.” Newton shook his head. “That is not your role at all.”

“Then what *is* mine?” Toss asked.

Charlie assumed an expression of uncertainty. “Annoying?”

“I hope you’re the next to marry,” Toss said. “Then you’ll be your wife’s problem.”

“How fortunate for the ladies of London that I’m unlikely to be any lady’s matrimonial ‘problem.’” He wanted to believe it was possible, but he was not precisely a lucky person. Fate tended to laugh at him.

The sound of two very familiar voices pulled them to their feet. Ellie and Artemis stepped into the corridor, walking arm in arm toward them. Their appearance of happiness didn’t fade as they approached.

Ellie slipped free and rushed to Newton. They were immediately locked in an affectionate embrace.

“Charles.” Artemis greeted him in the same cold tone she always used when addressing him.

“Artie,” he answered back. She didn’t care for the nickname he’d fashioned for her when they’d last been in company together, which was why he used it. She, after all, knew he didn’t care to be called Charles, but she called him that more often than not.

She eyed him with subtle criticism. “I had hoped to see you dress with a bit more care than usual, considering this is such a significant occasion.”

“And I had hoped you would abandon your usual pretense of superiority, considering this is such a significant occasion.”

In a tone of theatrical innocence, she said, “But do you not realize, Mr. Jonquil . . . it is not a pretense.”

Charlie had, on a few occasions, seen glimpses of a very different Artemis hiding behind the performer’s mask she wore almost constantly. There was a lot about Artemis that he didn’t care for, but her constant deception was top of the list. Few things bothered him more than duplicity. She wasn’t a terrible person—he even enjoyed her company in small doses—but her fallacy could not be ignored.

“Miss Ellie must be pleased that you took time from your campaign of conquering the *ton* to acknowledge her happiness,” Charlie said.

“And your fellow dullards must be disappointed that you’ve left the echoing corridors of academic boredom to celebrate Newton’s happiness.” Though the words were anything but complimentary, she offered the observation in an overly sweet tone that rendered the criticism more

obnoxious than hurtful.

Charlie held his hand out to her. “Shall we call a truce for the evening, Miss Lancaster?”

“For the sake of our friends,” she said. Artemis took his hand and shook it firmly. “I shall make avoiding you my most important goal for the evening.”

“It is already mine.”

With that agreement between them, they went their separate ways—Artemis remained in the vestibule awaiting the arrival of guests, and Charlie slipped into the still-empty ballroom to enjoy the momentary silence.

This was going to be a very long night.

* * *

Artemis had spent the entirety of every social gathering since before she’d made her entrance into Society looking for someone she couldn’t even describe. Though she’d crossed paths with him only five times in Heathbrook, her Papa, as she still thought of him, was, in some ways, quite clear to her: the kindness in his voice, the way he’d held her as if she were the most precious treasure, the nickname of Princess that he’d given her. But many things had grown vague or entirely absent in her memory. She remembered how soft the fabric of his coat and cravat were, but she could not recall any specifics of his clothing, whether he’d dressed in the first stare of fashion or in styles from an earlier era. He spoke much like her father had, proper and articulate, but she could not recall the sound of his voice. She remembered him being about her father’s age. Sometimes she imagined he’d had dark hair, like Persephone’s. Sometimes she was certain it had been golden, like hers.

Artemis had found, in fact, that her memories of him tended to take on the characteristics of people she knew *now* who had some qualities in common with the gentleman she remembered. If she met someone who was soft-spoken or thoughtful or particularly kind to children, their appearance began to melt into what she remembered of her Papa. She hadn’t the first idea which bits of the mismatched picture she had of him in her mind were actual memories and which were inventions of her imagination.

The one thing she recalled without the slightest doubt was that he’d loved her. He’d loved her. She knew, because he’d told her so. He’d said to her

the words her own father had never once uttered. The five times she'd seen him had been idyllic and hope-filled encounters. Five days that had changed her life. Five moments in which a lonely and heartbroken little girl knew—absolutely *knew*—she was loved.

He'd known her every time and had asked about things they'd spoken of the time before. She'd watched for him every week for two years before life had pulled her away from Shropshire to live with Persephone and Adam.

Now she watched for him all Season, during every visit back to her childhood home, at every house party, every roadside inn. He had been a grown gentleman when she'd encountered him, and he'd already had children. She assumed he would now be about the age her father would have been if he were still alive. She watched the faces of every person who remotely matched what little she knew of him, desperate to see a flash of recognition, a whispered "Princess." She would never recognize him—the memories of such a young girl were too vague and broken—but she knew, she simply knew, he would remember and recognize her if ever he saw her again. She was depending on it.

Person after person passed by at the betrothal ball, offering their greetings and stepping into the ballroom. None of them spoke of Heathbrook or a lonely, little, green-eyed, golden-haired princess.

Plenty of the guests were known to her though: fickle admirers from Seasons past, gentlemen who saw her as a means to a fortune, hangers-on who hoped her clout in Society would add to theirs, petty gossip-mongers who spoke kindly *to* her but viciously *about* her behind her back. Every Season, she attracted a crowd but never the one person she wanted to see.

Nearly half an hour after the guests had begun to trickle in, Lord and Lady Lampton arrived in line. They were Charlie's brother and sister-in-law, though she didn't hold that against them.

"Do you suppose the earl has come to claim his feeble-minded brother and take him back home to the nursemaid?" she asked Ellie under her breath.

"Stop it," Ellie whispered with a laugh. "Charlie is a fine person and an intelligent one, no matter your opinion."

Artemis shrugged a shoulder and assumed an expression of innocent confusion. "If he is so clever, why is it he dislikes me?"

Newton clearly had to work to hold back a grin. Artemis truly liked Ellie's beloved. He was a deeply good gentleman.

“Never you fear, Mr. Hughes,” she said. “I will not tell Mr. Jonquil that you agree with my assessment that he’s a bit bacon-brained.”

Newton shook his head, smiling slightly. “Charlie is quite possibly the most intelligent person I’ve ever known.”

“He hides it so well,” she said as if amazed.

“You’ve said that before,” Ellie said.

“It has been true for a very long time.” She turned to Charlie’s brother and sister-in-law, who had only just arrived at the very front of the line. “Welcome, Lord Lampton, Lady Lampton.”

The earl was, without question, the most flamboyant person of Artemis’s acquaintance. At a time when gentlemen rarely veered from blacks, greys, and dark blues, he wore brightly colored waistcoats and dramatic cutaway coats. His cravat was always tied in intricate and impressive knots. He, in what fell very near a feat of miraculous proportions, managed to be bold and odd in his appearance while still being deeply fashionable and well turned out. She found herself studying him every time she saw him, wishing she knew the secret of it. Fashion, in all its universality and individuality, was endlessly fascinating.

The countess also drew notice wherever she went but for very different reasons. She was a strikingly pretty lady who showed herself to be quite intelligent. She was also very nearly unable to walk. When she had come to London for the first time after marrying the earl, she’d struggled a bit but had seemed to be improving. When Artemis had attended a house party at the Lampton country estate, she had been impressed with how well Lady Lampton had moved about. But something drastic had changed in the eighteen months or so since then. The countess struggled to remain on her feet. Her husband kept her upright while clearly attempting to keep his efforts hidden.

“I would never miss a gathering hosted by His Grace,” Lord Lampton said. “Such evenings always promise to be blithe and lively. I do hope the duke will share all the latest *on-dits*.”

The countess eyed her husband sidelong. “You are going to get yourself beheaded, Philip.”

“She’s not wrong,” Artemis said. “Adam is not particularly known for his sense of humor, especially when forced to keep company with Society.”

“Nonsense. He is very fond of me,” Lord Lampton said. “I’ll make certain we have a good, gossipy gab.”

“I’m going to have to rely on Charlie to get me home, aren’t I?” Lady Lampton sighed, the sound both jesting and entirely sincere.

“I certainly hope not,” Artemis said. “You do not deserve such acute torture.”

Her rivalry with Charlie was well-known to both their families. They all tended to shake their heads and shrug and otherwise ignore the dislike teeming between their youngest siblings.

“Speaking of acute torture”—Lady Lampton motioned with her head toward Adam—“His Grace would likely appreciate our undertaking the required greetings efficiently and without delay.”

With his voice lowered to a whisper, Lord Lampton said to his wife, “Your legs would, no doubt, appreciate it as well.”

Lady Lampton offered a subtle nod. They moved on, offering quick words of congratulations to Ellie and Newton, then giving their greetings to Artemis’s sister and brother-in-law.

Artemis liked Lord and Lady Lampton. The dowager Countess of Lampton was a delight as well. Indeed, there was not a member of Charlie Jonquil’s family whose company Artemis didn’t find delightful.

Except for Charlie.

And from what she’d heard, she was one of the only people in the entire world *he* didn’t like. She wished that didn’t bother her, but it did. More than bothered, it stung. It stung because it was so horribly familiar. She’d spent far too much of her life earnestly and fruitlessly searching crowds for the one nameless, faceless man who had loved her while living in constant remembrance of another man in her life who ought to have loved her but hadn’t. She was his daughter, and she hadn’t mattered to him in the least. When the weight of that would threaten to plunge her into the darkness of despair, the words of her beloved Papa would come to her from across the years: “Best keep to the light, Princess.”

The light. She craved it, clung to it. There *was* someone in this world who loved her, and that kept the shadows at bay. She would do her utmost to keep Charlie Jonquil on the periphery of her life and focus instead on finding her refuge, her hope, her Papa.

Chapter Three

CHARLIE COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE grateful that Sorrel was in attendance at the ball. She, like him, was not overly fond of London. Her deteriorating hip meant she spent most of any gathering sitting, which afforded him an excuse to sit out the festivities as well. Though he felt a little guilty experiencing anything resembling gratitude while she was suffering.

"Your brother is utterly gleeful that you've come to London," Sorrel said.

The feeling was not likely an overly personal one. Philip didn't *need* him to be in London; he simply felt everyone should be as enamored of Town as he was.

"Philip is always delighted to be here," Sorrel continued. "I'll make the agonizing journey here and sit in pain at every ball he wishes to attend simply so I can see him looking as overjoyed as he looks now."

She could be a little gruff, a little terse, but when she spoke of Philip or of their children, she softened. Philip and Sorrel had chosen well when they'd picked each other to build a life with. All Charlie's brothers had. They'd found their other half, and they were all deeply happy.

Philip stood not too far off, speaking to a group of attendees. He gestured broadly, injecting whatever tale he was sharing with overwrought dramatics, and he was grinning broadly. A much more subtle smile spread over Sorrel's face.

Charlie couldn't help a laugh. "He always was a performer. We all wondered if he would ever meet a lady who could endure him. Wilson tolerates him, but Wilson is a king among valets."

"He is that." Sorrel motioned with her head toward Ellie and Newton standing nearby. "Your friends appear quite happy together."

"They are. They met by accident and fell in love without warning. Though he has a couple of years left of studying the law, he has income enough from his father's estate to live on while he does. I have every confidence they will be almost nauseatingly happy." Artemis joined the couple. "The 'nauseating' part is due to the company they keep, obviously."

"I hope you have a strategy in mind for keeping the peace between the two of you now that your paths are destined to cross regularly." Sorrel looked away from the attendees and directly at him. "I am not saying you have to suddenly decide she is your favorite person, but the future Mr. and Mrs. Hughes ought not be made to either endure a feud for decades to come

or choose between the two of you."

Especially since Charlie wasn't entirely certain he would be the one chosen.

"That is a theorem I have pondered quite a lot of late," he said. "I will not be in London as often as Artemis will be. During the Season, she and her group of particular friends can spend every evening possible with Newton and Ellie. I'll come down from Cambridge now and then when the Huntresses have retreated from Town. We would likely do best to keep the peace by avoiding each other."

Sorrel didn't laugh often, and when she did, it was quick and quiet and subtle. "I never will grow any less impressed by Artemis's decision to call her group of friends the Huntresses. Such a brilliant nod to the mythological goddess she's named for."

"A fittingly arrogant nod as well," Charlie said.

"Perhaps adamantly avoiding each other really is your best strategy," Sorrel said.

Charlie tapped a finger against his temple. "I'm an intellectual, you know."

Sorrel leaned a bit closer to him. "Philip brags to anyone and everyone how he will have a brother who is a don and destined to be legendary in the field of mathematics."

Philip hadn't said anything like that to him. "He's not embarrassed that I'm choosing something so . . . sedate?"

Sorrel shook her head. "He enjoyed school, but he was never truly academic. He's baffled by how intelligent you are."

"Baffled because he can't believe I'm not entirely bacon-brained?"

"Far from it," she said. "He is impressed."

One of the many things Charlie disliked about being the only one of his brothers with a bit of ginger to his hair and complexion was how easily and obviously he colored up. Escape was always best when he was turning red. "Would you like me to fetch you a glass of raspberry shrub?" he asked. "I understand the duchess's recipe is considered the very best in London."

"I would appreciate that, Charlie. Thank you."

He was grateful for the excuse, but he was also pleased to be of use. The Jonquil family had not merely an heir and a spare, as the saying went, but an heir and six spares. He wasn't often needed or helpful.

Careful to avoid Newton and Ellie on account of Artemis and her

Huntresses gathered there, Charlie made his way around the room. A few people stopped him to offer greetings as he passed. Though he was not in London often, nor did he interact a great deal with the *ton*, his family was well known and respected. They all looked enough alike that he would never be able to be in Society without being identified as one of them.

Toss cornered him briefly to suggest Charlie join the group he'd spent the past few sets with. If not for his promise to Sorrel, Charlie might have agreed. He didn't dislike people or socializing. It was London's ready acceptance of hypocrisy that bothered him.

At last, he managed to find a footman with a tray of glasses and obtained two. If Sorrel had been thirsty before, she would be parched now. Moving quickly but carefully, he wove through the crowd back in her direction. He did his best to keep an eye on the people around him and carefully evaluate the steadiness of the glasses of deep-red liquid in his hands. His family teased him endlessly about his tendency to find himself in unintentional scrapes. He wanted to believe he'd finally outgrown that, but his brothers certainly didn't think so.

He dipped back around the outer edge of the room. It seemed the most logical place to find a clearer path. As he reached the open doors of the ballroom, someone jostled him. He firmed his grip on the crystal glasses, watching them with worry. He managed not to spill any.

Then someone else bumped into him with greater force than the first. The cups slipped in his hands. He fumbled with them, not wishing to see them break. That effort managed to save the glasses, but he could not save the contents . . . or his clothing. The deep-red raspberry shrub spilled all down his front.

"Blast it all," he muttered.

"Adam says far worse with far less provocation." Artemis. Of course.

He looked up from his red-stained jacket, waistcoat, and shirtsleeves directly at the one person who could actually make his current predicament worse than it already was. "I should have known you would be the one who knocked into me."

"It was an accident." An immediate note of annoyance filled her words. "One that might have been avoided if you had been watching where you were walking."

"This is my fault, is it?" He motioned with an empty glass toward the unsalvageable state of his clothing.

“It was an accident.” She emphasized each word.

Could he not get through a single evening without being involved in a disaster?

He shoved the empty cups into her hands. “Pardon me, Miss Lancaster. I need to go address the consequences of your *accident*.”

She followed him out of the room. “You are, without a doubt, the grumpiest person I’ve ever known, and that is not a designation I recommend one aspire to.”

“And *I* do not recommend aspiring to be the one person with whom even the most cordial of people grow grumpy.”

She set the cups down on a table in the corridor but did not miss a single step. She continued on at his side. When he made to turn toward the gentlemen’s withdrawing room, she tugged at his sleeve. “Adam has vodka in his bookroom. It is your best chance of getting that stain out.”

“An expert in hard liquor, are you?”

She sighed in obvious frustration. “I am attempting to help you, though why, I don’t know.”

“Guilt?” he suggested with theatrical innocence.

“The inevitable result of being an exceptionally wonderful person.” She pushed open the door to her brother-in-law’s bookroom. “It is a burden I am learning to bear.”

Artemis never did stop performing, even when her audience of one had no interest in the theatrics. The red liquid on his front had begun dripping on his trousers as well. His clothes were ruined, and he looked an absolute sight. He would do best to focus on that difficulty and formulate a logical approach to addressing it.

Artemis made directly for the liquor cabinet and pulled open the doors. “Look about and see if you can’t find a towel or a rag or something of that nature.”

It was not a bad suggestion. Still, he felt foolish pulling open drawers and searching for something to help him clean himself up. “This is ridiculous.”

“That is my brother-in-law’s favorite word,” she said. “It makes your presence in this room feel very appropriate.”

“You are a young lady digging about in a liquor cabinet whilst I rummage through the drawers of another gentleman’s private room. I can see very little about this arrangement that is appropriate.”

“Are you always this tedious?”

He took a calming breath. “I am simply being rational.”

She turned around, a glass bottle in her hand. “I’ve found what I was looking for. Have you?”

He located in the drawer of the desk a neatly folded cravat of whitest linen, no doubt one kept there should His Grace find himself in need of a change of neckwear. It would be utterly ruined after this. “If the duke asks, I’m telling him that destroying his cravat was your idea.”

She shrugged a shoulder. “He’ll rant a bit at me, but I exhaust him far too much for him to do more than that.”

“So you have that effect on *everyone*.”

“I will have you know I was told only yesterday that the Season would be an utter waste without me in it.”

“People *are* known to lie in social situations.” He dabbed at his front with the soon-to-be-ruined cravat, trying to soak up some of the raspberry shrub. Bumbling Charlie was making a mull of things again. His brothers would never let him hear the end of this if they discovered his current state. “Lud, Artie, this has soaked all the way to the skin. I’ll never clean it all up.”

“*Lud* is not an appropriate word to use in front of a lady,” she said, her nose a bit in the air.

He could not even begin to soak up the liquid on his shirtsleeves. His jacket and waistcoat made it impossible. “I cannot believe this,” he muttered. He tossed the cravat on the desk and yanked off his jacket. “I am still a student, you know. I haven’t loads of money at my disposal to replace ruined clothing.”

“Quit being so dramatic, Charles. You haven’t even attempted to clean the stain.”

He took up the cravat again and pressed it firmly against the wide, deep-red splatter. “I look like I’ve been shot.” The color seeped into the bright white of His Grace’s cravat.

“Was there a second cravat in that drawer?” Artemis asked. “I can’t exactly pour vodka all over you.”

“Why not?” he said dryly. “It would be in keeping with tonight’s pattern.”

She tipped her head and eyed him with raised brow. “Wouldn’t the *ton* be shocked to know that Lord Lampton is not, in fact, the most dramatic of the Jonquil brothers.”

He pressed a dry section of the cravat to another place on his waistcoat, but that simply drove home the damp state of his shirt beneath. “I cannot

believe this.” He tugged at the buttons of his waistcoat. He’d not manage to dry out anything if the bottommost layer was soaked.

“Hand me your waistcoat.” She held her hand out for it. “I’ll see if I can get some of the red color out.”

“We’re back to pouring vodka on my clothes, are we?”

“I’ll try to find a rag or another cravat lying around, though I’d be surprised if I can.”

He yanked at the knot in his own cravat. It had managed to escape with only a few tiny splatters of red. He pulled it off and tossed it to her. “Might as well use this.”

He used the duke’s cravat to soak the stain from his shirt. Artemis poured tiny amounts of vodka on his cravat and dabbed at the stain on his waistcoat. What a ridiculous mess.

Charlie unbuttoned the top of his shirt and stuck the cravat inside, trying to dry off his skin. “You soaked me through.”

“It was an accident.” Again, every word emerged as if it were its own sentence. She turned back to face him, his waistcoat held up for his inspection. “The stain is already beginning to come out.”

“Even if it does, I can hardly return to the ballroom smelling of liquor and soaked to the skin. I really should just call up my brother’s coach and return to Lampton House.”

“Nonsense.” She hung his waistcoat over her arm and closed the distance between them. “Do you always give up so easily?”

“Are you always so stubborn?”

With his vodka-soaked cravat, she rubbed at his open shirtfront. “Newton would not want you to run off in the midst of his betrothal ball. And I will not see Ellie disappointed either.”

“Your loyalty to them is admirable, but fealty does not require you to torture others.”

She shook her head. “I’m helping you not torturing you.”

“There seems to be a fine line between the two.”

She looked up at him, her mouth tight with annoyance. They stood close enough for him to see the minute narrowing of her eyes and hear the tension in each breath. He returned her look of fiery disapproval with one of casual challenge. She, after all, had caused their current debacle. He would not be made to blame.

“I do not like you, Charles Jonquil,” she said through a rigid jaw.

“Mutual, my dear.”

They were standing that way, he in his shirtsleeves, his jacket discarded, his cravat and waistcoat in her hand, his shirt unbuttoned, one of her hands pressed to his chest, looking intently into each other’s eyes, when a voice rang through the empty room. And the word the new arrival chose was not a genteel one.

A glance in the direction of the doorway revealed the duke and duchess, Philip and Sorrel, two wide-eyed Society matrons, and a smattering of young people with mouths agape.

“Oh bother,” Artemis whispered.

One look at Philip told Charlie this was far, far more than a mere bother.

Chapter Four

"WHEN I FIRST SAW YOU, I thought you'd stabbed him." Persephone rubbed at her temples. "I'm not certain that wouldn't have been better."

"I would be willing to stab him now." Artemis tossed a smile at Adam. Her brother-in-law was always in the mood for a violence-based jest.

But he didn't nod in agreement or acknowledge her jest in any way. He simply sat at his desk, hands steepled in front of him, his fingers tapping tensely. He'd said very little since stumbling upon Artemis and Charlie attempting to address a laundering emergency. He and Persephone, along with Lord and Lady Lampton, had managed to shoo the crowd away without making the situation seem dire. It had been embarrassing but, thank the heavens, not a disaster.

"Who is overseeing the remainder of the ball?" Artemis asked. All the hosts, after all, were in the bookroom.

"The Duchess of Hartley," Persephone said.

An excellent choice. She was universally considered an impeccable and capable hostess.

"She will do a fine job," Persephone said, "and will give no one *further* reason for whispers."

Artemis shook her head in amusement. "The *ton* never needs reason for gossiping."

"They have ample reason now," Adam muttered.

The servant's entrance to the room opened quickly. Rose, who was more than Artemis's abigail—she was also a mentor and friend—slipped inside. She moved directly to Adam. He watched her with silent anticipation.

"Discussions of this have reached the mews. It is impossible to believe it will not be all over London by morning and beyond that very soon thereafter."

Adam nodded slowly, his expression not lifting. "And what is the nature of the various reports?"

"That Miss Lancaster and Mr. Charlie Jonquil were discovered in a state of undress in an abandoned room of the house."

Oh bother. While there was a tiny degree of truth to that version of events, it was an exaggeration, and a condemning one at that.

"The whole thing was ridiculous," Artemis said. "He spilled raspberry shrub on himself, and it soaked clear through everything. He was trying to

salvage his clothing; I was trying to help since I bumped into him and was somewhat to blame for his state. We really were only trying to salvage his clothing."

"I know," Persephone said. "And we believe you. But reality is of far less import at the moment than perception. And perception is decidedly against you."

"But Adam will take my part. He can override any perception."

Adam rose from his desk with a look of weariness she didn't often see on his face. "Even I can't fix everything, Artemis."

"What the blazes does that mean?" Worry was beginning to creep over her.

Adam ignored her use of questionable language and, instead, addressed Rose. In the almost two years Rose had been among them, Adam had come to respect her deeply. That had always pleased Artemis. She adored Rose but had worried how she would manage in what could sometimes be a difficult household. As an Indian woman, Rose had faced prejudice and maltreatment in the years since she'd come to England. Artemis did not want to be party, however unintentionally, to any further unhappiness.

"Are the whispers significant and damaging enough to warrant drastic action?" Adam asked Rose.

"To be perfectly blunt, Your Grace, even drastic action isn't going to entirely undo this." Rose was not one for dramatics; her evaluation could be taken as unvarnished truth. "The discussions I've heard in just the last half hour are the sort that would follow a person for years. Given a few days, what happened will be twisted into something far more ruinous."

Persephone joined Adam, standing beside his desk. "I know what you are pondering, love. But would it work?"

"With the combined efforts of everyone involved and an inconvenient amount of playacting, perhaps."

Artemis waved Rose over. "What remedy are they speaking of?" She had a horrible suspicion she knew. Oh, how she needed reassurance that there was an explanation she wasn't thinking of.

"You are not simpleminded. You know the answer." Rose was direct and often unflowery in her speech, but she was not unkind. The bluntness was both painful and merciful in that moment. Artemis did not have to guess at the answer she had been given, no matter the horridness of it.

The bookroom door opened, pulling all their eyes in that direction.

Charlie and his oldest brother stepped inside. Both looked entirely put together and not the least like they'd been stabbed or shot or otherwise mortally wounded. Charlie had changed his clothes, but when and how?

Rose, apparently, saw Artemis's confused surprise. "He is nearly of a size with the Duke of Hartley. A change of clothing was obtained from their home, which, conveniently, is only a few doors down from here."

Ah. "Which would have been a far easier way to address the problem than how we went about it not an hour ago."

Rose simply nodded.

"My wife sends her regrets," Lord Lampton said to Persephone. "Your housekeeper very kindly showed her to a guest chamber, where she is currently resting."

Persephone nodded. "If she does not feel equal to making the return journey to your home, you are both welcome to remain, of course."

"And you, Mr. Jonquil"—Adam looked to Charlie—"what are your plans for the remainder of the evening?"

"My plan is to do whatever Your Graces deem the situation requires."

Adam didn't look away, didn't change his stern expression. "Are you aware of the extent of damage that has been done?"

"I am, Your Grace. My brother, sister-in-law, and I have spent our time since leaving this room searching for an answer to this debacle, and there appears to be but one. However, if you and your wife have determined otherwise, I will bow to your authority and wishes."

They sounded so businesslike and unemotional, as if discussing the exchange of carriages or the hoped-for arrival time at a house party.

"We cannot truly be considering this," Artemis said.

They all looked at her.

Lord Lampton spoke first. "I assure you, Miss Lancaster, we have considered *everything* else. My wife, in particular, pressed for any less drastic solution, but the whispers we are hearing outside of this room that have already begun to spread through Town are worse than even we feared. This is a scrape that cannot be brushed aside. The damage is extensive. Only an enormous plaster will allow it to heal."

She had never before heard Lord Lampton speak without even the tiniest hint of jesting or theatricality. Persephone looked sad, which she seldom did. Adam wore an expression of resignation, completely out of character for him.

Artemis met Charlie's eyes. Of everyone in this room, he would agree with her and insist everyone was being utterly and completely ridiculous.

"If it makes you feel any better, I would rather you *had* shot me," he said.

Blast and boil. "You are not seriously entertaining this . . . 'solution,' are you?"

"There are no other options available to us, Artie."

"Do not call me Artie."

His jaw tightened. "At the moment, you are fortunate that is the *only* thing I am calling you."

Lord Lampton sighed. "Heaven save us, they're going to kill each other."

"Miss Narang, did you hear any conjectures in the gossip that might offer us another option?" Adam asked. "Anything at all."

Rose shook her head. "All the conjecture is that either the two will be married or ruined. I heard no anticipation of anything else."

Married or ruined. "We cannot truly mean to move forward this way." Artemis's concern was growing to panic. "It was a misunderstanding."

"Artemis, dear," Persephone said, "that misunderstanding involved a very private location and removal of clothing. It doesn't overly matter that those missing pieces were not more intimate than a jacket and waistcoat. It is shocking and will be bandied about without a great deal of mercy."

Artemis rubbed the palms of her hands against her forehead. "This is absurd."

Adam walked past her. "You should have considered that before pouring a bottle of vodka all over a gentleman's discarded clothes."

"That was not the nature of the situation at all." She could not keep her deep frustration hidden.

No one heeded her.

The gentlemen stood near each other, their postures identically stiff.

"There is no real choice left to us," Adam said to Charlie, "but I still need to know what your situation is. Artemis, of course, has a significant dowry, but I'd rather you not have to live exclusively on that."

Artemis began pacing, hardly believing what she was hearing.

"I have some income from my father's estate, Your Grace. My intention was to become a don at Cambridge, but a don cannot be married. I confess I am a bit at sea as to how to move forward with that so suddenly snatched away. There is the possibility of publishing papers and offering lectures for hire."

Adam nodded slowly. Persephone stood at the window, clearly listening but not watching the discussion. Rose had taken a seat in a quiet corner. She would be listening as well; she missed very little.

"Artemis's father made his living the same way," Adam said, "and it was far from sufficient. I cannot like the possibility of Artemis returning to that level of poverty."

"Our father provided generously for his younger sons," Lord Lampton said.

"I do not doubt that he did," Adam said.

"Charlie will not be wealthy, by any means," the earl said, "but that income supplemented with what he can obtain academically will not leave them in dire straits."

This cannot be happening.

"Further, amongst the Lampton holdings is a small estate in Cumberland. As it is designated for the use of the heir to the title during the period between his coming of age and his inheritance and my son has only just turned one year old, the estate will be empty for the next twenty years. Its upkeep is seen to by the Lampton estate. I've offered its use to Charlie for the foreseeable future."

Now they were speaking of houses and decades of domestic arrangements. Artemis clasped her hands and pressed them to her lips. She was too upset to even pace. A forced marriage. To Charlie Jonquil, of all people. This simply could not be her reality. It could not.

"I believe you are speaking of Brier Hill," Adam said. He turned and looked to Persephone. "It is within a day's journey of Falstone Castle."

That brought Persephone's gaze to Artemis. "You'll be nearby."

"And married to a gentleman who only just declared that he wished I had murdered him rather than be in our current predicament."

"In fairness," Adam countered, "you said the same thing."

She threw her hands up. There was no denying this was an absurd plan, but no one was backing away from it.

"Lampton, you and Charlie call on me here in the morning. Since your brother is still, by law, underage, you will have to negotiate on his behalf."

Was this a means of escape? "If Charlie is not old enough to marry—"

Adam didn't allow her to finish the objection. "He is too young to marry without permission from his family or to negotiate marriage contracts on his own. He is not, however, too young to marry at all."

Merciful heavens.

"We'll announce the betrothal as soon as possible," Adam said, "work out the contracts, and obtain a license so they can marry within the fortnight."

Artemis blinked back hot tears, struggling to breathe through the fear growing inside.

"This is where the playacting comes in." Adam eyed them all in turn. "We must give the impression we are all pleased with this. Miss Narang"—he looked to Rose—"put it out amongst the servants that we are anticipating these nuptials with pleasure." He looked to Lord Lampton. "Ask your Wilson to wield his influence also."

Lord Lampton agreed with a nod. The earl was known for flamboyance and dramatics. Artemis still had seen none of it during this discussion. Not even a hint, and that scared her.

Adam turned his attention to Artemis and Charlie. "The two of you will pretend from this moment until you leave London for Brier Hill that you are quite pleased with this arrangement. You needn't make a show of being in love or ecstatic about the engagement, but it is crucial you do not add to the gossip surrounding you by making it obvious you are doing this under duress."

Artemis shook her head over and over again, her mind struggling to comprehend what her heart was crying out over.

"Once you reach Cumberland, you are welcome to shoot or stab or otherwise murder one another, but not until then."

She crossed to Adam and tugged him away from the others. "Please don't force this on me. Please."

His usually hard expression softened in a way she seldom saw. "I cannot save you from this."

"He doesn't love me," Artemis whispered. "All the rest of the family married for love."

"Persephone and I didn't," Adam said. "Mr. Jonquil's parents didn't."

"I cannot speak for the late earl and the dowager, but I do know you and Persephone didn't hate each other, so it is hardly the same situation."

"Regardless, it is *your* situation. And it cannot be avoided." He sounded sincere but also unmovable. He wasn't going to help her.

None of them were. A lifetime of abandonment ought to have taught her to stop expecting anything else.

Artemis had often imagined herself a newlywed bride, her days filled

with warm glances and overtly romantic gestures, torrid embraces, and a deep, abiding passion worthy of the most gothic of novels. It had been easier to believe in something more literary than literal. The sort of realistic, unwavering, reassuring love she saw her siblings share with their spouses had always felt out of reach. Utterly so now.

She took a shaking breath. She set her shoulders in the hope that she appeared more composed than she felt. “At least at some point, tell me which chapel to arrive at.” She spun about and walked not to the main door but to the servants’ entrance. She could avoid the remaining guests that way. She didn’t look back as she left the room. None of them would be given the opportunity to see her pain.

The servants’ stairs weren’t abandoned, by any means, but they were safer. Few people crossed her path. Fewer still made their study of her overly obvious.

She arrived in her bedchamber and closed the door with a snap. This was a nightmare. After years of imagining herself building a home somewhere with someone who loved her, with the blessing of her beloved Papa, anticipating a future where she was valued and wanted and embraced, she was back to the horror she’d lived as a child.

Once more, she would be living with a man who despised her in a home where she would never be wanted, living far away from Heathbrook and London, where she might have had some hope of finding her Papa, knowing that there would never, ever be anyone in her life who loved her the way she’d always wanted to be loved.

“Best keep to the light, Princess.”

But she felt no light in that moment, no promise of escape. Through the shadows of her room, she crossed to her bedside table and pulled out of the drawer the one thing she needed most in that moment: her Papa’s handkerchief.

“I cannot keep to the light, Papa. There isn’t any.”

With the precious square of linen clasped in her hands, she crumbled onto her bed and wept.

Chapter Five

THE DAY FOLLOWING ELLIE AND Newton's wedding, Artemis walked briskly around the green near Falstone House, attempting to comprehend the reality of her situation. She was joined by Daria Mullins and Gillian Phelps, two of her particular friends and members of the group known to Society as the Huntresses. They'd all agreed to postpone a much-needed discussion of things until after Ellie's wedding.

It was now "after Ellie's wedding."

"The explanations of what happened are vast and varied," Daria said. "I can't sort it for the life of me."

"What explanations have you heard?" Artemis was almost afraid to ask.

"Everything from a torrid embrace to . . . er . . . " She looked from Artemis to Gillian and back. "An extremely . . . compromising . . . er . . . the two of you . . . " The poor thing was turning deep red.

Artemis really ought to take pity on her, but Daria was so diverting when she was flustered, and she was such a remarkably good sport about it.

Even Gillian, who was less likely to tease, joined in the jest. "An extremely compromising *what*?"

Daria shook her head. "The two of you are the absolute worst."

"The absolute worst *what*?" Artemis asked, all innocence and wide eyes.

"Stop it," Daria said with a laugh.

"Stop *what*?" Artemis and Gillian said in near-perfect unison.

That set them all to laughing. Oh, how Artemis needed this welcome bit of levity.

Daria was famously amiable. She took their teasing in stride and, now and then, gave a bit back with an expert touch.

"How do you intend to move forward?" Gillian asked Artemis. "Surely, you have a plan."

She wished she did. "I've spent the few days since I unfortunately did not shoot Charlie Jonquil attempting to change the minds of those insisting on this course of action, but to no avail." She eyed her friends pointedly. "I don't have to tell either of you how bothersome family can be."

"Certainly not," Gillian said.

Daria only smiled. She had difficulties with her family, as all the Huntresses did, but she was blessed with a very loving connection to her brother. Her room for complaint was a bit narrower than Gillian's.

“If your family will not be moved, what will you do?” Gillian asked.

“I will hold out hope until the very moment this is finalized.”

Daria brushed her fingers over a pink flower on a bush as they passed it. “But you *will* actually marry him if your family will not hear your pleas?”

Artemis assumed her most confident and unshaken demeanor. She had relied upon it often enough. “I will have to, unless someone magically appears to prevent this disaster.” Though it was an outlandish hope, a very real and desperate part of her imagined her Papa arriving to save her from her miserable fate. He would if only he knew her dire circumstances. That alone had made seeing the announcement in the *Times* bearable.

She was fairly certain he didn’t know her name—he had never asked her—but perhaps he would come to the chapel and realize who she was. He would, as he had every time they’d been together, recognize how she was feeling. And he would save her.

She told herself again and again that it was possible. Unlikely but possible.

“You do not care at all for Charlie Jonquil, nor he for you.” Daria was blessedly horrified on Artemis’s behalf. “I know I am not the cleverest person, but even I know how ill-advised such an arrangement is. Neither of you will be happy.”

“Happiness is not always the goal of a marriage.” Gillian had a way of making very unemotional observations regarding things she actually felt very strongly about. Too many did not realize how deeply her feelings truly ran.

“It will certainly not be the goal of this one,” Artemis said out the corner of her mouth.

Two more of the Huntresses—there were seven in total, including Ellie and Artemis—came rushing toward them. The O’Doyle sisters were often mistaken for twins, though two years separated them. They had identical deep-brown hair, silver-gray eyes, and adorably freckled complexions. They were of a height and weight, a fine thing for their struggling family, as it allowed them to share a wardrobe. They had very Irish given names, their family hailing from Dublin, but had long since given up trying to teach English tongues to properly pronounce those names and had, instead, adopted English ones. Rose had done precisely the same thing upon her arrival from India. It was a shame the English didn’t put more effort into learning things that fell outside their very narrow worldview and

experience.

"The whispers are growing more colorful," Eve, the older of the two sisters, said. "'Twas all we could do not to gape and laugh and snort in derision—"

"And call them all ninnies," Nia, the younger, finished. "We know you far too well to believe a word of it."

Daria, in her usual sweet-natured and sometimes naive way, looked to Artemis. "Would that help? We could tell everyone that you aren't the sort to do what they are saying you did."

Gillian threaded her arm through Daria's. The two were very close friends, with Gillian having a knack for answering Daria's potentially embarrassing questions in silence, saving her from the humiliation. And, in turn, Daria helped Gillian feel less awkward amongst Society.

"Just how colorful have the rumors become?" Artemis was utterly exhausted but needed to know with accuracy what she was facing.

"Apparently there are wagers on the books at Whites and Boodles," Eve said.

"Regarding my betrothal?"

The sisters nodded.

"The question being debated is whether or not Mr. Jonquil will toss you aside." Nia watched her, wide-eyed. "How utterly terrible that is!"

"They all believe he will run roughshod over the gentlemen's code simply to be rid of me?"

Again, two nods in near perfect synchronization.

"Society are a dreadful bunch, aren't they?" Artemis sometimes despised the *ton*. "This is my fourth season as Society's ruling diamond. And now, quick as anything, they have turned against me."

"I suspect," Gillian said, "much of that is borne of jealousy."

Artemis stopped their forward walking. She took a deep breath through her nose, then pushed it out slowly between her lips. Wagers were being made against her. She was a byword, her name being bandied about. If Adam knew, she hoped he would put something of a stop to it.

There are some things even I can't fix. That declaration had echoed in her mind again and again. She hadn't realized until hearing him say it just how much she had depended over the years on him rescuing her from scrapes and difficulties. She, who had prided herself on her formidable independence, had let herself grow reliant on someone.

She might not have been in a position to escape this predicament, but she could approach it on her own terms.

"I am Artemis." She spoke the three words with emphasis and purpose. "My namesake was the goddess of the hunt, slayer of men, determiner of her own fate. I will be nothing less."

"Including the 'slayer of men' bit?" Eve asked with a grin.

"I intend to undertake matters with *my* Actaeon in the same way Artemis of old did with hers."

Daria's brow pulled in thought. She didn't appear to know the history of that myth.

Gillian, true to her well-read self, did. "I doubt even you could turn a man into a deer and set wild dogs on him."

"Actaeon imposed on Artemis, robbing her of her right to determine who she was, how she lived, and who she was permitted to let be part of her life. He was a braggart and an arrogant bounder. Artemis utilized what methods she had at her disposal and removed the threat he posed."

"You aren't actually going to kill Mr. Jonquil, are you?" Nia asked.

"I intend to deny him the satisfaction of destroying everything I've dreamed of. He is stealing away my chance for a happy marriage. He will not take away anything else."

She was feeling the ground solidify beneath her. At last, she had a plan, an idea. It was not ideal, but it was something. And it gave her back a tiny bit of her pride and control over her life and future.

If her Papa did not hear of the nuptials in time to save her, she would save herself in whatever way remained open to her.

"I will go on with my life as *I* wish to live it, without needing permission or approval from my unwanted husband. Indeed, without needing *anything* from him at all."

"You'll ignore him," Gillian said, piecing it together with her usual speed.

"I'll live my life. And I will leave him to live his."

Chapter Six

THE PAST WEEK HAD BEEN miserable. Charlie would have argued further about the ill-advised marriage he was being forced into, but he knew there was no other solution. If he and Artemis did not move forward with this plan, she would be ruined, and he would be labeled a rake for the rest of his life. They would both forever be tainted by the scandal, and their families would suffer for it. He'd rearranged the equation in every conceivable way, hoping to reach a different answer. There wasn't one.

The only bright spot in all of London was the nursery at Lampton House, where a niece and nephew of his spent their days. He was uncle to ten nieces and nephews now. It was one of his favorite things about being part of the Jonquil family.

He pushed open the door to the nursery three days before his marriage of inconvenience was scheduled to be made official and met the eye of the nursemaid. She nodded her acceptance of his proposed intrusion, so he slipped inside. The little ones were always happy to see him. They always wanted him there. They needed him when no one else seemed to.

Little Kendrick, who was known to all the world as Lord Jonquil, and Julia, who was more properly referred to as Lady Julia, were crawling about the floor of the nursery, exploring their domain. Both the twins could pull themselves to a stand if furniture was nearby, but neither could walk yet. Charlie suspected they would be doing so quite soon.

His nephew spotted him first. With a baby babble Charlie chose to interpret as his name, the little ragamuffin crawled at impressive speed toward him. Julia, true to character, stopped where she was, twisted to a seated position, and watched him quietly. The two shared a birthday and a surname but were otherwise as unalike as could be.

Charlie scooped up Kendrick and crossed to Julia. He sat next to her, giving her a moment to decide if she wanted to be held or not. She didn't always. He plopped Kendrick on his cross-legged lap.

The nursemaid moved into the adjoining bedchamber. Perhaps he was offering her a bit of a respite, a chance for a moment's silence and peace. Someone ought to be benefited by his presence.

"How are the two of you?" he asked the babies.

Kendrick set immediately to babbling, something he did almost any time someone spoke to him. Julia, as always, sat silently watching. She often

wore a look that reminded Charlie of Sorrel's brother—another of Julia's uncles and one of Charlie's good friends—who was also a studier of people, sorting them out in quiet contemplation.

"Are you puzzling out that I'm a bit sad, Julia? Can you sense that in me?"

One-year-olds were not precisely known for their conversational abilities. Neither of these two offered him any verbal escape from his heavy thoughts. But they were good for his heart.

Kendrick stretched for a chunkily carved horse almost within reach. Charlie leaned him in that direction enough to allow him to fetch his toy. A slightly older child would likely have made the horse run along the floor or mimic its whinnies. Kendrick promptly popped its head in his mouth.

Charlie looked over at Julia. "I suspect you are the clever one in this duo."

A sweet, heart-piercing smile pulled at her tiny mouth, revealing four baby teeth and an adorable set of dimples. She leaned forward and set her head on his leg, half sitting, half lying. Charlie shifted her closer so she could lean against him with greater comfort.

"I won't get to see you so often after a few more days," he said. "I'll be living too far away. I'd make you promise not to forget all about me, but babies forget things so quickly. I'll be a stranger to you before too long."

Lud, he was growing emotional over a conversation with two tiny children who couldn't understand a word he was saying. So much for the logical mind of a mathematician.

"I might have guessed I'd find you in the nursery. You've a soft spot for babies."

Toss.

"Nieces and nephews are the best sort of distraction," Charlie said without looking over at his friend. "I recommend you obtain a few."

He laughed, his footsteps echoing as he crossed the nursery. "I'll let my sister know. She's nearly eleven. Seems she's dragging her feet a bit."

"Rosamond can't get married yet. I fully intend to match her up with my nephew Edmund in a few years' time. He's her same age."

Toss sat on the floor across from him, sending Julia a tender and adoring look. She had such an angelic air about her. The girl could melt even the coldest of hearts, and Toss's was far from arctic.

"You've enough nieces and nephews to matchmake for the entire *ton*,"

Toss said.

Charlie brushed his fingers lightly over Julia's soft, brown hair. "Perhaps that is what I ought to do with myself now that I've lost my career of choice."

"It's a blasted stupid rule. A man doesn't stop being intelligent and articulate or an expert in his field of study simply because he's married. Indeed, the influence of a wife might make him a *better* don."

While Charlie wholeheartedly agreed, that agreement accomplished nothing. "I can't say I'm happy about it, but I don't expect it to change."

Kendrick offered Charlie his slobber-covered horse, then without allowing even a moment's time for the toy to change possession, the boy plopped the head in his mouth once more.

"And you still intend to withdraw from Cambridge?" Toss pressed.

Charlie nodded. "The entire purpose of my studies was to become a don. I can't do that now."

"Blasted shame, Jonquil." Toss shook his head. "Blasted shame."

"It certainly is. I would have enjoyed spending more time pursuing higher levels of mathematics."

"No, I meant it's a shame you won't be there to assist me in tossing Peter Duncan's small clothes into the River Cam."

A laugh snorted from him. "Lud, I'm going to miss our larks. I'm not at all suited to being a sober, well-behaved . . . miserably married man."

Julia was watching him, studying him. How was it an infant could be so observant?

"I still can hardly believe you're marrying Miss Shamcaster."

Charlie had called her that when expressing his frustrations to his closest friends. From the first time he'd met her, her counterfeit personality and insincerity had bothered him deeply. Of all the people he could have been forced to marry, she was perhaps the worst option. There could be no *real* marriage with someone who didn't know the meaning of the word.

"Mr. Jonquil, if you'll pardon me." A maid stood in the nursery doorway. "Your family's arrived, sir. Thought you'd care to know."

"Thank you," he said.

Those of his family who were able to do so had agreed to come up to London for his wedding. They likely weren't any happier about it than he was. This would not be a joyous reunion.

He looked to Toss. "Shall we bring the babies with us? They'll provide a

nice distraction.”

“I am in favor of wielding adorableness as a weapon.” Toss reached his hands out to Julia but didn’t force her to accept his offer. Kendrick negated the idea anyway. *He* crawled into Toss’s outstretched arms, apparently assuming the offer had been made to him.

Charlie held Julia, and the two of them, with their tiny bundles, made their way from the nursery to the drawing room, where the sound of Jonquil voices gave away the location of the new arrivals.

Three of his brothers—Layton, Corbin, and Harold—had arrived. Harold was a vicar. Charlie hoped he would be permitted to perform the ceremony. That might make the experience a little less miserable.

“We found a couple of sneak thieves,” Toss announced. “Anyone care to claim these two ne’er-do-wells?”

That brought the room’s attention to them. Good man that he was, Toss had jumped through the greetings and straight to the distraction. The family obliged. Friendly taunting directed at Philip, apologies to Sorrel, and a bit of a light-hearted tussle over who would be permitted to hold the babies, occupied them all.

Charlie was divested of his adorable bundle. He breathed a sigh of relief. There would be no lectures or drawn-out discussions of how pathetic his situation was. Not yet, at least.

His mother emerged from among them. She wore black, as she had ceaselessly the past thirteen years. And her silver pendant with the light-blue stone that Charlie didn’t think he’d ever seen her without gleamed in the light spilling from the window. The familiar sight of her didn’t bring the sense of relief he needed.

He held his breath as she crossed to him. She did not wear a look of pity or scolding but, instead, one of loving concern that never failed to bring out in him the lonely little boy who still desperately needed his mother. His schoolmates had teased him mercilessly over that for years and years. He’d learned over time to hide how homesick he’d been and how often he’d cried at night, wishing he had his parents nearby. But no amount of tears could have brought them there to comfort him. Mater had been at Lampton Park. And Father had died long before Charlie had begun his years at school.

Without a word, Mater wrapped her arms around him and held him like she had when he was tiny. He held her in return, fighting for his composure.

“I’ve landed myself in yet another mess,” he whispered. “And I don’t

think it can be made right."

"Don't lose hope, my boy. We'll find a means of moving forward." She kept an arm around him and walked at his side out of the drawing room and all the way to the bookroom. They sat side by side on a sofa. Having Mater with him had always eased his tension and fears, but it didn't this time. His current troubles were too big even for her to fix.

He breathed and rolled his shoulders. "I know this has been Philip's domain for more than a decade, but this room always makes me think of Father."

"I feel the same," Mater said. "Philip has instituted very few changes in this space. Perhaps it reminds him of your father also."

"I wish Father were here." Charlie leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "I always wish that, but right now . . . " He swallowed.

Mater rubbed his back in long, slow circles. She used to do that when he was tiny and overwhelmed by emotions he'd been too young to sort through. "I cannot guarantee to know precisely what your father would tell you in this situation, but I can tell you a little of his experiences in this area."

Charlie closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe.

"Our parents arranged, agreed upon, and announced our betrothal without our input, approval, or knowledge. We started on a very similar footing to what you are anticipating."

It was not the same though. "You two didn't choose each other, but you also didn't despise each other. That is not an insignificant difference."

"I know you and Miss Lancaster do not get along and do not particularly like each other, but I think if you ponder it honestly, you will have to admit you don't actually *despise* her."

He wanted to insist he did, wanted to list all the reasons he was justified in utterly despising her. This latest debacle only added to the feeling. No one could possibly blame him for it. And yet, *despise did* feel like too harsh a word.

Another breath didn't ease any of his tension.

"I will not discount how distressing your situation is at the moment," Mater said. "And though you might not be ready to admit it, I am certain you are a little afraid. But take comfort from one who faced that same worry: there is hope, my sweet Charlie. Do not give up. There is hope."

He wanted to believe it. "What if in the end, we simply dislike each other

more? What if everything proves even worse than I fear it will?”

“But, darling, what if it doesn’t?”

He straightened his posture a little and looked over at her. “You’ll still love me either way?”

Mater put her arms around him and leaned against him. “I have loved you all your life, my boy. And I will love you always. No matter what.”

Her love had been the sure foundation in his life for so long. When he’d struggled to find his place in the world and in his family, she had loved him. When he’d gotten himself into one bit of unintentional mischief after another, she had loved him. When his memories of his father had dimmed with the passing of years, leaving that gentleman as little more than a vague idea in the recesses of his childhood, when he’d found himself wondering if his father had loved him as much as his brothers were sure he had loved them, Mater’s love had given him reassurance.

When he had needed her most, she had not neglected him. He knew she would not do so now.

“I’m struggling not to feel defeated, Mater.”

“You mustn’t give up before you’ve even begun,” she said. “Promise me you will try.”

It was a request he did not take lightly. He knew he had been a disappointment in many ways, but he had never broken his word to his mother. He didn’t mean to do so now. “I will do my best,” he promised her. “I only hope it will be enough.”

Chapter Seven

CHARLIE HAD BEEN PRESENT FOR his brothers' weddings. Those had been inarguably happy occasions. But the feeling in Grosvenor Chapel the morning he was to be married was more that of a funeral than a wedding.

I promised Mater I would try. He had repeated that reminder to himself countless times over the past few days. He'd promised to try, and he would not break a vow to his mother.

He did his best to appear happy and at ease while waiting in the chapel for Artemis to join him. Nearly all her siblings and siblings-in-law were there. Her group of close friends, the Huntresses, were as well. They were, to a one, glaring him into the grave.

His family was relatively well represented as well. Philip and Sorrel were in attendance, along with Layton and Corbin and Jason and his wife, Mariposa. Crispin, Lord Cavratt, who was an honorary member of the family, and his wife were present as well. Mater sat in the midst of them all. Harold stood at the altar. The vicar of Grosvenor Chapel was a friend of his and had given him permission to officiate at the wedding. Toss and Newton were there also, along with Sorrel's brother, Fennel, who was a newer addition to their close-knit group of friends. It was hardly a grand and elaborate wedding with an extensive and impressive guest list. But both he and Artemis had supporters there. Considering the circumstances, that was as good as could be hoped for.

Artemis arrived at last, in the company of the Duke of Kielder. Her father had passed away some years earlier, and her brother-in-law acted in the role of guardian. In this moment, he would take the place of her father.

She and the duke stopped directly beside him. This was the point where a father traditionally "gave" his daughter to her new husband.

I promised Mater I would try. Though his heart was sinking, Charlie was determined to make the best of the situation.

He met His Grace's gaze, fully expecting the fearsome anger the duke was so infamous for. He saw sternness and immovability, yes, but he also saw a surprising amount of empathy and more than a bit of sadness. Sadness for their forced union? Or sadness at "losing" his sister-in-law?

The duke nodded, then stepped back, leaving an awkward and ill-matched couple to face their forced fate alone.

Try.

One thing Charlie could say for his soon-to-be wife: she was gorgeous. He had, of course, noticed that from the very first moment he'd met her. One could not help but notice. But their animosity had grown so quickly and become so enormous that it had hardly seemed worth mentioning. It was something he could say in the moment that wasn't a complaint or a prediction of doom.

"You look beautiful," he said.

She could hardly have looked more surprised. "Thank you." Artemis didn't appear necessarily more at ease, but at least she didn't seem *more* unhappy. "You look very nice yourself."

"Philip's valet, Wilson, insisted I not arrive in the raspberry-stained clothes that put us here."

She nodded. "That was wise. And the waistcoat he chose is both bang-up and appropriate to the occasion."

"Wilson can always be relied upon."

It was, quite possibly, the most cordial conversation they'd ever had.

"If you two are ready," Harold said.

"Patience, vicar," Charlie said. "We're discussing fashion."

"Pardon me," Harold said with an overblown air of apology.

Artemis actually smiled, something Charlie had not at all expected to see from her on such a difficult occasion. "Somehow the oddity of this is very fitting."

"Absurdity seems to be the theme of the day, doesn't it?"

She laughed lightly, pulling an answering chuckle from Charlie. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Mater. She watched him with a look of approval.

Try. Her advice was proving sound.

* * *

Philip had been calling His Grace "Brother Adam" through the entirety of the wedding breakfast. The odds of the Dangerous Duke murdering Charlie's oldest brother were growing by the minute.

Artemis had retreated to a guest chamber, along with her sisters, to change for the wedding journey. They were to leave London that day to begin their trek to Cumberland. Many couples did not embark on the very day of the ceremony, but leaving Town and the whispers residing there had been deemed necessary to thwart the increasingly vicious gossip

surrounding the two of them.

"I thought we would not be family until our children inevitably married one another," Philip said to the duke, using that tone the brothers all referred to as his buffoonery voice. Did His Grace know this was a jest? "Our siblings managed the thing years ahead of schedule, Broth—"

"If you call me that one more time, we will all have to return to the chapel for a funeral."

Philip pressed a dramatic hand to his heart. "Shocking!"

The duke's mouth pulled tight. He turned his attention to Charlie. "A moment of your time." It was absolutely not a request.

Charlie followed him from the drawing room and into the small adjacent sitting room, where they were alone.

"First," the duke said, "you will discover that all of my brothers-in-law call me Adam." His expression was stern, without a hint of familial welcome. "You, however, have not earned that right."

"I understand," Charlie said.

"Second," His Grace continued, "life has been vastly unfair to your new bride. Do not add yourself to the list of reasons why."

"You're asking me not to mistreat her?"

He skewered Charlie with a look one generally didn't see outside of swordfights and pugilistic bouts. "I am *warning* you not to."

Lud, the man was terrifying. All Charlie could do was nod in silent agreement.

"Artemis will drive you absolutely mad with frustration. She will push you away and throw up walls and hide behind her air of superiority"—this was not terribly encouraging—"but that show of arrogance and her dependence on theatrics is a shield not a window." He paused. Nothing in his expression indicated what he was thinking. When he spoke again, he was quieter. "She has lived with me since she was very young and, in that time, has never once been fully trusting of me. Her walls crumble for no one. She is independent, at times to a fault. That does not seem likely to change."

In other words, he was going to be as unneeded and unnecessary in his own marriage as he had been in his family growing up. Fitting. Discouraging, disheartening, yes, but fitting.

"And yet, with all that," the duke said, "do not ill-treat her, no matter the provocation. She deserves better than life has offered her thus far. Don't

hurt her further. Don't add to that pain."

"I do not intend to, Your Grace."

"I have faith in you beyond what you have shown yourself to deserve," His Grace said. "But I do believe you can live up to that unearned trust, in part because I live less than a day's journey from where you will reside. I could arrive at your doorstep at any moment, unannounced." The duke's gaze had hardened once more, his tone icy. "And I have no qualms about inflicting punishments as I see fit without the slightest worry about repercussions."

Charlie nodded once more.

"Now"—the duke pointed to the doorway—"go wait for your bride. Do not make her wonder if you've turned tail and run."

Charlie deposited himself in the vestibule, waiting for Artemis to descend the stairs. While he stood watch, his family filed past.

Layton came first. "Don't let her catch you out pretending to be listening to her whilst your mind is actually wandering," he said. "Better yet, don't *pretend* to be listening in the first place. She will always catch you when you do."

Spoken as if from experience.

Corbin stepped up next. "Be—be kind to her."

Charlie nodded. That was actually good advice, a shocking thing from any of his brothers. And it was an entire sentence, a rare thing from Corbin.

Jason approached, his wife at his side. "Abandon logic, ye who enter here. Logic has no place in marriage."

Mariposa swatted at her husband. "You are terrible." She looked to Charlie. "Don't listen to him."

"I never do." He earned a smile for that rejoinder.

Harold was next in line.

"If you quote scripture at me, I *will* swear," Charlie warned. Had he said such a thing to his very church-minded brother a year earlier, he likely would have been lectured about propriety. Harold had softened since his now-wife had become part of his life.

"I was going to remind you that murder is frowned upon. It is one of the significant ten, you'll remember."

"I don't plan to murder her," Charlie said.

"Yet," Harold tossed back as he gave way to the next in the farewell procession: Toss.

“Do you have advice for me too?” Charlie asked.

“What advice could I possibly have?” Toss scoffed at the very idea. As always, he couldn’t hold entirely still. No one had the pent-up energy Toss did. “I’m not married. I’ve never even courted anyone.”

“You’re not in one place long enough for courtship,” Charlie said.

“A great deal of truth in that.” Toss slapped him on the shoulder. “Good luck to you, my friend. Try not to die.”

“Lovely.”

Sorrel and Philip, a child in each of Philip’s arms, approached next.

“I’m assuming you mean to share words of questionable wisdom,” Charlie said dryly.

“Of course,” Philip said. “But Sorrel told me to keep my toast trap firmly shut. ‘Toast trap.’” Philip scoffed and shook his head. “Could she not have chosen veal vestibule or pudding pocket, some food with a degree of refinement?”

“There is nothing refined about a pudding pocket,” Sorrel said, shaking her head minutely.

Philip’s expression turned rather hilariously pompous. “My dear, a pudding pocket is only as elegant as the one who possesses it.”

Sorrel eyed him with a hint of misgiving. “We *are* speaking of your mouth, aren’t we? I certainly hope you don’t actually have pudding in any of your pockets.”

“And risk the wrath of Wilson?” Philip shook his head firmly. “He would murder me.”

Sorrel turned to Charlie. Though she put on a brave face, she did not at all keep her pain hidden. Her already shattered body had not recovered well from the birth of her children. After such a demanding day and despite the hour not being late at all, she likely needed to lie down.

“Come visit us as often as you can,” she said. “Not for Philip’s sake—he and his pudding-filled pockets don’t deserve visitors—but for the children. They will miss you.”

Sorrel liked to give Philip a difficult time. One look at his grin whenever she executed a verbal jab testified to his enjoyment of their banter.

“I am half tempted to take the children with me.” Charlie took Julia’s tiny hand in his and chucked Kendrick under the chin. “But to quote my pudding-pocketed brother, Wilson would murder me. And the twins need their mother. And grandmother. And Layton and Marion and their children.

And they might even miss Philip."

His oldest brother pretended to be offended. "After a comment like that, I will not do you the favor of remaining here to see you off on your journey. I will take my children and my wife and trudge off."

Charlie knew perfectly well that Philip was taking his family away in order to allow Sorrel to rest. He loved her too much to see her continue to suffer but also didn't wish to embarrass her by revealing to everyone within earshot that she was too weak to continue standing.

A moment later, Mater stood at Charlie's side in the otherwise empty vestibule. She set her arm around him. "I was proud of you today, Charlie. You managed to make your bride smile in a moment when she must have been terrified. Your father had a knack for that too." One could not mistake the hint of tears in her voice. "Be patient with her. Treat her with compassion."

"The duke gave me the same orders." Charlie hugged his mother in return. "He spoke kindly, something I suspect he almost never does."

"He has a more tender heart than he lets on," Mater said.

"And how do you know that?"

She looked up at him. "Have you not yet realized, my sweet Charlie? I know *everything*."

He allowed a silent laugh. "I wish I were going back to Lampton Park with you instead of dragging my miserable wife to Brier Hill."

Mater patted his cheek. "Have faith, my boy. The two of you will find your way."

Artemis appeared at the top of the stairs in a carriage dress of deep green. It made her eyes even more emerald.

Mater slipped her arm away from him but took his hand in hers. "She is, without question, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life. It is almost shocking."

"The first time I saw her at your house party two years ago, I couldn't even speak to her," Charlie said. "I'd never met anyone so beautiful and poised and confident. I was overwhelmed."

"What changed that?" Mater asked.

"*She* spoke to *me* and broke the spell."

Mater squeezed his hand. "You discovered she was human?"

"I discovered she was a pest."

Mater bit back a grin. "Charlie." Her scolding tone fell a little short of the

mark.

He laughed lightly. “I am trying, I promise. I’m simply not always successful.”

“So long as you keep making the attempt.”

Artemis was there with him only a moment later. “I suppose we had best be on our way.”

He nodded and motioned her toward the door. The carriage would be waiting for them. She offered a few breezy farewells to her family and floated out. He knew she did not feel as light as she pretended to be. She had often shown herself to be a good actress. He didn’t even know the *true* Artemis.

Mater hugged him fiercely. He called on the emotional tourniquet he’d learned to utilize during his Eton days when leaving his mother and home had left him teary. The teasing and prodding had been unbearable, so he’d found a way to keep it all at bay.

“Come visit the Park,” she instructed, still holding fast to him. “You know you are always more than welcome.”

“I love you, Mater.” He was proud of his composure.

“And I love you, Charlie.”

Feeling his emotions too close to the surface, he pulled back and offered a dip of his head. He snatched his hat from the waiting butler and popped it on his head as he walked swiftly from the house. He climbed into the waiting carriage and onto the rear-facing seat across from . . . his wife.

Lud, how had this happened? His life was topsy-turvy with no opportunity in sight for righting it. He had lost his career, his future, his chance for love and happiness in marriage. And he felt as though he’d lost his mother and his home as well.

“It is quite disappointing to be leaving London so soon,” Artemis said, eyeing the passing buildings. “There are so very many people I never got the chance to see.”

She was bemoaning her lost social opportunities. Both their lives had been turned inside-out, and she mourned nothing deeper than Society.

How often Charlie had heard his brothers refer to bits of wisdom Father had offered, insights that had helped them solve the difficulties in their lives. Father, whom Charlie hardly remembered, had saved them.

Who was going to save *him*?

Chapter Eight

THE JOURNEY FROM LONDON HAD required several days. While Artemis had not been made privy to Charlie's exact financial situation, she knew he was not particularly deep in the pockets. The changes of horses must have been provided by either Adam or Lord Lampton.

They would likely be living off her dowry. All young ladies with substantial dowries worried that they were being pursued exclusively for the money they would bring to a marriage. Artemis had endured more than her share of would-be suitors who'd shown themselves to be utterly uninterested in her as a person but focused, instead, on what she would add to their coffers. It had happened over and over again. Every Season. Every at-home day. She could say little for the marriage she had been tossed into, but she did know Charlie hadn't wanted to marry her for her money. Heavens, he hadn't wanted to marry her *at all*.

They'd not spoken much during their journey. They'd ridden in silence, eaten in silence, retired to separate bedchambers at every inn only to rise the next morning and sit in the carriage in silence for hours on end.

How was she to endure a lifetime of this? She'd barely survived a childhood of it.

On the afternoon of their final leg of the journey, Charlie had broken the quiet of the carriage. "We're approaching Brier Hill. I haven't been here since I was little, but there is no mistaking the area."

It was at least an attempt at a cordial conversation. She grasped at it. "Why did you stop visiting?"

"My father died." And that ended all discussions. His eyes turned to the road, and his expression and posture closed her off.

She supposed it was preferable to her father's approach. *He* had made her wonder at times if she was imagining her own existence.

She set her gaze on the windows not because she was eager to see the house she was being required to make her home but to give herself a moment to regain her hold on herself. She could feel her emotions getting the better of her. She had lost her future, her hope, and her freedom; she refused to relinquish her dignity.

How confidently she had declared to the Huntresses that she would blithely ignore her unwanted husband and not give him a second thought. Mere days into the disaster of a marriage and she was falling to pieces

because *he* was ignoring *her*. What a pathetic goddess she was proving to be.

She closed her eyes and counted backward slowly, a trick Adam had taught her sister Daphne and which Daphne had taught her. It interrupted her swirling thoughts, gave her a task that required concentration but not effort. It calmed her mind and slowed her heart.

Best keep to the light.

When she opened her eyes again, she had her armor firmly in place. In every bust she had ever seen of the goddess Artemis, she had worn the same expression of untouchable determination. At the age of sixteen, Artemis herself had spent countless hours in front of her mirror, practicing until she could recreate the expression perfectly. She assumed that air again now.

She eyed Brier Hill as the carriage rolled down the drive. It was small but well-maintained. The stone facade had been weathered by the passage of many years, but in a way that granted it warmth rather than rendered it ramshackle. She liked the bay towers at the corners. There were many trees, mature ones and new saplings. Effort was expended on keeping up the grounds. That was a reassuring sign.

"What do you think of it?" Charlie asked.

"It is lovely."

"You don't hate it?" he pressed.

She shook her head. "No one with any degree of taste could possibly hate it."

He actually looked relieved. Perhaps he wanted her to like the house, wanted her to be happy here. That would be an unexpectedly encouraging turn of events.

An older man and woman stepped out of the front door, wearing the well-maintained but simple clothing of servants. The butler and housekeeper, no doubt. No other servants joined them. The house was small, leaving open the very real possibility that there were no other members of staff. Surely Charlie had a valet. And Rose would have arrived a bit ahead of Artemis. Was there any staff in the stables? A cook? Groundskeeper? Was Artemis meant to hire more staff? How could she do that if she didn't know what their income was?

Dignity, she reminded herself. It had proven the most impenetrable of shields over the years. Dignity and theatrics. An odd combination but an effective one. No one could hurt her if they never met the person she

actually was.

She stepped from the carriage, Charlie having taken up the role of footman and helped her descend.

"Artemis, this is Mr. and Mrs. Giles, butler and housekeeper, respectively."

Artemis dipped her head. They offered a bow and curtsy.

To the servants, Charlie said, "This is the newest Mrs. Jonquil."

Mercy, that was odd. So very, very odd. She'd known she would not always be Miss Lancaster, but she had never in all her nightmares imagined being *Mrs. Jonquil*. Just hearing him say it threatened to bring tears to the surface again.

I am Artemis, she silently reminded herself. *Goddess of the hunt, slayer of men, determiner of my own fate.* She'd made this promise to herself again and again in the two weeks since being set on this horrible path.

She took herself firmly in hand and walked with Charlie into the bright front entryway. The space was pleasant, clean, and appealing in its simplicity. If the rest of the house followed suit, she would find herself with a space on which to make something of a mark. She could give this house a bit of herself, and that meant a lot.

"It would be my honor to show you about the house, Mrs. Jonquil," the housekeeper said, dipping her head deferentially.

"Yes, thank you." Artemis turned to Charlie, proud of her dignified demeanor and the convincing job she felt she was doing at playing the role of mistress of the estate. "Do you intend to join us?"

"I have not been here in many years, but I remember the house well enough to not need to be reacquainted with it." He addressed his next remark to the housekeeper. "The walled garden in back remains, I assume."

She nodded. "Kept to your father's exacting standards."

A bit of sadness, a bit of nostalgia touched his expression. "I believe I will look in on it. I've not seen his garden in years." He stiffened a bit as he turned to Artemis. "Unless you would rather I join you on your tour of the house."

She would have liked him to, truth be told. She would have appreciated a bit of support as she stepped into this new role in this unfamiliar setting. But she needed to be as fiercely and safely independent as her namesake. *I'll live my life. And I will leave him to live his.* "I have no objections," she said. "I daresay Mrs. Giles and I can manage the thing on our own."

His brow pulled a little but only for a moment. Whatever he'd been pondering appeared to have been settled in his mind. He tucked his hands in the pockets of his coat and, without another word, turned and—there was no better word for it—trudged from the house. Did he not wish to see the garden, or did he simply not wish to be inside with her?

"The garden was the late earl's?" Artemis asked. As far as she knew, it was more common for women to claim ownership of gardens; such had been the case at Falstone Castle.

"He designed and helped build it," Mrs. Giles said. "And he chose every plant and type of flower in there. That garden was important to him."

Her father had claimed a corner of their family home, a spot that had been important to him. He'd seldom left his bookroom. He'd been very particular about it, allowing no one to upset his studies or focus while he was inside. She'd heard a bit about the late Earl of Lampton. He didn't seem like the sort to neglect his family. Perhaps he had managed a balance between his passion for the garden and his family's claim on his time.

Artemis made her way around the house with Mrs. Giles. It was not a large home, but it was well proportioned and pleasantly laid out. There was room enough for hosting guests, which gave Artemis some reassurance. She could easily move some things around and render the space even more enjoyable and efficient.

She particularly liked the detailed molding in every room and around every door. The little flowers and leaves carved there were repeated on the bannister leading up to the first floor. Small details like that imbued character without taking up needed space. Decorating a home was not terribly unlike creating an ensemble. It was about balance and attention to those characteristics that ought to be emphasized and celebrated.

The first-floor landing afforded a view of a great many doors. Artemis was introduced into each of the rooms beyond: a bookroom, three guest chambers, and a pleasant antechamber with one door in each direction.

"Mr. Jonquil's bedchamber is through this door." Mrs. Giles motioned to the one on the left. "And yours, Mrs. Jonquil, is through this door." She indicated the one on the right. "Your abigail is inside already. Should you require anything, please do not hesitate to send her or tug the bell pull."

"Thank you, Mrs. Giles."

The housekeeper took her departure. Artemis stepped into the room that was now hers.

Rose was, indeed, inside, setting out Artemis's brush and combs on a small dressing table. Seeing someone so familiar, someone whose loyalty and kindness she could count on, brought her such a feeling of relief.

"What do you think of your new domain?" she asked Rose.

"The house is small but well maintained and offers a remarkable view." She motioned to the tall windows.

Artemis stepped to them and looked out on the mountains in the distance and the lovely grounds below. A person could do worse than awaken to that sight every morning.

Movement caught her eye, pulling her gaze toward the back corner of the grounds, to a wall made of stone that differed from that of the rest of the walls. A tall iron gate no wider than a single doorway sat open. Charlie was just then stepping out of it.

This, then, was his father's garden. Charlie didn't appear particularly lightened by the time he'd spent there. If anything, he looked *more* pensive. Worrying about his state of mind would do her little good. She would do better to focus on finding her footing.

"How is your room?" Artemis asked Rose. "I cannot imagine, in a house this small, that you have quite the space you did at Falstone Castle."

"It is smaller, yes, but not unmanageable." Rose slipped something into a drawer of the tallboy. "I spotted a room on the ground floor that is currently empty."

Artemis had noted it herself. "Mrs. Giles says it once was a billiard room, though it is not used for that purpose now."

"I would suggest its purpose might now be for our sewing and designing efforts," Rose said. "There is room enough, yet the spot will not intrude on other pursuits."

It was a good suggestion for utilizing the space. Had someone told her mere weeks earlier that she would have a room entirely devoted to designing, making, and refining clothes and ensembles, she would have been delighted. She found, though, in that moment, she could not summon her usual enthusiasm for the enterprise.

Pursuing any future in the area of fashion had always been a rather pointless dream. She couldn't make anything of it, but she'd enjoyed indulging in it. She hadn't the heart for it just then.

She took one last look out the window and down at her unexpected and unwanted husband slowly meandering his way back toward the house.

I’ll live my life. And I will leave him to live his.
The difficulty was, she no longer knew what her life was meant to be.

Chapter Nine

CHARLIE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT ARTEMIS wanted out of life, but he doubted it was a forced marriage to someone she despised. He had given her time and space to adapt. And that time and space had grown and expanded until they hardly ever saw each other.

He had promised Mater he would try to make a success of this unlooked-for marriage. Perhaps he simply wasn't trying hard enough. But then again, he had spent his entire life trying hard to do and be what he thought he ought and had fallen short far too often.

He passed the entirety of their fifth day at Brier Hill desperately searching for a way to spend time with his wife that was unlikely to lead to an argument or even greater resentment between them. The closest they'd come to a moment of lighthearted easiness the past weeks had been in the church moments before they'd been married. It had been a bit of absurdity, which had cracked a portion of the ice between them, and that, it seemed, was a good approach with Artemis. At least he hoped it was.

So that was what he decided on: a bit of absurdity, allowing for a moment's lightheartedness, in the form of a breakfast in the small, circular sitting room that joined their bedchambers. They would have a bit of privacy, where she might feel safer to let down those walls the duke had told him never crumbled. And eating a meal not on a tray or in a room designated for that purpose was just odd enough that they would have a ready topic of conversation. She might find it an amusing lark. It had to work; he had no other ideas.

Early the next morning, Charlie made his way across the back grounds to his father's garden. Climbing roses covered one entire section of wall, blooming with healthy abandon. Several tall trees sat at pleasant intervals, offering bits of shade in the midst of the sun-kissed garden. There was a single looped flagstone path with several narrow, pebbled paths jutting off, leading to quiet corners and carved stone benches. Alongside healthy green shrubs were flowers in dozens of varieties: lilies and snapdragons; forget-me-nots and fleur-de-lis; even rarer varieties, like love-in-a-mist and queen-of-the-meadow.

The family had often spent time at Brier Hill in the years before Father had died. Memories followed Charlie all over the estate, but none were stronger than those that filled this walled garden. He'd walked its looped

path with his father daily when they'd been in residence. They'd talked, though Charlie didn't remember many specifics of their conversations. He did, however, recall how very much his father had known about flowers and how much time he'd spent choosing which ones to pluck and take to Mater. He'd brought her flowers almost every day, whether at Brier Hill or Lampton Park.

It was the closest thing to matrimonial advice he had from his father. Every morning he and Artemis had been at Brier Hill, Charlie had gone to the garden, selected a handful of blooms, and asked Mrs. Giles to take them with her when she tended Artemis's room, refreshing the bouquet in there with newly plucked flowers. His new wife never mentioned his offerings, but he hoped she found some joy in the blooms.

Mr. and Mrs. Giles were in the circular sitting room when he returned with the small bouquet he'd gathered that morning. A table had been brought up, and the two faithful retainers were setting it with the needed plates and utensils and a small spread of breakfast foods.

Charlie set his flowers in a vase he'd asked Mrs. Giles to include in the arrangement.

"That's a lovely handful," she said. "Your father also had a knack for creating a pleasing collection of blooms."

He hoped Artemis agreed, even if she did so silently. She used to be almost overwhelmingly present in every moment. Yes, she had often been playing a part, but she had at least been a participant. He could generally sort through the facade to identify what lay beneath. Now, though, she kept herself so firmly tucked away that he felt like he knew nothing. It was like living with a statue of the ancient Greek Artemis instead of with the lady who was now his wife.

Mrs. Giles set the last of the utensils in place as her husband carefully adjusted the breakfast foods.

"Will you be requiring anything else?" the butler asked.

"Requiring?"

"Wishing for, then, sir."

Charlie pushed out a tense breath. "Brandy, Giles."

They all three smiled at that.

"All will be well, Mr. Jonquil," the housekeeper said. "You'll see."

"And if not," her husband said, "I'll have a decanter waiting."

Charlie laughed. "Good of you."

The couple slipped out through his bedchamber.

Charlie sat in the circular sitting room, waiting for Artemis. If this little scheme of his didn't do any good, he hadn't any other ideas. He'd chosen casual attire, assuming that was appropriate for a private tête-à-tête over breakfast. If that assumption was a poor one, Artemis would likely let him know. She put a lot of store in appearances. She likely found *his* off-putting. He hadn't Philip's flair for fashion. He also didn't have Philip's income.

While Charlie wasn't hoping for a fashion critique with his morning meal, at least it would be a conversation. And if his manner of dress was important to Artemis, he couldn't entirely neglect it without adding to the difficulty of their current circumstances. He didn't want her to be more unhappy than she already was.

The door that led to Artemis's bedchamber opened, and she stepped into the sitting room. She held herself as regally as ever, but she was attired casually. He'd made the right assumption on that score.

Somehow, her simpler hairstyle and clothing made her even more beautiful, which was admittedly a feat. Perhaps it was that she was less intimidating. When she wielded all of the weapons in her arsenal—wit, confidence, fashion perfection—she could seem somehow not quite human. Seeing her now, he could almost believe she was someone who could be a friend.

Almost.

"I have to admit, Charlie, I have been intrigued by this idea since you suggested it last evening. I have not ever eaten breakfast anywhere other than a breakfast room or on a tray." She looked over the table with its spread of food. "This is rather nice, isn't it?"

He could have shouted with relief. This hadn't proven a horrid miscalculation.

"This seemed a nice place to begin one's morning." He kept himself calm and dignified as he crossed to her. She smelled of something similar to evergreen but not quite. And citrusy but not exactly. It wasn't unpleasant, not in the least, but he couldn't begin to identify it.

He pulled out a chair for her, and she sat. Seeing her situated, he sat as well.

"I do think there is something to be said for breaking one's fast while being treated to a view of those mountains," she said. "It is far superior to the unbroken walls one usually finds in a breakfast room."

They were keeping themselves to topics usually reserved for those who had nothing to say to one another. Yet, it felt like a triumph.

"The countryside is particularly beautiful in this corner of the country," Charlie said. "Though I was quite young during our visits here, I do remember that about Brier Hill."

"Some childhood memories can be very vivid," she said. "While others seem to be broken or missing entirely."

Indeed. His memories of his father were often vague and unhelpful. But mixed in with the broken bits were some recollections as clear as if they'd occurred mere days earlier. Father tending to the flowers in the Brier Hill garden and the Lampton Park conservatory. Bringing handfuls of those flowers to Mater. Father running around the grounds of Lampton Park, playing games with all the brothers. Father holding Mater in his arms.

But Charlie only remembered what Father looked like because he'd seen portraits. He couldn't remember the sound of his voice. He hadn't any true reassurance that his father had loved him. He believed he had. He hoped he had. But he couldn't actually remember.

"My sisters and I had a picnic not long before Persephone left home," Artemis said. "She was very pensive, but I didn't know why. I was convinced something was wrong with the food, but since I had helped make it, I was particularly afraid to ask. I tried to force her to eat more and more and more, needing reassurance that I'd not made a mull of everything. Looking back, I realize she was probably nervous about her upcoming wedding. But I was too young to understand that."

"Layton was the first of my brothers to marry," Charlie said. "I can't recall whether or not he was nervous, though I was eleven years old, old enough to have been a little more observant than I was."

Mostly, Charlie remembered that he himself was afraid. At that point, the only time he recalled so many people being at Lampton Park was for his father's funeral. Though he had been old enough to have known how illogical the fear was, he'd been terrified that someone else in his family was going to die.

But that was too personal a recollection to share.

"I was old enough for all the other weddings to understand what was happening," he said. "My brothers and their wives were always nervous and excited and, generally speaking, rather nauseatingly in love."

"My siblings as well," Artemis said. "Even Adam and Persephone are

now.”

Though it was without question the longest conversation they’d had since arriving at Brier Hill—indeed, since leaving London—it was a topic rife with potential pitfalls. They, after all, had not been feeling the slightest bit of excitement, nor were they nauseatingly in love or happy. They weren’t likely to ever be. Things were not stable enough between them to risk that discussion.

Charlie chose something different. “I warned Newton that if he proved too much to endure, I would never go visit him and his new wife. I hope he took that very seriously.”

She smiled a little bit at him. “I have every faith they are going to be as impossible to endure as every other happily married couple I have ever encountered.”

“Well, then,” he said, feigning a breezy response. “That friendship, I suppose, has run its course.”

She laughed a bit.

This was working. A friendly conversation, no other people hanging about to add any additional awkwardness to the situation. Perhaps this was part of the formula he’d been searching for. They would take their morning meal here in this room, talk about little nothings. In time, conversation might come easily enough for it to occur throughout the day. Dinner might stop being such a bleak affair.

“If they repent of their stomach-churning coziness,” Artemis said, “perhaps we might have them come visit here.”

That was a fine suggestion, actually.

“Indeed, if we plan carefully enough,” Artemis said, an eagerness entering her eyes, “we could host a few of our friends. This isn’t a large estate, but there’s ample room for a modest gathering.”

Having Newton and Ellie come for a visit was more than doable. Toss could come. Maybe one or two of his Cambridge friends every now and then. And Artemis would wish to see the Huntresses. But house parties, even small ones, came rather dear.

“We have to limit ourselves to only a couple of guests for no more than a few days at a time, and no more than a few times a year,” he said.

“Because you prefer to be a hermit?” A sharpness had entered her voice.

“Because I’m too poor.” It was, perhaps, putting a bit too fine a point on it, but he didn’t have a profession. His entire plan for supporting himself

had been snatched away from him three weeks earlier. His income from the Lampton estate was not large. The amount provided for the upkeep of this estate did not cover repeated house parties and gatherings.

Artemis did not seem to be particularly empathetic. “I happen to know your coffers filled recently with £20,000.”

“I know you don’t think highly of me, Artemis, but I insisted when my brother and the duke negotiated our marriage agreement, that your dowry would not become our income. It remains untouched and will stay that way.”

“We are, then, to live in relative poverty so as not to injure your pride?”

He pushed out a breath. “Do not pretend that if I had arranged for us to live off your dowry, you wouldn’t find that equally upsetting.”

“There is no part of this ‘arrangement’ that I don’t find upsetting.”

He pushed back from the table. “Something you should have thought of before dumping raspberry shrub down my front.”

She stood, defiance radiating through every inch of her. “That was an accident.”

He rose as well. “It was a catastrophe.”

“You will hear no argument from me on that score.” She tossed her napkin onto the table and moved swiftly and angrily from the room, firmly closing the door behind her.

Charlie rubbed his temples with the palms of his hands. Was this how it was always to be? Every little moment of progress marred by anger and resentment? He stared down at the bouquet of flowers standing ineffective in their vase. The one piece of advice he had from his father and it wasn’t doing a bit of good.

He abandoned the breakfast as well, stepping back into his bedchamber and closing the door behind him. He was more disappointed than angry. Everything was in shambles. This room had once been Father’s. This had been *his* home, his and Mater’s. When the family had come to visit the estate, Father had been with them. But he wasn’t there now.

No one was.

Charlie was trying not to break his promise to Mater, but nothing he did worked. The duke had said that life had been unfair to Artemis, but it had also been unfair to him. Mater had told him to be patient with his new wife, but he needed patience as well. They were *both* hurting and frustrated and in completely uncharted territory. They were both miserable. And they were

both trapped.

He paced about the room, trying to sort out the thoughts bouncing around in his skull. All of his friends would be returning to Cambridge soon enough but without him. He knew the lectures they would be attending. Ones he would enjoy hearing. Ones he had planned to one day give. He'd had everything mapped out. It was all gone now. He would continue to study mathematics on his own, but it was more a consolation than a purpose.

He pulled himself from the room, from the house, and out once more into Father's garden. A memory washed over him as he walked that garden path. It was during their final trip to Brier Hill. Most of his brothers were away at school, and Harold hadn't wanted to play with him. Charlie had found Father in this corner of the grounds. His heart breaking, he'd told Father he felt very alone.

Father had pulled him into an embrace and held him close and tight. Though Charlie could no longer remember the sound of his father's voice, he had not forgotten a single word of what he had said.

"You will never be alone, Charlie. I will always be here. Whenever you need me, *wherever* you need me, I will be there."

Charlie dropped onto the stone bench where he'd often sat beside his father. A soft and solemn breeze rustled leaves throughout the garden, giving the scene a veneer of peace that did not truly exist anywhere in this estate. Neither he nor Artemis wanted to live here, where they had so little hope for the future.

"You promised me, Father. You promised. But you're not here. You are never here."

Chapter Ten

ARTEMIS WAS TIRED. THERE WAS no other way to describe what she felt. Every day was a fight, either with her own optimism and endurance or with Charlie. Or both. They'd been at Brier Hill for over two weeks, and everything was a mess.

One bright spot was that he'd made no objection to her and Rose commandeering the empty billiard room and converting it into a space for discussing and designing and creating various bits of clothing. It had become nothing more elegant or grand than a large sewing room, but in it, she'd found a refuge.

"I would advise lowering the waistline just a bit," Rose said, looking over Artemis's shoulder at the sketch she was working on.

"I do prefer slightly lowered waistlines," Artemis said, "but as they are not widely accepted yet, I think lowering it any farther will only make the gown seem an oddity rather than a statement."

"The lay of the gown will be better with it even an inch below where you've placed it." Rose was correct, of course. She always was.

Bother.

"I'd look a quiz. Hardly the best way to arrive at a Society event, especially dragging recent history with me." She tipped her head to one side, then the other, eyeing the design critically. "What if we lower the waist but remove the embellishment and make certain the fabric pattern matches up? That would allow the line to be better while not drawing attention to the adjustment."

"An excellent solution."

Artemis took up her bit of rubber and carefully erased the midsection of her sketched gown. She'd managed no more than that when Charlie's voice broke the silence.

"Pardon me for interrupting."

Artemis looked up and over at the doorway.

"We have visitors," he said.

"Truly?" She set her eraser down.

Charlie nodded. "And based on the very familiar heraldry flying from the carriage, these visitors are ones you, in particular, will be pleased to see."

Heraldry flying from the carriage. Adam was one of the few people confident enough to boast to any would-be highwayman or criminal that his

traveling coach belonged to a gentleman of rank and wealth. His heraldry was known. And feared.

"Adam is unlikely to leave London whilst Parliament is in session," she said. "Then again, he has done so before but never without significant reason."

"If you hurry, Artemis, you can catch him as he reaches the door and ask him what his 'significant reason' is this time."

She slipped from her high stool, mind filled with anxiety at the possibility of disappointment.

Charlie crossed to her. He took her hands in a friendly and encouraging gesture. "The carriage is his, Artemis. Go greet your family."

My family. She swallowed back emotion. Adam had come, and she was certain he would have brought Persephone and their children. For one who had felt utterly worthless and unwanted for more than a fortnight, it was enough to undo her hard-fought composure. But she didn't dare.

Goddesses don't cry.

She looked up at Charlie, bracing herself for mockery at the hint of emotion she'd allowed.

He simply smiled, appearing genuinely happy for her.

"I had hoped they would come," she admitted, her voice quiet and a bit broken.

He nodded toward the door. "Go on, then. This is no time to stand on decorum."

With a bubble of excitement she hadn't allowed herself to indulge in for ages, she picked up her skirts and ran without the least dignity from the sewing room and down the corridor, aiming for the entryway. She reached it just as Giles greeted the arrivals: Adam, Persephone, and both their children.

"Won't the neighborhood be beside themselves with awe when they hear that my very first guests as mistress of Brier Hill are a duke, duchess, lord, and lady?" She smoothed her gown with a casual arrogance. "I, of course, will be unbearable about it."

Persephone put an arm around Artemis's shoulders and squeezed them fondly. "Our same Artemis."

"Not the same though. I am quite grown up now and terribly mature. Watch." Artemis pitched her voice high and nasally and assumed a very prim posture. "Mrs. Giles will see that your things are taken to a guest

chamber, Your Graces. And as we haven't a proper nursery wing here, Lord Falstone and Lady Hestia can stay in a room beside yours. All will be seen to forthwith."

"Impressive," Persephone said with a laugh.

Adam stood, waiting. Artemis had learned over the years that he hid his thoughts shockingly well. Though she always hoped to break his composure, it didn't bother her overly much that she was not ever successful.

How fortuitous that her first visitors were family. Charlie certainly couldn't argue that the financial burden of hosting family was excuse enough to require them to leave.

"Will you come sit for a chat?" Did that sound too pleading? While she'd been jesting about being very sophisticated, she was embarrassed to be falling far closer to childish. But, heavens, she'd been lonely.

"Do not be grumpy, Adam." Persephone apparently anticipated an objection from that quarter. "A bit of a visit before resting will be perfectly fine."

"Of course it will." Artemis wrapped her arm through his, something he usually let her do but made certain she knew he wouldn't choose. "I will have you know I am an excellent hostess."

"Because you are so mature now?" he asked dryly.

"Precisely."

She pulled him toward the sitting room. Charlie stood a few steps from the door. He dipped his head as they approached. "Your Grace," he greeted Adam.

"Jonquil."

Charlie turned his gaze to Persephone. "Your Grace."

"A pleasure, Charlie."

He then offered a bow to Oliver. "Lord Falstone. So pleased to have you here."

Oliver could be as staid and unbendingly proper as Adam at times. He offered Charlie a regal head-only bow.

"My lord," Charlie continued speaking to Oliver, "would you be so good as to undertake an introduction to your sister? I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting her."

Oliver looked up at his father. Adam nodded subtly. Persephone set Hestia on her feet and put the little girl's hand into Oliver's. Hestia was

walking quite well but still toddled a bit and fell down now and then. The two children bore too much of a resemblance for anyone to doubt they were related.

"Hestia, this is Mr. Jonquil," Oliver said. "Oh." He looked up at Persephone. "What do I call him now that he's married to Aunt Artemis?"

"A very good question, Oliver. It is best to ask him. The three of you can decide what you would prefer."

Oliver turned back to Charlie once more. "What do we prefer?"

Charlie held out a hand to him. "Let's situate ourselves in the sitting room, and we'll come up with a solution."

The offer was accepted without hesitation, an odd thing for Oliver. He tended to be a little shy of strangers and had a decided preference for being with his family. Charlie walked the two children through the threshold, keeping his pace slow enough even for Hestia to keep up without difficulty.

Persephone watched the departure. "He has a way with children, doesn't he?"

"A trait he inherited from his parents," Adam said.

"Parents?" Artemis looked to him. "Did you know his father, then?"

Adam nodded and pulled his arm from hers, offering it instead to his wife. "I knew them, in fact, when they lived in this house."

This was news to Artemis. But she was offered no further insights. Adam and Persephone followed the path their children had taken, leaving Artemis to do the same on her own.

Charlie had sat himself and Oliver in a large wing chair, one with just room enough for the both of them to sit beside each other. Hestia sat on Charlie's lap, a triumph again. While Oliver was a bit wary of strangers, Hestia was often terrified. She showed not the least discomfort with him though.

"What do you call the other gentlemen who have married your aunts?" he asked Oliver. "Perhaps you could call me that."

Oliver shook his head firmly. "I can't call you Harry. It's not your name."

Charlie glanced over at Adam and Persephone sitting on a sofa facing their children and barely held back the grin clearly fighting to break free.

"Does everyone call him simply Harry?" Charlie asked his little companion. "Or are there other options?"

"Papa sometimes calls him—"

"Best stop there, Oliver," Artemis said, dropping into a twin wingback

chair next to theirs. “Your papa doesn’t always call your uncle Harry by appropriate names.”

Adam ignored the lot of them. *He* hadn’t benefited from a Papa who had told him it was important to sometimes be a bit silly.

“We call him Uncle Harry,” Oliver said.

“*Uncle Harry*,” Charlie repeated. “Is that your pattern, Lord Falstone? Uncle and their Christian names?”

Oliver nodded. “And they call me Oliver, not Lord Falstone.”

Charlie was sweetly patient with him. “Dropping that formality requires permission from your parents.”

“When amongst only the family, we all are less formal,” Persephone said. “Except Adam. You’d best call him whatever he tells you to.”

Charlie nodded. “I know how to follow instructions.” Hestia was watching him closely, curiously. She had Adam’s tendency to ponder things deeply. Charlie bounced her a bit on his knee, watching her in return with a tenderness that echoed a warmth in Artemis’s heart. Though he was the girl’s uncle and not her father, he looked at Hestia in the way Artemis had always wanted her father to look at her. The way her Papa had.

In that moment, her memories of her Papa shifted to include blue eyes.

“You can call her Hestia,” Oliver declared. “And you can call me Oliver.”

“I would be honored,” Charlie said. “And you can call me Uncle Charlie. Although, my niece Caroline—you might remember her from the day we spent launching paper boats on the river quite some time ago—she calls me Uncle Charming.”

Oliver giggled. There was no other word for the laughter that echoed from him. Artemis didn’t think in all his life she’d heard him giggle. He laughed often enough and was a decidedly happy child, but he was very reserved. Giggles were new.

Charlie pulled in a quick breath, precisely the sound of a person having a sudden epiphany. “Oliver,” he said very seriously, “have you ever played hide-and-seek?”

“Of course I have,” he declared with a hint of wounded pride.

“Excellent,” Charlie said, still using the tone of one discussing something of extreme importance. “Because this house, Oliver, is the very best house for hide-and-seek. When my family would stay here, my parents insisted on games of hide-and-seek and further insisted on participating.” Charlie lowered his voice as if sharing a secret. “They were often *very* hard to

find.”

Oliver bounced a little in his seat. Heavens, how was Charlie turning the often-somber boy into a giddy child?

“Would you like to play hide-and-seek with me? We will need to limit ourselves to this room, as Hestia would be overwhelmed looking for us all over the house.”

Oliver nodded. “I am a very good hider.”

“I suspected you were.” Charlie helped him onto the floor. “I will sit here and close my eyes for a time. You find a place in this room to hide. After a spell, Hestia and I will do our utmost to find you.”

Oliver was already looking around, no doubt searching for a spot.

Charlie turned his attention to Hestia. “Will you be my partner, darling?” He brushed a wisp of her thin, baby hair back away from her face and past the stub of an ear she’d been born with. His eyes darted to the girl’s parents.

Artemis held her breath. Adam was sensitive about any unkindness or insult in the matter of Hestia’s missing ear. Charlie might find himself torn limb from limb.

“She has the green Lancaster eyes,” Charlie said.

Persephone nodded. “And the Lancaster curls, both of which *I* didn’t inherit, though most of my siblings did.”

Charlie was fully focused on his armful once more. “I hope you will be my friend, Hestia. I suspect you are an absolute sweetheart.”

“You’re supposed to close your eyes,” Oliver called out from beside the sofa his parents were sitting on.

“My deepest apologies.” Charlie cuddled Hestia to him and closed his eyes.

Oliver began running about, searching for the best hiding spot. Artemis’s attention was fully on her very confusing husband. *This* Charlie, with his tenderness and gentleness, could win her heart with hardly any effort. Why was it, then, she only ever seemed to cross paths with the one who drove her mad?

Chapter Eleven

CHARLIE LOVED BEING AN UNCLE. While at Cambridge, he'd not been afforded as much time with his brothers' children as he would have liked. But Oliver and Hestia didn't live very far from Brier Hill. And the rest of the Lancaster family gathered at Falstone Castle now and then. Charlie would have nieces and nephews close by again.

The second day of Their Graces' visit offered a spot of gorgeous weather. Charlie wasted not a moment and not only obtained permission for the little lord and lady to join him on the back lawn for games but also secured the duchess's participation.

They began with lawn bowls, but that proved too confusing for Oliver and far outside Hestia's ability. The space was too wide open for hide-and-seek, a game Oliver had adopted as his absolute favorite after their impromptu round on his first day at Brier Hill. Shuttlecock and battledore would be too complicated for such young children.

There was a game Charlie grew up playing with his brothers. It would not at all be beyond Oliver's capabilities. With her mother's help, Hestia would be able to participate as well. But they'd need at least one more person.

He spotted Artemis at the terrace door.

"I have an idea," he said to the duchess and the children. "I'll be back directly."

He rushed over to Artemis, excitement building. He loved seeing children's faces light up. Such small things managed it. Made a fellow feel like a regular hero.

"We're going to play a game," he said to her without preamble. "And we want you to join in."

"Truly?" She eyed her family over his shoulder. "What game?"

"Catch us, catch us."

She shook her head. "I don't know that one."

"You'll recognize it. My brothers and I didn't invent the game, only gave it our own name."

Little Oliver's voice called over to them. "Is she going to play with us, Uncle Charming?"

He turned his head enough to call back. "She hasn't said yet."

"You have to look cute," Oliver said.

Laughing and a bit confused, Charlie turned back to Artemis. She grinned

as broadly as he'd seen in ages.

"Adam is forever telling him when they are trying to convince Persephone to agree to something, 'Look cuter, Oliver. She can't resist you when you look your cutest.' It seems Oliver is convinced that is an applicable approach in many situations."

So Charlie assumed a babyish, innocent, pouty-lipped expression, complete with hands clasped in a posture of pleading.

"He said *cute*, not *pathetic*." She was being far too dramatic for the evaluation to be a sincere one.

"I was aiming for cutely charming. Must live up to my name, after all."

"Oliver seems to have enthusiastically adopted it," Artemis said.

He arrogantly adjusted his lapel. "It's fitting, don't you think?"

She shrugged and gave him a look of overblown doubt.

He chuckled. "Do come play with us, Artie. It'll be a misery without you."

To his surprise, she reached out and threaded her fingers through his quite as if she intended to hold his hand as they walked.

"Explain this game to me," she said.

He spun about, keeping her hand in his. "She's going to join us," he told the others.

Oliver cheered and jumped about.

"He can be very somber," Artemis said. "It is good to see him acting more like the five-year-old little boy that he is."

"I adore him. And that Hestia is an angel. I am half tempted to try to convince their parents to let us keep them."

Artemis shook her head. "They would never agree."

"We'll simply have to go visit them, then."

"There are seven other nieces and nephews in my family," she said. "In time, you'll get to meet them all."

"There are ten in the Jonquil family, though I've heard a few whispers that there might be at least one more on the way." Charlie didn't know if Jason and Mariposa's news was common knowledge, and he didn't mean to spill the secret. "*You'll* eventually get to meet all of *them*."

"I would like that," she said.

He glanced at her and saw unmistakable sincerity in her expression. "Would you?"

She nodded. "I have always liked children."

Relief wrapped around his heart like a warm blanket. “That’s something we have in common, then.”

“What are we going to play, Uncle Charming?” Oliver asked as they approached.

“A game I used to play with my brothers.”

“You have brothers?” Oliver asked.

“Six of them.”

Oliver’s eyes pulled wide. “How many sisters?”

“I didn’t grow up with any, but all of my brothers are married, so I now have quite a few.”

“You have four sisters on the Lancaster side now,” the duchess said.

“I would be honored to think of all of you that way, Your Grace.”

“Persephone,” she said. “Please.”

Why that request touched him so deeply, he couldn’t say. But he was grateful. Grateful to have gained family. Grateful for the immediate and loving welcome these children had offered him, and now their mother as well.

“What game?” Oliver pressed firmly.

Charlie looked to Artemis. “That one is definitely a future duke.”

“Indeed.” Artemis’s hand was still in his. He’d not have guessed a month earlier that he would enjoy holding her hand, but it was proving a pleasant experience.

“In this game, one person has their eyes covered with a scarf or cravat or whatever is at hand. The others call out, ‘Catch us! Catch us!,’ all the while doing their utmost to slip out of reach. If the one with his or her eyes covered catches hold of someone, he or she has to guess the person’s identity. If the one who has been caught is identified, that person is blindfolded next.”

“I know this game. An excellent choice.” Artemis sounded excited. “I do worry, though, that the one blindfolded will inadvertently step on poor little Hestia. She is not swift enough to get out of danger.”

Persephone offered a solution. “She and I will play as a team. I’ll hold her. She will be happy simply to be part of the fun, though she’ll not understand at all what we’re doing.”

Charlie had to free his hand. He felt a surge of disappointment. Perhaps Artemis would let him hold her hand again. It was quite possibly the most hopeful moment they’d had together since their marriage. He needed

something to cling to.

He tugged at his cravat; it would need to serve as their eye covering. “If ever we have all our Lancaster nieces and nephews together with all our Jonquil ones, we simply have to play an enormous game of catch us, catch us. It would be a beautiful bit of chaos.”

Artemis watched him with surprise. “Are you a fan of chaos, then?”

“What is life without a bit of chaos?”

“That is the Jonquil family motto, no doubt.”

Charlie laughed. “It ought to be. But our motto is *Fortitudo per Fidem*. Latin for ‘There are a lot of us, so prepare yourself for an aching head.’”

Artemis smiled in clear enjoyment of his jest. Yes, this was proving an encouraging day.

He hunched down in front of Oliver. “Would you like to be the searcher first?”

The boy agreed eagerly. Charlie tied the cravat around his head, covering his eyes. Then he spun the boy about before stepping back.

“Catch us! Catch us!” Charlie called out.

The game that ensued was filled with delightful laughter. Oliver captured his mother, who handed Hestia off to Artemis and took her turn. She caught Artemis, who gave the little girl to Charlie. Soon it was Oliver’s turn again, then Charlie’s. The children’s giggles—even Hestia, who had been all but silent during their time at Brier Hill, laughed a couple times—filled the back lawn with joyfulness.

Oliver caught hold of Charlie’s coat on his next turn. “Caught you!”

Charlie kept still, grinning as Oliver tried to sort out who he had captured.

“Mama doesn’t wear a coat like this,” Oliver said.

“Though she was wearing a cravat a few rounds ago,” Artemis tossed out.

“And tied an embarrassment of a knot,” Charlie said, mimicking Philip’s voice and mannerisms.

Persephone and Artemis both grinned.

“You sound just like him,” Artemis said.

“A talent of mine.”

“It’s Uncle Charming!” Oliver proclaimed.

“I’ve been sorted.” Charlie sighed.

He helped Oliver out of his blindfold, then tied the cravat in place over his own eyes. “I am quite good at this game, I should warn you. I’ll likely find all four of you at the exact same time. You will be amazed.”

Oliver laughed. It was an utterly adorable sound.

"Catch us! Catch us!" He knew that was Artemis. Her voice was exceptionally familiar to him.

All their voices echoed about, calling out the same phrase, broken up by their laughter. Charlie held his arms out, trying to catch hold of someone. Oliver had a bit of an advantage, being so much shorter than everyone else playing.

Hearing a rustle behind him, Charlie spun about and caught someone. It was either Artemis or Persephone.

This time adopting his imitation of the duke's voice, he said, "I am almost certain this is Oliver."

"You sound like Papa," Oliver declared from somewhere behind him.

Charlie set his other hand on his captive's other arm. She couldn't have been holding a child, and Persephone had been the one with Hestia in her arms. This, then, was most likely Artemis. He reached up to where her head would be, and his fingers found a long, spiraling curl of soft, silky hair. No one's hair curled with the abandon Artemis's did. He stepped closer and caught the unmistakable aroma of earthy pine and citrus.

"Artie." His voice, for reasons he could not identify, emerged in a whisper. And why, for heaven's sake, was his heart pounding?

With his free hand, he slipped off his blindfold. He'd identified her correctly, of course, yet the sight of her was still surprising. He let the cravat hang limp around his neck and wrapped his arm around her, essentially a one-armed embrace. She wasn't pulling away. He brushed his fingers over another of her mesmerizing curls.

Those startlingly green eyes of hers watched him closely. "You caught me," she said a little breathlessly.

His mind emptied. He could think of nothing to say and couldn't seem to force himself to pull away. He found he wanted nothing more in that moment than to simply hold her. *Her.* Artemis Lancaster, who had once declared him such a forgettable, dismissible person that even his own family took no notice of him, who had proven herself insincere and petty time and again, whom he'd been forced to marry.

What was happening?

"Papa!" Oliver shouted.

Artemis's head snapped in that direction, a look of hopeful anticipation that disappeared almost instantaneously. A hint of disappointment passed

through her expression but so quickly he almost missed it. Disappointment at seeing her brother-in-law? Who else could she have been expecting to see?

She stepped away from Charlie and looked to her sister. “Oliver will want nothing to do with us now that Adam’s here. Those two are inseparable.”

Oliver had, in fact, already begun running toward the small back terrace where His Grace had appeared. Hestia was lying rather heavily against her mother’s shoulder, likely mere minutes from falling asleep.

“I believe our game was coming to an end anyway,” Persephone said. She looked to Charlie. “Thank you for being so indulgent with them. You have made our visit a delight for both of them.”

“I assure you it was no sacrifice at all,” he said. “I hope they will visit often.”

“And I hope you will come visit us as well,” Persephone said. “Falstone is not terribly far away.”

“I do have a whole slew of new siblings I need to meet.” It was a more pleasant thing to ponder than the mystery of why he felt a tug toward a lady who did not share that pull, indeed one he didn’t even like, who didn’t like him in return.

“Perhaps we can convince everyone to come to the Castle for Christmas this year,” Persephone said. “They did the year Hestia was born, and it was delightful.”

Charlie nodded.

Artemis walked with her sister along the same path Oliver had taken, leaving Charlie alone. Alone and utterly, utterly confused. He stood rooted to the spot, watching his baffling wife. Some questions didn’t have answers, he feared.

The duke stepped off the small back terrace, Oliver held in his arms, and walked directly to Charlie, then motioned him onward. “Walk with me.” His Grace never did make a request that sounded the least optional.

Charlie obeyed. Oliver was not sleeping but looked quite as if he might follow his sister’s lead and drift off. The duke pulled a small carved horse, one a bit worse for the wear, from his pocket and gave it to his son. Oliver clutched it to himself, then rested more heavily against his father.

“Do you suppose we’ll have bread pudding again today?” Oliver asked, his voice quiet and sleepy.

“As this is Artemis’s house, I cannot imagine we will not,” His Grace

said.

“Bread pudding is her most favorite.” Oliver’s declaration tapered off into a whisper, even as his eyes grew heavier.

The gentleman all of Society knew as the Dangerous Duke brushed a hand gently over his son’s hair, holding him as naturally as if he’d been a father all his life. Something in the gentle and easy way he interacted with his little boy put Charlie in mind of his own father.

He followed the duke to his father’s garden.

“I like this corner of your home, Jonquil,” the duke said.

“So do I. It reminds me of my father.”

The duke nodded. After the length of a breath, he looked once more at Charlie. “I am a member of the Royal Society.”

An odd and abrupt change of topic, but Charlie accepted it. “Are you?” Charlie had hoped to one day apply for membership. Intellectuals and academics from all areas of study made up its ranks. He’d not yet proven himself though. Considering the state of his career trajectory, he wasn’t likely to ever do so.

“It was suggested to me many years ago that I ought to join,” the duke said. “I do not attend as many lectures as some, but I’ve found the ones I have attended to be interesting and enlightening, for the most part.”

Charlie envied him that. “I’ve heard of a few recent lectures on mathematics that I would have liked to attend. My friends declare that an oddity in me.”

“It’s an oddity that makes sense.”

Charlie didn’t know quite what to make of that observation. “Does it?”

For the briefest of moments, the duke didn’t say anything. He’d done that often during his visit to Brier Hill, though Charlie wasn’t certain if it was a common thing with him.

“Before leaving London, I made a few arrangements.” His Grace adjusted Oliver’s position so the boy was resting in his arms and on his shoulder. They walked slowly around the small flower-filled garden. “Under my recommendation, the Society is extending to you an invitation to offer a lecture on a mathematical topic of your choosing.”

Shock rendered Charlie unable to answer immediately.

“A date has not been chosen. I told them I would inform them of the date that would be preferred.” Only the infamous Duke of Kielder could make such demands of a prestigious organization even he admitted to being only

marginally involved with. “Pick your topic. Prepare your lecture. Then tell me when you are ready to have a date selected.”

“You are in earnest?” Charlie pressed.

“I am *always* in earnest.”

Lectures for pay was one of the few options available to an academic who was married and, therefore, unable to be a don. To be invited to speak to the Royal Society would open doors for him. From this opportunity, if he managed the thing without making a fool of himself, would come others.

Years of struggling to publish papers and gain notice had loomed large in front of him. With a single meeting and a likely imperious set of demands, his brother-in-law had swept all that away and set him on the path he’d been aiming for.

“You must have a degree of faith in my intelligence and reliability,” Charlie said.

“As I told you at your wedding breakfast, I have placed faith in you that you yourself have not yet earned.”

“If you will forgive the impertinence, Your Grace, trusting people for no reason seems very out of character for you.”

The duke turned back toward the garden gate. “I said you hadn’t earned my trust. I didn’t say I had no reason for giving it.” He left on that mysterious explanation.

Was there any member of the extended Lancaster family who made any sense whatsoever?

Chapter Twelve

“Do you really have to go?” Artemis stood in the guest chamber Persephone and Adam had used the past few days, watching her sister gather the last of her things. “Everything has been so much better with you here.”

“That is because we are a distraction.” Persephone gave her an empathetic but slightly scolding look. “You can avoid reality for only so long before it catches up to you.”

“Reality sat heavy enough in this house before your arrival, I assure you.” Artemis dropped onto the bed, frustration weighing her down.

Persephone set aside her reticule and sat beside her.

“We can hardly have a conversation without arguing,” Artemis said. “Charlie has made perfectly clear that he resents me. I am certain I have not hidden my disappointment at our current arrangement. We are both stuck in this house, married no matter our objections, and facing a miserable future.”

“And is a miserable future what you want?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what are you doing to change that?” In true Persephone fashion, she had offered a reprimand, advice, and empathy all at once.

“What can be done?” Artemis answered quietly.

“I suspect you think our siblings rather sailed toward their happy futures, but that is not remotely the case.” Persephone took Artemis’s hand in hers. “I always dreamed of life in a cozy cottage with an affectionate husband who married me because he loved me tenderly and entirely. Then I married the most terrifying man I’d ever met, who lived in an enormous, drafty castle and married me in an act of revenge against a cousin.”

It was, without question, the bleakest explanation of the earliest days of Persephone’s marriage Artemis had ever heard her give.

“I had to decide if my happiness, *our* happiness, was worth fighting for.” Persephone squeezed Artemis’s hand. “Harry fell in love with Athena almost the moment he met her, but she was looking for love everywhere but with him, and everything about their situation testified to the reality that his chances of earning her affection were small indeed. He had to decide if that whisper of a chance was worth fighting for.”

Artemis had been so young during Athena and Harry’s courtship that she remembered very little of it.

“Daphne adored James from the beginning, but his family’s machinations and the impossible situation it put him in created a painful and personal barrier between them. She had to decide if the future they might have was worth fighting for.”

“I am sensing a pattern,” Artemis said.

“Good, because I’m not finished.” Persephone gave her a look she knew so well from her childhood. It was equal parts older sister and mother figure. “Linus found his perfect match in Arabella, but he had a very real rival for her affection, one she seemed to get on with very well. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to say the odds were not in his favor and walk away. He had to decide if a life with her—”

“Was worth fighting for,” Artemis finished for her.

“I am not going to discount the difficulty of the situation you find yourself in, Artemis. But absolutely nothing will change if you do not try. This will not get better on accident.”

“If *he* doesn’t think it ‘worth fighting for,’ it won’t get better no matter what I do.”

“Shall I explain all the ways that is not true? I believe I shall.” Persephone put an arm around Artemis’s shoulders. “Even if you are the only one working to find a degree of happiness, you *will* be benefited by it. Secondly, I don’t believe you are the only one willing to try to make this a success.”

“You have not been here,” Artemis said. “He either treats me with disdain or indifference.”

Persephone snorted. “I watched him during our game out on the back lawn. When he ‘caught’ you, there was no indifference there. Confusion, yes. But nothing remotely resembling indifference.”

A bit of heat touched Artemis’s cheeks. That moment had been unexpected. “I think he liked touching my hair.”

Persephone smiled at her. “Your arm, your hair. Setting his hand on your back. Standing close to you.”

“It was rather nice,” she said. “But it doesn’t fix everything.”

Persephone squeezed her shoulders. “I didn’t say it would. You have a very long road to travel, but that moment gave me hope. And watching him with the children convinced me Adam was right about him.”

“What do you mean?”

Persephone stood. “For reasons he has not divulged even to me, Adam

has a tremendous amount of faith in the goodness of Charlie Jonquil. One thing I have learned in the nearly thirteen years I've been married to Adam is that he is generally a good judge of character."

"Being kind to children is not the same as being a good husband," Artemis countered.

"No, but it says a lot about a man's heart."

There was no arguing with that. It was her Papa's kindness to her as a child that still lived on as hope in her own heart. It was how she knew he was a good and loving gentleman. It was how she knew that if she could only find him again, he would be as tender and loving as he'd been then.

Charlie was in the front entry thirty minutes later as Adam and Persephone made their way from the house. Artemis pondered her sister's words as Charlie offered his farewell to the children. Oliver seemed pleased at the promise Charlie made to come visit him at the castle. Hestia tenderly touched Charlie's cheek as he kissed her goodbye.

It says a lot about a man's heart.

Adam shook Charlie's hand. He gave Artemis a very quick one-armed hug. He had always been more withdrawn and less affectionate than most people. She had learned over the years to stop interpreting that as disapproval. She had needed more affection, more shows of approval and love, but she'd stopped disliking his detached nature.

Persephone was quite his opposite in that respect. She pulled Artemis into a full embrace, squeezing her close and tight.

"Please don't leave." Artemis hated that she couldn't hold back the emotional plea. "Please stay."

Still embracing her, Persephone said, "You are equal to this. Have faith. Fight for it."

"I need you here." She'd begged Papa with those exact words more than once.

Persephone pulled back. She brushed a tear from Artemis's cheek with the thumb of her gloved hand. Her expression held reassurance, but it didn't assuage Artemis's worries.

Artemis stood on the front step, watching her sister leave. Heavens, she was a little girl again. Watching her brothers leave for sea. Watching Persephone leave for her new life at Falstone Castle. Watching her Papa leave Heathbrook without taking her with him.

Persephone might have thought Artemis equal to the challenge, but she

wasn’t.

She wasn’t at all.

* * *

The two days since her family’s departure had been as lonely as Artemis had feared. She and Rose had spent long hours working to create the gown they’d designed on paper. The undertaking had not proven as satisfying as usual.

“I’ll work on this,” Rose said on the second afternoon. “Your mind’s wandering too much.”

“My mind can wander while my fingers are working.”

But Rose shook her head. “Spend the afternoon perusing the pattern books. That’ll bring you a bit of relaxation and perhaps a few new ideas.”

She would have argued, but the prospect was the most tempting activity she’d been presented within two days. So she set her feet in the direction of the bookroom.

It, however, was not empty. Charlie, clad in untucked shirtsleeves and trousers with frayed cuffs above his bare feet, paced in front of the large table upon which a pile of books and parchment were spread. He was flipping through a text, brow pulled low in concentration.

The sight took her back to her family home, to year upon lonely year of her life there. Father had often looked similarly disheveled and distracted when he’d been deep in his academic studies. He’d paced in just that way. He’d scattered his books and papers about.

She had stood in Father’s doorway, watching, wondering if he would notice her there, if he would say something. Anything. When she was little, she’d cried. With maturity had come the realization that her tears were wasted on him not because he didn’t still break her heart but because he didn’t care.

“Is something the matter?” Charlie’s voice pulled her from her memories, but only just.

She couldn’t entirely bring her mind to the present. It remained heavy, and her heart hurt. “My father used to pace about when he was riddling out a puzzling concept.”

“He was an academic as well, I’ve been told,” Charlie said.

She nodded. Her mind’s eye repeatedly transformed this much larger and brighter space into the dim and crowded bookroom to which her father had

so often retreated. This was not that place, and Charlie was not her father, yet she couldn't force her feet to take her fully into the room. She hovered in the doorway as she had for years in her family home.

"I used to stand on the threshold and watch him." She wasn't whispering, but neither could she force her voice to emerge at full volume. "Sometimes I talked to him."

"About his studies?"

She shook her head. How easily she could see her father, watch him pacing, feel the agony of his indifference. "I would ask him to look at me, to talk to me. He never did."

"Many men become consumed by their studies," Charlie said.

Artemis forced the air to empty from her lungs. "I mean he *never* did. Not once in my entire life."

"Criminy." Shock filled the whispered exclamation.

She dragged herself inside not because she was ready to but because she wanted to believe she was stronger than the weight of these memories. "He never looked at me or spoke to me. He didn't talk about me to my siblings or the neighbors or the vicar. The closest he came was after Persephone moved to Falstone Castle and I would write to her. My father would tell Athena what he felt ought to be written to Persephone, but he never acknowledged that the letters were being sent by me. He never said my name. I wasn't even included in his will. Even in death, he ignored me."

"Good heavens, Artemis."

Another deep breath failed to release her tension. "Persephone said it was because his mind was broken. But he was brilliant. His papers on mythology were met with academic acclaim. I heard him undertake thoughtful conversations. His mind worked, at least in some capacity, but it —or *he*—refused to admit that I existed."

She had seldom talked about this, not ever with anyone but Persephone. And her beloved, long-lost Papa. Heavens, how she needed him. For years, she'd needed him to come back for her.

"Did Persephone have any idea why your father was so . . . confused?"

A gentle way of explaining it. She appreciated that.

Artemis leaned her back against the wall beside the door. "My mother died giving birth to me. Acknowledging that I was real and alive and present would have required him to acknowledge that she was dead. Persephone believes his mind couldn't endure it."

Charlie moved closer to her. “I suspect that explanation doesn’t truly make it better.”

She swallowed down a lump of emotion. “My mother traded her life for mine. I’ve spent the past twenty years wondering if the exchange was worth it.”

He took her hand. “I don’t think these things can be measured that way.”

Artemis dropped her gaze. “But of the two of us, maybe she was the one who ought to have lived. Maybe her life was the more valuable one.”

He leaned against the wall beside her, near enough that his presence added a bit of warmth to the chilly, rainy day. He rubbed her hand between his. “Your father’s treatment of you certainly didn’t help, did it?”

“He has been gone for nearly five years, but I still debate the answer.” She leaned her head against his shoulder, finding needed comfort in his nearness and his hand holding hers. “He may have been right, Charlie. It might have been better if I’d died instead of her.” A tear rolled hot down her cheek. “He would have still had his beloved wife. My family wouldn’t have been thrust into destitution. *You* would certainly be happier.”

“But terribly bored.”

The unexpected jest pulled a fleeting smile to her lips. “I think sometimes you miss feeling bored.”

“At times, perhaps.”

“Which explains your love of mathematics.”

He laughed. One thing she could say for her unchosen husband: he was quick to lighten difficult moments. “What I am wrestling with at the moment is far from boring.”

“What is it?” she asked.

He pushed away from the wall, keeping her hand in his as they walked back to his table. “I have been studying François Budan’s theorem on the real roots of polynomials. He adjusted Pascal’s triangle and incorporated Descartes’s *Rule of Signs*.” He looked over at her.

“My apologies,” she said, making certain her tone of mental numbness was clearly jesting. “I didn’t hear all of that. I was too bored to keep listening.”

Charlie had a nice laugh. That had made their time here at Brier Hill better than it might otherwise have been, though he’d not laughed as often as she suspected he usually did.

“If not for Cambridge’s ridiculous rules,” he said, “you could be spending

every day listening to discussions with others who are equally intrigued by equally boring things."

She assumed a look of abject disappointment. "I have been robbed."

His laugh emerged in an odd sort of snort, bringing her own laugh to the surface. She'd been crying mere moments earlier, and now she was laughing. The change was unexpected but welcome.

"What did you actually come in for?" he asked. "I suspect it wasn't in the hope of discussing theoretical mathematics."

"I wanted to peruse a book of old fashion plates." Embarrassment surged as a blush over her face. "I'm certain you find that a very shallow and simple pursuit." She ought not be ashamed of her interest, yet he had just told her of his in terms she could not begin to understand.

"Clearly"—he motioned at his ramshackle appearance—"I know nothing of fashion. That you are an undisputed expert is impressive, Artie. Truly."

She hadn't always liked when he called her Artie. Lately, though, it felt like a nickname borne of affection. Other than Princess, she'd not experienced that. "Will you find me bothersome if I stay in here while you ponder the mysteries of the mathematical universe?"

"Not at all."

She retrieved one of her plate books and settled comfortably on the sofa, her feet tucked up beside her. Charlie took up his book again and resumed his pacing and pondering.

He'd shown her greater kindness than her father ever had, despite having every reason to deeply resent her. She'd told herself that was the reason she'd not attempted to forge a connection with him: because he clearly disliked her. But she had to admit, in that moment, that her fear ran far deeper.

She had spent her life plagued by an unanswerable question: was hers the life that ought to have been preserved twenty years earlier? She knew the answer her father would have given. What if Charlie's answer were the same?

Chapter Thirteen

THE QUESTION OF WHAT TO present to the Royal Society remained unanswered in Charlie's mind. He wasn't well-versed enough in Budan's theorem to expound on that. He was deeply intrigued by the law of quadratic reciprocity but hadn't anything new to add to the topic. He'd hoped to further study Euclidean geometry at Cambridge, as he was convinced its principles were not the only ones at work in the universe no matter the general consensus. That last would make an excellent topic for lecture, but he couldn't prove anything nor speak with a great deal of authority.

This was an opportunity he dared not waste. It could be a means of reclaiming a little of what he'd had to give up. And yet, that was not what hung heaviest on his mind. He couldn't stop thinking about Artemis.

"He never looked at me or spoke to me."

"He never said my name."

Charlie could hardly imagine a father completely ignoring his child and doing so for the entirety of her life. He'd been unsure what to do while she'd shared such personal pain and recollections. Had she needed an arm around her shoulders or a hug? He'd settled for holding her hand, hoping it would help. After a time, she'd rallied. And she'd stayed in the bookroom for a while afterward, reading and perusing her fashion plates.

Had he done the right thing? They didn't love each other, and this marriage had not been their choice, but that didn't mean he wanted her to be unhappy.

Now, with only the light of his candle breaking the dark of the bookroom, his mind refused to make sense of anything. Not mathematics. Certainly not the lady he was married to.

He took up the letters Giles had delivered to him earlier that day but which he'd not yet had time to even glance at. Letters in one hand, candleholder in the other, he made his way back to his bedchamber. None of his clothes were so fashionably close fitting that he needed a valet to help him undress. He could simply strip down to his small clothes and climb into bed when he was ready.

Light spilled through the ajar door of the circular sitting room, precisely the amount one would expect from a candle. Charlie moved to the door and peered inside.

Artemis was seated on the sofa, her legs up beside her, just as she'd sat in

the bookroom. She held a folded handkerchief in her hands, which rested on her lap. Her gaze was on the bit of linen, and what he could see of her expression was deeply sad. Heartbroken, even.

Charlie's heart dropped to his toes. He hadn't caused this, had he?

"Artemis?"

She didn't look up. He knew she wasn't asleep.

What was he meant to do? He didn't know what was causing her distress. He certainly didn't know how to fix it.

What would you do, Father? There was, of course, no answer. He was on his own, muddling through life, as always.

He crossed to her, pausing just long enough to set his candle and the letters on the side table next to the sofa before sitting beside her. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing I can't sort out." Her usual tone of defiance felt forced. She had often frustrated him with her playacting and insincerity. Seeing that mask crack, though, was not the satisfying experience he would have expected.

"Not much can be said for me, but I am generally considered a good listener," he said.

"I suspect I have forced you to listen to more already today than you'd prefer." She shrugged a shoulder and tipped her chin at an arrogant angle.

Not once in the last two years had Charlie expected he would ever feel empathy for Miss Shamcaster.

"I am sorry about how you were treated," he said. "A father is someone who ought to . . . ought to be there when you need him."

Eyes still on her handkerchief, a bit of linen that appeared to have seen better days, she asked, "Was yours?"

He seldom spoke of his father, almost never, in fact. But he felt in his bones that she needed him to. She needed to know that her difficult feelings about her father were something others could empathize with.

"My father died when I was seven years old," he said. "So, no, he has not been around when I've needed him. I suspect, though, if he had remained alive, he would have been."

"I wonder sometimes which is more difficult: missing the kindnesses one once had or mourning the tender moments that never were."

How easily she could have been describing the last thirteen years of his life. "I've wondered that myself."

She took a slow, deep breath. It was the sort of thing one did when hoping

to retain one's composure. "Did you enjoy your mathematics?"

"I *always* enjoy mathematics."

She shook her head. "You are a strange person, Charlie Jonquil."

"Yes, but a strange person with letters." He reached over to the table and took up the stack. "And two of them are for you."

Eagerness entered her expression. He was glad of it. Seeing her so downcast weighed heavily on him.

He set her letters in her hands.

"Daria," she said, eyeing the first. "And Nia," she said about the second. She looked at him briefly. "Two of the Huntresses."

"Ah."

She bent over her letters, so he turned his attention to the one addressed to him in Mater's familiar handwriting. He flipped it over and broke the seal.

It was a single sheet of parchment written on one side only. A brief letter, then. That was a bit disappointing.

He read silently.

> *My dearest Charlie,*
>
> *I realize you are only just settling into your new life and home, but I fear I must disrupt. While it will seem an oddity to you, and I will confess it is unusual, your father's will requires that all you boys and your families come to Lampton Park for the reading of its final portion. He was very specific about this.*
>
> *Though the reason for this gathering is perhaps not the happiest, I am so pleased at the possibility of seeing all my boys again, and you in particular, Charlie. I look forward to hearing how you are progressing with your marriage and the life you are building.*
>
> *Come as soon as you are able, with plans to stay until all of you are able to arrive and these matters can be seen to.*
>
> *All my love,*
>
> *Mater*

She anticipated hearing a good report from him, reassurances that all was going well. He and Artemis were not much better off than they had been when last Mater had seen them. They spent most of their time ignoring each other. When they weren't isolated, they were generally arguing. And now and then, they had moments of companionable peace, like they'd had today.

And on the back lawn during their game of catch us, catch us. Heaven knew he'd thought about that moment many times. He imagined himself touching her soft curls again, putting his arm around her. He couldn't shake the idea, and he couldn't deny that it was far more appealing each time he pondered the possibility.

But even that bit of encouragement didn't change the reality of their situation. His struggling marriage would be subject to direct comparison with the loving and successful families his brothers were building. Fleeting moments of not wanting to strangle each other would not pass muster at Lampton Park.

Charlie couldn't bear the thought of disappointing Mater. And his brothers would alternate between teasing him mercilessly and offering mountains of unsolicited advice. He didn't care for the possibility of either one.

"Is something the matter?" Artemis asked.

"We are being summoned to Lampton Park, something to do with my father's will." He couldn't reconcile that part of it. Father had been gone for thirteen years. How could any aspect of his will be read and enforced only now?

"Will very many people be there?" She gave no indication of what she hoped the answer would be.

"My entire family," he said. "And I know them well enough to be certain they will not bother to hide their curiosity about the two of us."

After a moment's hesitation, she spoke again. "What are we to do? I suspect neither of us wishes to be scrutinized."

He could think of only one answer. "The same thing your brother-in-law told us to do in London"—once more mimicking the duke's voice—"we will undertake a required bit of playacting."

"We're going to lie to your family?"

He hated that her evaluation wasn't entirely an exaggeration. "I propose we call a truce between the two of us while we're there. We'll make a show of being on friendly terms and, in so doing, avoid the awkwardness we would endure otherwise."

In other words, yes, he silently added. *We are going to lie to every last one of them.*

Chapter Fourteen

CHARLIE HAD BEEN ADEPT AT pretending to be other people all his life. He could recreate each of his brothers' mannerisms and vocal oddities. His schoolmates had been endlessly entertained by his impersonations of every professor and headmaster they'd ever had. He, of course, could also do impersonations of all of his friends.

Thus, playing the role of doting husband was not terribly difficult; he simply acted like he was *any* of his brothers.

The journey from Brier Hill to Lampton Park required multiple days. They'd already passed two nights at inns along the way. They'd made a show of being a perfectly content couple and, as a result, were never given a second glance. Nothing about them drew anyone's notice. That was the goal.

On their final night on the road, they stopped at the White Horse, a quaint coaching inn with a warm, inviting atmosphere. They'd arrived too late for the supper hour, but the proprietress was nearly overcome with concern over the state of their bellies and well-being.

"You must be fair starving." She eyed Artemis. "You're so thin, love. Such a tiny thing. You'll be fainting clear away, you will."

"I'm not so desperate as that," Artemis assured her.

"Help me to convince her, sir," the woman said to Charlie.

He adopted his brother Layton's approach with his wife when she was worn thin but too distracted to take proper care of herself. He set an arm about her waist and pulled her next to him.

With a soft smile, he leaned close and, in exactly the solicitous tone his brother used, said, "A bit to eat before you retire for the night would likely do you good."

He'd known from the first moment he met Artemis that she was an actress of greater ability than even those appearing on the London stage. She'd proven that true again and again the last three days.

She leaned against him, her posture and expression demure. "I am so tired. I don't mind being a little hungry, if only I can lie down."

Was she really so exhausted as that? He eyed her more closely. "You aren't growing ill, are you?"

She shook her head, a soft pull to her lips. "No, dear. I'm only tired."

Charlie brushed the back of his hand along her forehead. Philip was

forever doing that when Sorrel was unwell; she almost without fail swatted his hand away and told him to quit being a fusspot. Artemis would likely have done the same, but less gently, if not for the roles they were required to play.

"You aren't feverish," he said.

"Merely tired."

But was she? He cupped her jaw with his hand, brushing his thumb along her cheek. Stanley did that all the time with Marjie. "I worry about you." Something Philip said.

She leaned her head against his hand and closed her eyes. If he didn't know better, he would think she actually took comfort in his touch, the way a wife would if she and her husband were on kindly terms.

"Perhaps you *should* lie down," he said. "Your abigail will be waiting for you."

She looked at him once more. "Thank you, dear." With one last besotted smile, she slipped away and followed the proprietress's daughter up the stairs to the room they would be given for the night.

"Might I trouble you to bring up a tray?" Charlie asked. "I cannot bear the thought of her being hungry, but she also seems legitimately exhausted. I wouldn't wish to prevent her from resting."

"Aren't you simply the sweetest." The proprietress sighed. "And she loves you, she does. Saw it in her eyes."

He felt a little guilty at having deceived the poor woman. She didn't deserve to be played such a trick. Yet, the two of them arriving unhappy and miserable would have been embarrassing for everyone, including her. "I'm very fortunate." He hoped he embodied half the sincerity his brother Harold used when declaring how grateful he was for his beloved Sarah.

"I'll bring you up a tray, sir. Is there anything in particular the lady likes? Anything I might include that'd be a joy to her?"

He knew the actual answer to that. Perhaps he wasn't a complete disaster of a husband after all. "Do you have any bread pudding? It is her favorite."

"We do, sir. I'll send her up a warm bit of it along with her supper."

Charlie didn't have to imitate anyone with his reply. He was genuinely grateful to the woman. "I cannot thank you enough. We've had a long few days of travel. This will restore her spirits, I am certain of it."

"Her happiness matters to you." The proprietress nodded, clearly feeling she knew the answer.

Her happiness did, in fact, matter to him. He wanted her to be happy, to be hopeful about her future. He wanted her to find some pleasure in the life that had been forced on them.

"I'm happy when she is happy." It was nothing but the truth. Their lives were too intertwined now for their happiness to not be as well.

"Go on up with you." The woman kindly motioned him on, the gesture and the expression on her face as maternal as one was likely to find. "You could use a bit o' rest yourself, I daresay."

"I could at that." Especially as he was certain he'd afforded Artemis time enough for Rose to help her change into her nightclothes.

They had formulated this approach before leaving Brier Hill. Their playacting as a loving and in-love couple meant they would be assigned a shared bedchamber at inns along the way, which was decidedly awkward for a couple who had only recently reached a degree of tolerance between them. So at each inn, she made her way to their room before he did—until that evening, she'd simply left the private dining room ahead of him—and Rose helped her change for the night. That allowed her to be settled into bed before he arrived. He slept on the floor or, if he was particularly fortunate, on an obliging sofa or settee.

Rose was only just stepping out of a room two floors up when he reached it.

"Is she all tucked in?" he asked.

Rose nodded. "And between the two of us, Mr. Jonquil, she looks done in."

"Do you think she's ill? I thought she seemed a bit pale."

"Likely only worn down from days of travel."

He hoped that was all. "Supper's being sent up on a tray. She'll get something to eat without losing any rest."

Rose gave him a look of approval. Two people approving of him in a matter of minutes. He hardly recognized himself.

Charlie slipped inside the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Artemis was cozily situated under a coverlet, pillows behind her so she sat nearly upright. She had a book of fashion plates open in front of her.

He sat gingerly on the side of the bed, facing her. "A tray's being sent up."

"Thank you."

"And there's a bit of a treat for you coming along with the meal."

She set her book aside and eyed him with curiosity. “What is the treat?”

He shrugged a little. “It’s a surprise.”

Her eyes lit with interest. “What is it?”

“I’m not going to tell you, Artie. If I did, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

She leaned forward, half sitting, half kneeling. “Tell me, Charlie. Do.”

He shook his head.

“You mean to tease me?” She was grinning. Artemis, he was discovering, took particular delight in spontaneous larks. They had that in common.

“I mean to make you guess,” he said, his heart as light as it had been during their game of catch us, catch us.

“Is it something I’m particularly fond of?” she asked.

“It is.”

She pressed her hands together, touching them to her lips as she thought. “Bread pudding?”

He shrugged.

A grin spread over her face. “I do hope it is bread pudding. I adore bread pudding.”

“What are your other guesses?” He had accidentally stumbled upon the perfect formula for learning more about his bride, and he meant to utilize it.

“Peppermint candies?”

He made mental note of that but made no effort to stop her guesses.

“The lavender-colored flowers that are often in vases at Brier Hill,” she said. “They have pointed petals, light purple at the tips but fading to dark in the center. And a green crown tops it. I’ve never seen any flower like those.”

“Love-in-a-mist,” Charlie said.

“Is that what they’re called?”

He nodded.

“Do you also know the name of the . . . ?” Her mouth twisted a bit as she thought. The reigning diamond of Society looked undeniably adorable in that moment. “The fuzzy ones. I can think of no other way to describe them. They’re a deep purple or pink, and there are dozens and dozens of tiny fuzzy flowers on each stalk.”

“Those are called queen-of-the-meadow. My uncle Stanley sent back seeds when he was in America fighting in the war with the former colonies. Years later, my parents planted them at Brier Hill, and they’ve grown there ever since.”

“I know the little blue ones,” Artemis said. “They are forget-me-nots.”

Charlie nodded. “They are my mother’s favorite.”

“I don’t know which flower is my favorite.” Artemis actually leaned a little bit against him, though he didn’t know if she realized it. “I’ve never given much thought to the question.”

A knock echoed off the door. He stood and crossed to it. The proprietress stood on the other side, a generously laden tray in her hands. He stepped aside to let her in. She crossed to the table not far from the door and set the tray down.

“Thank you,” he told her as she left, and he received a maternal glance of approval in return.

With the door closed once more, he turned to Artemis. “It appears we have roast chicken and boiled potatoes. I spy a bit of spelt wheat bread.”

“But what is the secret treat?” She was kneeling on the bed in a long night rail, watching him with wide, excited eyes. She was so remarkably relatable in that moment. This was a lady he could see himself having a great many larks with. A far cry from the unreachable ice sculpture she so often insisted on being.

“Boiled potatoes,” he said in answer to her question.

She snatched up a pillow. “Do not make me toss this at you.”

“I’d not do that if I were you,” he said. “You might knock the potatoes off the tray; then where would you be?”

She laughed and dropped back against her other pillows. “You are impossible, Charlie.”

He took up the little bowl of bread pudding and a spoon from the tray and carried it over to her. “Your special treat.”

“Oh, it *is* bread pudding.” She took it from him and held it in her hands, taking in the aroma with a sigh.

“I know it’s a particular favorite of yours.”

“It is.”

He walked around the bed and pulled the curtains closed on two sides. They’d taken this approach at the previous inns. He could change for the night that way without embarrassing either of them.

As he tugged his jacket and waistcoat off, he could hear her spoon clang against the bowl.

He pulled off his boots, not so snug that he couldn’t get them off on his own. “How is your secret treat?”

“Delightful,” she said.

He laughed. “You sound like a little girl who’s been let loose in a sweetshop.”

“We had a sweetshop in Heathbrook. I used to stand outside and press my face against the glass and dream of being permitted to have something, *anything* from inside.”

“Did you ever get to?” he asked.

“Five times,” she said. “A peppermint. A butterscotch. An anise twist. A chocolate-covered almond. And another peppermint.”

“You remember your visits there well,” he said.

“I do.” She sighed with nostalgia. “Those were five of the best days of my entire life.”

Charlie was down to only his trousers. He generally slept in his small clothes—long nightshirts always tangled and bunched in uncomfortable ways—but had made a point of not reaching that state of undress until the candles were blown out and Artemis was asleep for the night. He put on the dressing gown Rose had left on the settee for him. She had very kindly agreed to help them with the logistics of all this since he didn’t have a valet. Charlie wished he had the means of raising her salary.

He tied the sash of his dressing gown. It covered his bare chest, and his trousers kept his legs from peeking out scandalously. “What would you like for your supper?”

“I can fetch it for myself.”

“I know you can, but you shouldn’t have to. You’re tucked in and comfortable. It’ll be easier for me to prepare you a plate.” He looked back at her. The table was on the same side of the bed as the open curtain. “A little bit of everything?”

“Yes, please.”

He’d not attended many balls, the place at which most gentlemen gained experience creating a supper plate for a lady, but he felt he did a decent job of it just then. After snatching up a set of utensils, he crossed to the bed and set the plate and cutlery on the bedside table.

“Anything else I can get for you?”

She shook her head no.

He hoped she would tell him if she wanted more. Though Rose had insisted Artemis was merely tired, he wasn’t fully assured that was the case.

“Is there a reason you don’t have a valet?” she asked as he made a plate

for himself.

The real reason was a lack of money, but that was more embarrassing than the explanation he usually gave. “I don’t dress fashionably enough to need one.”

“A great many young ladies in Society have declared you shockingly handsome. If you dressed to the nines, you’d be devastating.”

It was a fine compliment but a bit of a depressing one as well. What good would being “devastating” be to him now? He was already married, and to a lady who disliked him enough that no amount of fashionable handsomeness would change that.

He sat on the settee and pulled the folded blanket lying there over his lap before tucking into his supper.

“Did you know Rose is niece to your brother’s valet, Wilson?” Artemis asked.

He couldn’t see Artemis now. The settee sat at the foot of the bed, and those curtains were pulled closed. “Philip told me back when the arrangement was first made,” Charlie said.

“And did you feel sorry for Rose, knowing she would be enduring my company for years on end?’

He had, actually. But their pretended amicableness had made for a pleasant couple of days. He didn’t want to throw that all out. “The two of you seem to get on very well.”

“She is the only person of my acquaintance, aside from Wilson and your eldest brother, who shares my enthusiasm for fashion. We can discuss it for hours on end, piecing together wardrobes we would suggest for various people were we in a position to do so. The very first imaginings we concocted together were for Princess Charlotte.”

The nation had very recently come out of mourning for the young royal, who’d died in childbirth. She’d been only a year older than he and Artemis were. Such a tragic end. “Philip struggled a great deal with the news of the princess’s passing. He’d nearly lost his wife the same way mere months earlier.”

“Rose tells me that her uncle is absolutely besotted with the newest little Jonquils.”

“Everyone is,” Charlie said. “Kendrick—Lord Jonquil, I suppose I should say—is an absolutely delightful handful. Lady Julia is something of an angel. She reminds me of Hestia. The two would likely be very good

friends.”

“They are practically family now,” Artemis said. “Something I am certain Adam finds unbearable.”

Charlie chuckled. “I will never forget the day he and Philip beat each other to a pulp on the banks of the Trent during that house party. Philip so often acts like a frippery popinjay. It was a bit amazing to see him hold his own against the Dangerous Duke.”

“Even more amazing,” Artemis said, “I have seen the Dangerous Duke sing a lullaby to a sleeping baby.”

Before seeing His Grace hold his children at Brier Hill, Charlie might have struggled to imagine such a scene. He could do so easily now. “His children adore him. That much is clear.”

“I asked him once if his father had been tender and attentive. I know his mother wasn’t, and I couldn’t sort out where he’d learned the way of it. He said his father taught him to be a duke, to be independent and strong-willed and authoritative and dependable, but that he learned to be a father and a husband from another source entirely.”

That was an intriguing mystery. “From what source?”

“He didn’t say, and I could tell he would object to me pressing the matter. I haven’t ever asked him again.”

Charlie had finished his food and rose, crossing to the side of the bed once more. She’d finished eating as well. He took up her plate and her empty bowl. “If I ever need to bribe you, I now know how.” He held up the bowl.

“I’ve loved it since I was a little girl.” She pulled her blanket up, tucking it over her shoulders, and leaned back against her pillows. “Persephone would save back bread for days before my birthday each year so she could make it for me.”

They really had been in dire financial straits if bread pudding had been a delicacy.

Charlie returned their dishes to the tray the proprietress had brought in, then went around the room blowing out the candles. The one on Artemis’s bedside table he would leave for her to extinguish when she was ready.

In the dim light, he carefully returned to the settee. It wasn’t quite long enough for him to stretch out on, but it would do for one night. He hadn’t the first idea what the arrangements would be at Lampton Park. In light of the crick in his neck, he hoped they’d have separate rooms, or at least one

with a longer sofa.

"Oh mercy!" Artemis gasped the word out. "The tray."

"What about it?"

"The proprietress will come back to fetch it at some point," she said from behind the bed curtain. "Whispers of our arrangement will be all over the inn in an instant."

That was inarguably true. At the previous inns, Rose had slipped in before the chambermaids arrived to tend the fire in the morning, allowing him and Artemis time to wake before being caught out in the true state of their marriage. While Charlie's concern was far more for his family's evaluation of things, the potential for embarrassment along the way weighed on Artemis.

He took up his blanket and walked around the bed to the side opposite of where he knew she was lying and pulled back the curtain. "I'll lie on top of the blankets. It'll be dark enough that no one stepping inside the room will be able to tell the difference."

He pulled the bed curtains closed again and situated himself as best he could. He flicked the blanket he'd brought with him out over them both. That would give the impression needed to prevent the whispers Artemis feared. It was both the most and least comfortable he'd been at any of their inn stops.

"You'll even be able to straighten out your legs tonight," she said.

"The very lap of luxury, this." He settled himself on a pillow, closed his eyes, and let the air slowly leave his lungs. They could make this work.

The bed shifted a little. Citrusy pine hung quite unexpectedly in the air around him. An instant later, he felt the tickle of hair brushing against his face and neck, then the lightest of kisses pressed to his cheek.

"Thank you, Charlie," Artemis said.

Again, everything shifted. He opened one eye and looked in her direction. She resettled on her side, facing away from him, then blew out the candle.

It was for the best the room was dark. Otherwise, she would have seen the heat he felt stealing up his neck. He was both a little embarrassed and pleased as a peacock.

He had done something right. He, the brother who was forever in scrapes, who seemed to always need rescuing and correcting and scolding, had done something so right that he'd earned a sweet gesture of gratitude.

A few minutes might have passed, perhaps a few hours, but he was still

quite awake when the door to the room creaked open.

"Charlie." Artemis's worried whisper surprised him. He'd assumed she was asleep. Her worries over the embarrassment awaiting them should the state of things be discovered was even greater than he'd realized.

"Don't fret, Artie," he whispered in return.

He slipped a little closer and set an arm over her, atop the blanket that he'd laid across them both. His arm would be visible to the proprietress as she stepped in. They would appear to be a couple quite comfortable together, sleeping soundly with none of the awkwardness they actually faced.

The proprietress slipped inside and quickly and quietly retrieved the tray. With expertise borne of years of experience, she pulled the door closed even with her hands full, leaving Charlie and Artemis alone once more.

Into the silence left behind, Artemis spoke in a quiet and somewhat broken voice. "You must think me utterly pathetic."

"Not at all," he said.

"But worrying so much over being whispered about." He felt her take a shaky breath. "Society's Ice Queen is meant to be above such concerns."

"Perhaps." He held her a little closer. "But Artemis Jonquil is a human being, and she is permitted to have worries and uncertainties."

"What of Charlie Jonquil? Does he have any of those human frailties?"

"At the moment, Charlie Jonquil is feeling absolutely superhuman."

His arm shook with her light chuckle. "My hero," she said in a singsong voice.

He laughed along with her. It was a light and tender and comfortable moment between them, one made even more welcome by its rarity.

This was progress. This was hope. Perhaps he wasn't destined to make a mull of his entire life after all.

Chapter Fifteen

ARTEMIS DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO make of Charlie Jonquil. They'd been mortal enemies for nearly two years, picking at each other, disliking each other, resenting each other. That had grown ever more pointed in the weeks since they'd been forced to marry. But during their journey to Nottinghamshire, he'd been sweet and patient, accommodating, and thoughtful. Of course, they had agreed beforehand to play the role of a caring couple. Perhaps he was simply as talented a performer as she had learned to be over the years. He'd certainly shown himself a remarkable mimic.

But he'd been kind even when they'd been alone in the inn the night before. There'd been no one around in need of fooling. He'd been sweet and funny, and he'd made her feel at ease in a situation that could have been terribly uncomfortable. She liked the Charlie she'd spent time with in that pokey little room. He'd been very like the Charlie who'd played games at Brier Hill. Who'd listened as she'd spoken of her father. Who'd softly touched her hair. She'd been more herself with him in those moments than she had been with almost anyone else, and he hadn't been repulsed or rejecting.

How tempting it was to snatch at that thread of hope, but she'd had far too many snap over the years to trust it.

She'd still not made sense of it all by the time they arrived at Lampton Park. The Jonquils were known to be a tight-knit and fiercely loyal family. Their loyalty to one another was legendary. And she had shattered all the hopes of their youngest brother. She hadn't the first idea how she would be received.

Charlie had grown quieter as they'd drawn closer to his family home. He seemed as uneasy as she.

"I'm a little nervous," she said as the carriage rolled to a stop in front of the imposing house.

He let out a slow breath. "So am I."

They'd seen each other through the awkward discomfort of the inns on the journey here; they would support each other through this as well. Heaven knew the effort wouldn't be perfect, neither would the facade they meant to present, but it was something.

A liveried footman handed her down. She stood a moment, breathing through her uncertainty. Artemis of myth was likely never nervous. She was

a warrior goddess, captain of her own ship, determiner of her own fate. The Huntresses would be appalled if they could see how far short of her namesake's legacy she was falling at the moment.

Charlie stepped up beside her. Artemis squared her shoulders. They were in this together.

"Are you ready to resume our roles?" he asked.

"I think we had best try."

Almost mechanically, he offered her his arm. There was no real warmth in the gesture.

"If you don't try to look a little happy," she whispered, "they will never believe the ruse."

She heard him push out a strained breath. A smile appeared on his face. It was not entirely believable, but it might do.

Artemis had vastly more experience pretending to feel at ease in situations where she knew she was not wanted or welcome. She wrapped that protective cloak around her as she'd done many times before and walked at his side into the lion's den.

Whenever she'd imagined herself married and visiting her husband's family, she'd pictured herself a welcome part of that family. She'd imagined gaining a father and mother who loved and cherished her, siblings who considered her one of them. Instead, she was arriving as the enemy. All the playacting in the world wasn't likely to actually change that.

The butler and housekeeper received them cordially and formally. They were offered the option of either retiring and resting from their journey or joining the earl and countess in the drawing room. Charlie deferred to Artemis.

"I should like to greet our hosts," she said, not because it was necessarily the better or more proper choice but because she worried she'd lose her nerve otherwise. She was meant to be Artemis, diamond of Society, intimidated by no one and nothing.

They were led there, no matter that Charlie knew perfectly well where the drawing room was. It was a strong reminder that they were guests. On his own, he likely would have been welcomed as family.

At the drawing room door, the butler announced, "Mr. and Mrs. Charles Jonquil."

Charlie groaned quietly, almost a sigh of disgust. Whether he objected more to being called Charles, a version of his name she knew from

experience he disliked or from hearing her so intrinsically tied to him, she wasn't certain.

Please don't abandon me now, Charlie.

The earl, turned out in colorful and dramatic fashion as always, rose at their entrance. The countess did not, though she greeted them.

"You've arrived without murdering one another." Lord Lampton eyed them both. "Perhaps Holy Harry's been praying for a miracle."

"Who is Holy Harry?" Artemis asked.

Lord Lampton's expression turned to one of theatrical worry. "Has he not mentioned that he has brothers?"

She could play along. She would enjoy it, in fact. "Brothers?" She pressed a hand to her heart, settling her features in a look of surprised confusion. She turned to Charlie. "Do you have brothers?"

A bit of color touched in his cheeks. "Holy Harry is my brother Harold, though he does not particularly care for that nickname, so I wouldn't recommend it."

She nodded. "Any other warnings I ought to heed?"

"Don't listen to a word Philip says."

For that bit of cheek, his older brother gave him a shove and received one in return. There was something painfully poignant about seeing such easy familiarity between them. Though her family loved each other, they were never this at ease. At least *she* wasn't. Even amongst her siblings, she kept herself safely tucked away.

She diverted her gaze, needing a moment to regain her composure. Her eyes fell on a large family portrait above the fireplace. The subjects were easy to identify. Lord Lampton, though likely at least ten years younger in the portrait and far less brightly dressed than he was now, looked too much like himself to be confused for anyone else. The dowager countess was easily recognized. The little boy with the ginger hair was utterly unmistakable.

The gentleman sitting amongst this large family drew her attention. His friendly expression and the smile in his eyes was familiar. She'd thought so when she'd been at Lampton Park for the house party a couple of years earlier. He looked a great deal like his sons. Shockingly so, in fact. Anyone who knew them would feel instantly as though they'd known him.

"Where are the children?" Charlie asked his brother. "I've come to see *them*, you realize. The rest of you aren't terribly important."

“Not important?” Philip eyed him with overblown shock. “How can anyone wearing a waistcoat of hand-embroidered yellow silk beneath a perfectly tailored coat of deepest purple be considered anything but absolutely crucial? I fear you must be unwell from your journey.” He looked to his wife. “Sorrel, have Dr. Scorseby sent for at once. Charlie is clearly delirious with some horrific illness.”

“You are going to be impossible while your brothers are here, aren’t you?” Lady Lampton said with a sigh.

“Not ‘impossible,’ dear. Utterly irresistible.”

She shook her head. “The children are in the nursery,” she told Charlie. “You had best go visit them, as they are likely to be better behaved than their father.”

Lord Lampton clasped a hand to his heart. “You wound me, my love. Deeply.”

Adam found the earl’s theatrics wearying. Artemis adored the dramatics. This was a brother-in-law she could get along with very well if given half a chance. He so easily brought a smile to her face even in a difficult moment like this. Her Papa had managed that also. In her mind’s eye, she began to picture her Papa as being tall, like Lord Lampton.

“Layton’s little ones are here as well,” Lady Lampton said. “Caroline, in particular, will be offended if you do not visit her straight off. Her uncle is a bad influence, you realize.”

“Which uncle?” Artemis asked, enjoying the banter.

“All of them,” the three answered in near unison.

“It seems the perfect time to look in on the children.” Charlie walked back toward her.

She reached out, fully expecting to be offered his arm. In his enthusiasm to see more of his family members, he neglected that. Only because he was eager for his family. She told herself that several times as she followed him from the room. Only as they climbed the stairs did she realize he might not have been inviting *her* to join him on the trek through the house.

There was no real option but to continue following. She didn’t know where in this house she would be staying. Wandering about until she either found her traveling trunk in a bedchamber or a servant to plead with was too embarrassing a prospect to entertain.

They arrived at the nursery wing, and a chorus of welcomes greeted Charlie. Little Lord Jonquil was vocal, but he was too young for much of

what he said to make sense. A little boy, who must have been at least two years old, sporting a bit of red in his hair, came rushing over. Artemis remembered a younger version of him from the long-ago house party.

The most enthusiastic of greetings, though, came from Charlie's eight-year-old niece, whom Artemis had been absolutely enchanted with during her last stay at Lampton Park. Miss Caroline Jonquil was a delightfully precocious girl with a head of golden curls and mesmerizingly blue eyes. She had all her family wrapped around her finger yet was wholly unspoiled by it.

"Uncle Charming!" She rushed to Charlie.

He knelt and held the little girl in a fierce embrace. "Oh, I've missed you, Caroline."

"Uncle Flip says you do not live here anymore. He is being very silly with me."

He sat on the floor, and she sat facing him. "Uncle Flip, you will be shocked to hear, is telling you the truth."

She looked confused. "Where will you live if you don't live here?"

"I am living in a house called Brier Hill in Cumberland. It is up near Scotland." Somehow, he managed to make it sound as if he were pleased with the arrangement, though Artemis knew he was not.

"Why would you live there? Your family are all here."

"Not all of them," Charlie countered.

"*Nearly* all."

He reached over and took his niece's hand. "Generally, when a person marries, he or she goes to live in his or her own house."

Caroline's eyes pulled wide. "Did you get married?"

Had no one told the little girl? It was, Artemis supposed, not something the family was precisely celebrating.

"I did," Charlie said. "To Miss Lancaster." He motioned toward Artemis hovering awkwardly near the doorway. "You remember her. She visited year before last."

Caroline shook her head. She didn't remember. The one person in this family Artemis had been certain would remember her with fondness—they'd had several lovely interludes discussing curly hair and how to best arrange it—didn't even remember her.

Artemis slipped a bit to the side and sat in one of the adult-sized chairs placed around the edge of the room.

“Will you walk with me by the river?” Caroline’s focus was on Charlie once more.

His lap was filled with children. Lord Kendrick and the other little boy had made their way to him quickly. Charlie had scooped up Lady Julia and was holding her too. “Of course I will, sweetheart. I’ve missed our walks along the Trent.”

This was the family life Charlie had lost. Only when held by her Papa had Artemis felt that someone wanted or needed her around.

She and Charlie had concocted a plan to pretend to be perfectly content and happy in their current arrangement, assuming it was the only way to save them from misery upon returning to the Jonquil family home. Charlie was obviously accepted back without needing the playacting. Would Artemis be accepted even *with* it?

Chapter Sixteen

THE FRIENDLINESS OF THEIR JOURNEY south had evaporated, and Charlie didn't know why. Artemis had returned to the flighty, dramatic, feigned version of herself he'd first met in this very house. He tossed the confusing change around in his mind but couldn't identify the variable that had so abruptly altered the equation. People, he'd discovered, were seldom as easy to analyze as numbers.

"Any self-respecting landowner simply must install a gibbet," Artemis said to Mariposa on the second afternoon of their sojourn at Lampton Park. "No estate is complete without one."

"And how do you feel about motes?" Mariposa could be counted on to encourage ridiculousness.

"A bit outdated but an acceptable addition if one has the space and the inclination." Artemis turned a theatrically serious expression on Philip, who was even more in favor of oddity than Mariposa. "And one mustn't discount the utility of possessing a dungeon."

"Is there a dungeon at Falstone Castle?" Philip lowered his voice to a whisper. "I've heard rumors."

"Of course there is, my lord. How do you suppose His Grace disposes of unwanted family members?"

"Genius." Philip shook his head with an air of realization. "I've seven brothers and no dungeon. An unacceptable ratio by anyone's estimation."

"I could deposit your youngest brother in the dungeon at Falstone." Artemis's offer was met with laughter and expressions of gratitude, and not just from Philip.

Into the chaos came Crispin, Catherine, and their two-year-old son. Charlie ought to have known Crispin would be arriving as well.

Layton stepped up beside the newest arrivals. "Welcome to Lampton Park, strangers." He motioned to Charlie. "You remember Mr. Artemis Lancaster."

Crispin grinned. "I remember the ceremony well. Charlie told Holy Harry to take himself off. Brilliant."

Mr. Artemis Lancaster. It was clearly meant more as a jab than an actual insult, a bit of brotherly teasing, but it wasn't particularly appreciated, especially as the room had been so delighted at the prospect of *Mrs*. Artemis Lancaster ridding the family of him.

Charlie reached for the only distraction he knew he could count on. “Robert has grown so much since I last saw him.” He spoke to Catherine, motioning toward their little boy. “He looks a lot like you.”

Catherine had a quiet and reserved nature but wasn’t too bashful for conversation. “He looks remarkably like a miniature I have of my father when he was a little boy.”

“Is that a comfort to you or a grief?” He glanced across the room to where Mater sat. “Stanley and Marjie’s little boy, from what I’m told, is the very image of my father as a baby. He’s even named for him. I worry that will be difficult for Mater as he grows older. She still mourns my father deeply.”

“You brothers are a comfort to her,” Catherine said.

“And a worry, no doubt.”

“I am discovering a mother never stops worrying about her children.”

Charlie didn’t want Mater worrying about him. He wanted to bring her happiness and reassurance. He wanted to ease her burdens, not multiply them as he’d done his whole life.

Philip sauntered over. “I have just been having the most illuminating conversation with our newest sister-in-law.”

Charlie froze.

“And what did Mrs. Artemis have to say?” Layton and Philip thoroughly enjoyed egging each other on.

“That our littlest brother does not have a valet.” Philip shook his head as if it were the greatest of shocks. “I am not certain how to break the news to Wilson. He might have apoplexy and die on the spot.”

Layton nodded solemnly. “I am amazed our very fashionable sister-in-law hasn’t succumbed to the horror already.”

“I daresay she’s survived greater shocks lately.” Crispin’s tone was dry as an autumn leaf.

Enjoying themselves, weren’t they? If ever there was a moment in which he needed Artemis to dedicate herself to the ruse they’d meant to enact, this was it.

“Artie,” Charlie called over to her, “I’m being told that you have barely managed to survive the shock of my appearance. I suspect you had best come defend yourself.”

She flitted over. Lud, he’d seen her walk that way before. It was such a frustrating affectation, clearly meant to convey carelessness and ennui.

As she arrived, she looked over the three of them with disapproval. “‘Barely survived’?’’ She clicked her tongue and shook her head. “You severely underestimate the enormity of my endurance.”

Not the defense he had been hoping for. But it did make his brothers laugh. And she set a hand on his arm as she laughed along with them. He wasn’t certain why she’d returned to this shallow incarnation of herself, and it wasn’t the approach to reducing scrutiny they’d agreed on, but it did the trick in the moment.

“Uncle Charlie!” He turned at the sound of his niece Alice’s voice. A blessed angel of mercy. “Come play with us.”

He looked to his brothers and wife. “I may not have a valet, but I have the very best of playmates.” He dipped a little bow. “If you will excuse me, my Alice wishes for me to join her, and I would never deny her anything she wanted.”

Alice took his hand and pulled him across the room to where nearly all the assembled grandchildren were seated on the floor. They sat beneath the enormous family portrait that hung over the fireplace, the last one painted of the family before Father’s death.

How often Charlie had sat in this very spot, looking up into his father’s still and lifeless face, trying to remember him, wishing he could talk to him one last time and ask him all the questions he had.

You promised you would always help me when I needed you.

I need you now.

Chapter Seventeen

ARTEMIS WAS STILL ON EDGE, but she was finding her footing at Lampton Park. They had been assigned a shared bedchamber—the one, she had been told, that was Charlie's from his years growing up at the Park—and it was proving more awkward than any of the inns they'd stayed in.

They'd changed for the evening meal in shifts and had managed only a stilted version of a conversation in the drawing room, the dining room, and, now, amongst the family after the meal. Rose had made it known to the housekeeper that the chambermaids were not to come into the bedchamber in the morning to light the fire until Rose indicated they should. That would save them the humiliation of having all the house know that this newlywed couple were none too pleased to be sharing close quarters.

Things had gone relatively well during their afternoon interactions with the extended family. Her new sister-in-law from Spain had proven an utter delight. Lord Lampton, who had insisted she call him Philip, had joined in their absurdity with eagerness. They'd laughed and enjoyed bits of what her Papa would likely have called "silliness." Artemis was breathing a bit more easily. She could rest on her familiar approach to such things and have some faith it would work.

Charlie didn't seem overly dedicated to their efforts. He'd dressed a bit better for the meal than he had during the day, but his appearance was still haphazard and careless. He would give everyone the impression that he placed no importance on being with them. They would begin to wonder at his unhappiness. They would likely blame her.

"I am certain someone from the staff, perhaps even one of your brothers' valets could be spared to help you dress for meals," Artemis said as they made their way down the stairs.

"I thought the 'enormity of your endurance' could see you through the misery of having to look at me."

That he repeated the joking comment in such a disapproving tone was . . . odd. "We were jesting."

"Yes. I know." Tension filled his voice.

"I found a way of being welcomed among your family. Is that not what you wanted?"

He released a tight breath. "Joining them in mocking me is not quite what I had in mind."

“You don’t object to it coming from them, but you object to *me* being part of it?”

“We were meant to come here and present a picture of unity. Instead, I was a man at a mark.” They stopped a few feet from the drawing room door. “I am keeping my end of this bargain, Artemis. I need you to keep up yours.”

“Are you, though?” She couldn’t keep her voice entirely calm. “Within moments of arriving here, you were off enjoying your family and having quiet moments with them whilst I followed you around like a lost puppy. That is hardly a ‘picture of unity,’ Charles.”

“Do not call me that.”

She pushed out a frustrated growl and walked past him into the drawing room. Half the family was there already. Regardless of her frustration with the gentleman she’d been forced to marry, she would not embarrass either of them.

“Did I manage a dramatic entrance?” she asked those who had turned at her arrival. “That was my goal.”

“Not quite,” Philip said.

She dipped her head regally. “I shall try again.”

She stepped back out. Charlie was watching her from the very spot she’d left him a moment ago. She would not allow him to make her doubt her ability to survive this. A moment to catch her breath and she spun once more. She glided back into the drawing room and swept both arms in a grand gesture, ending in a pose worthy of the London stage.

Philip gave her a silent bit of applause. Many of the others laughed; the rest smiled genuinely. That was key to this family, she was discovering. They liked to laugh and share light moments. She would remember that.

“Is Charlie planning a grand entrance as well?” Lady Marion—Layton’s wife—asked.

“Does he often?” Artemis asked.

“Only when arriving from a rooftop.” Even the vicarly brother was participating in the teasing.

How could Charlie not enjoy this? Her family had been weighed down by death and poverty for so long that they struggled for these kinds of moments. Linus was better at it than the rest of them. Artemis tried her best, but her heavy heart made even her most earnest efforts more forced than natural.

Charlie did arrive in the room a moment later, looking as uncaring as his outdated and worn clothing would indicate. He was inarguably handsome. She could not understand why he didn't even try to dress a bit neater and more flattering. There were so many valets at Lampton Park just then that he might have had all the help he wanted simply for the asking.

Was being married to her so miserable an experience that he couldn't bring himself to look anything but . . . miserable? She didn't want him to be. The Charlie who had shown her such consideration during their journey, who had been so loving to Oliver and Hestia, who had kindly listened to her painful memories of her father, deserved a measure of happiness.

The family promenaded informally into the dining room, sitting not by rank but by preference. All of Charlie's brothers, those present at least, chose to sit by their wives. It was sweet, really. Their mother sat at the head of the table, watching them all with such fondness.

Would Artemis's mother have felt that way seeing her children now? Artemis wanted to believe the mother she'd never known would have loved her if she'd lived. And that she would have wanted Artemis to be happy, just as the Dowager Countess must surely want Charlie to be.

A picture of unity. An impression of happiness. It really wasn't too much to ask.

All around them, his brothers showed their wives easy and natural affection. The way it manifested varied from one couple to the next. Philip and his wife bantered. Layton and his wife smiled at each other almost ceaselessly. Lord Cavratt regularly lifted his wife's hand to his lips for a tender kiss. Corbin and his wife had what appeared to be silent but fully understood conversations. Jason and his wife occasionally slipped into Spanish, something Jason sounded as though he'd only recently learned but spoke relatively well, no doubt having taken up the study of it specifically for her benefit. Harold and his wife exchanged glances of warm friendship and affection that no one could possibly miss or misunderstand.

Charlie mostly ignored her. She tried to keep up the pretense of ease and contentment between them. Perhaps he was simply too accustomed to being a single gentleman amongst his married siblings. Perhaps it was too easy to forget the role he was now meant to play.

The gentlemen did not remain behind after the meal but chose to forgo their port in favor of remaining in the ladies' company. They walked in a convivial clump, all grins and laughter. Artemis liked being among this

family. They were joyous. Being with Charlie's brothers was good for him, no matter that he took a little exception to their teasing. Even with that, he was more content here than he'd been at Brier Hill. If ever there was a chance for something positive between the two of them, it was now. Here. Among his family.

"Fight for it," Persephone had said. Artemis would do what she could.

"Philip has proposed parlor games," Lady Lampton said. "As he will be impossible if he does not get his way, I suggest we indulge him."

"What game?" Lord Cavratt asked.

"Snap dragon?" Philip suggested.

"No." The dowager quickly put paid to that suggestion. "You and Layton always get carried away, and someone ends the night injured."

"Perhaps when we were eight," the second-oldest son objected.

"*Twenty*-eight," their mother returned.

Teasing was nearly universal, at that.

"What about questions and commands?" Lady Marion suggested.

"Provided the forfeit is not something terribly embarrassing," Clara, the most reserved of the sisters-in-law, said. "Or the questions or tasks."

Philip tossed her a look of empathy. "None of us will embarrass you. My word of honor. Your husband, on the other hand, is fair game."

"I have a suggestion for the forfeit," Mariposa said. "If the question or command is made between a couple, the forfeit will be a kiss."

A chorus of agreement filled the room.

"And if not a couple?" one of the brothers asked.

"A heart-felt compliment from the one refusing," Lady Marion said. "I daresay we will enjoy watching you brothers struggle to say something kind to each other."

Quick as that, names were scrawled on bits of paper and tossed into an obliging hat, and the game began.

The Jonquil family were genuinely hilarious. Their questions ranged from confessions of childhood misdeeds for which one brother had blamed another to social missteps made in adulthood. The commands involved everything from sneaking into the kitchen to nip off with a biscuit to requiring the vicar, of all people, to climb the bannister of the grand staircase, which he did with both ease and finesse.

What an utterly fascinating family. And she had a chance to be part of it, to be one of them. If only she could find a means of carving out a place for

herself.

Fight for it.

Her name was pulled from the hat as the next person to require either a question or a command. Here was an opportunity to prove herself a welcome and fitting addition. The person to whom she would direct her requirements was drawn next.

Charlie.

He stepped with her into the center of the gathering as the others had done when being drawn. Three, thus far, had been couples. Not a single one had agreed to answer the question or follow through on the command. The one being challenged had insisted upon the forfeit. The kisses that had followed had been met with teasing and indulgence.

She and Charlie weren't on such terms. She would think of a question he would not be embarrassed to answer. One they could laugh about. One that would show their connection in a positive light.

"Forfeit!" Philip called out.

"Go on, then," another brother added his voice. "Choose the forfeit."

"Not a chance of it," Charlie said. "She can ask any question she wants; I'll answer no matter what it is."

The declaration, tossed out so carelessly but sincerely, struck her like a slap in the face. *Not a chance of it. Any question. No matter what it is.* She'd not intended to force him to kiss her, but she'd also had no intention of embarrassing him. She'd moved forward with that end specifically in mind.

"Boo!" Philip said, getting many of the others to join with him.

"You'll not sway me," Charlie tossed at the lot of them.

It was all a great joke, one that Charlie grinned along with.

Not a chance of it. She was the only wife in the room whose husband had publicly declared that he would not kiss her no matter the alternative. She was the only one who had been rejected so wholly and entirely. And publicly.

"Protest all you want," he said to his brothers. "Your browbeating hasn't worked on me in years."

She stood there in front of them all, watching as her husband bantered with his brothers at her expense. *Look at me. See me here, drowning in the humiliation you're heaping on me.* But he didn't. She might as well have been five years old again, silently pleading with her father to care about her

pain and loneliness. Her father hadn't. Charlie didn't. There was part of her that knew, unless she found her Papa again, no one ever would.

"You haven't asked your question or given your command."

Artemis wasn't certain who had called out the reminder. She swallowed against the lump of emotion in her throat. She blinked and breathed, trying to pull herself together.

Goddesses don't cry.

"My question." She needed to think of something. *Anything*. And she needed to think of it before the tears she felt began to fall. "What—Have you decided on a topic for your lecture to the Royal Society?"

Charlie shook his head. "Not yet."

Questions began flying from all around the room. He was to lecture at the Royal Society? When had this opportunity arisen? When would he be there? What topics was he considering? Who had extended the invitation?

The distraction hadn't been planned, but it was welcome. She slipped from the center of the circle of siblings and away from them all.

Her husband had been repulsed at the idea of kissing her. He might have even kissed her on the cheek, and though he would have been teased a bit, it would have been seen as a sweet moment of bashfulness or consideration of her feelings. Instead, he'd humiliated her, rejected her in front of the family she wanted so badly to accept her as one of their own.

She'd kissed him on the cheek at the inn a few nights before. Had that repelled him as well? That tender moment, one that had given her so much hope, now felt empty.

She slipped from the drawing room. She couldn't bear to be in there any longer. The game might be taken up again, but she wasn't likely to be missed.

"Not a chance of it."

"You'll not sway me."

She moved with quick steps up the stairs to their bedchamber. Careful not to tip over the vase of fresh flowers on the bedside table, she pulled open the drawer and took out the handkerchief her Papa had given her so many years ago. She needed him there, but that bit of linen was all she had of him.

She crossed to the bell pull and gave a quick tug. If she could have changed without assistance, she would have, if only to spare herself scrutiny as she battled with her own misery.

This heavy feeling of rejection and worthlessness had been tucked firmly behind her protective walls since she was a little girl. If she let it out entirely, it would shatter her.

She needed an escape, a refuge. But there was none. Even sleeping, she felt the weight of it all. She was expected to sleep in the bed as if she were a welcome and wanted guest, but she knew that was a lie. Resigning herself to the floor would feel more fitting, but she could not endure further humiliation.

There was no light to keep to. No comfort to be had.

She carefully tucked the handkerchief into the cushion crevice of the chaise longue where she could easily retrieve it. She focused on the vase of flowers, a simple bit of uncomplicated beauty. Flowers must be important to the Jonquils. Vases of fresh blooms were found throughout Brier Hill, and they had adorned this room since that evening when she'd returned to dress for the night's meal.

She took several deep breaths, reclaiming her calm demeanor. Rose arrived. She wore the look she so often did, the one that said she saw far more than she was letting on.

"Please don't ask questions," Artemis quietly requested. "I just want to lie down and be left alone."

Loyal and good friend that she was, Rose didn't press for answers as she helped Artemis change into her night clothes. She even took up a discussion on a safe and unemotional topic.

"I believe there is room enough in here for a bit of sewing and sketching. I brought supplies for both."

"I would like that," Artemis said, breathing through the lingering pain in her heart.

"I would very much like to design a gown for the barrister's wife," Rose said. "She has so unique a quality about her: diminutive in size yet grand in temperament. I suspect she would not be overwhelmed by bold colors."

Artemis nodded. She'd had much the same thought. "And Lady Lampton, I understand, wears a somewhat cumbersome contraption about her middle to add stability to her hips, thus the overly large dresses she wears. I think we could design something that would accommodate her bracing while still flattering her figure. Perhaps she would welcome the idea."

"It could not hurt to create a sketch," Rose said. "Even if nothing comes of it, we would enjoy the challenge."

The challenge and *the escape.* She could lose herself in their efforts and, for a time, forget how painful the world was quickly becoming once more.

Artemis took up the blanket Charlie had been using and spread it over her lap as she sat on the chaise longue.

Rose blew out the candle, blessedly silent on the topic of Artemis's choice of sleeping location. Rose stepped from the room, leaving Artemis in darkness. She didn't lie down. Not yet. She held Papa's handkerchief in her hand, hoping she could keep back her tears but nearly certain she'd not manage it.

Not a chance of it. Charlie's voice echoed in her thoughts. *I'll not be swayed.*

"I've tried so hard, Papa." Her whisper broke in the blackness. "I need you here. I need you to tell me you love me. I need you to hold me again. Without you, I am so alone. Without you, no one wants me."

Chapter Eighteen

ARTEMIS HAD ABANDONED THE GAME. Charlie wasn't certain why. She'd seemed to be enjoying it, though she'd fumbled a bit for a question to ask him. In the end, the one she'd chosen had been rather perfect. It told his family they knew each other's interests and pursuits, which they certainly would if their ill-fated marriage was the growing success they were trying to pretend it was. His siblings had asked dozens of questions about his lecture opportunity, and in the midst of it all, she'd disappeared.

She'd placed such importance earlier that evening on getting on with his family that simply walking away made no sense. Nothing about any of this made any logical sense.

He sat amongst the others as the game of questions and commands continued with its usual hilarity. But he couldn't enjoy it. He and Artemis had kept their interactions cordial. She'd used her signature dramatics to add his family's amusement to the equation. He'd multiplied that with a bit of his own antics during their round of questions and comments. It ought to have resulted in an improvement of the situation. Yet there he was, alone and confused.

Corbin's wife, Clara, came and sat next to him, something that didn't happen overly often. She was as quiet as her husband, though not unfriendly. "I am certain you have and will receive ample unwanted advice from your brothers, but will you accept an observation from a sister-in-law who loves you?"

"Of course."

Clara held his gaze. "You embarrassed her."

"Embarrassed her?"

"Artemis." Clara emphasized the explanation with a nod. "Her husband publicly declared he could not under any circumstances be convinced to kiss her."

He had panicked a little when his name had been drawn in conjunction with hers. But he thought he'd played it off well. "She knew I was teasing. She does it all the time."

"You were not looking at her," Clara said, "but I was."

"She wasn't . . . laughing along?"

"I am honestly a bit surprised she wasn't actually crying."

His heart dropped. Surely Clara was overstating the severity of Artemis's

reaction. “She doesn’t cry.” But he knew that wasn’t entirely true.

“You made it clear to everyone in the room how low your opinion of her is, Charlie. That would make even the most stalwart heart falter, especially when she is already feeling alone and afraid.”

He shook his head. “She’s Artemis Lancaster. She’s never afraid.”

“She is now Artemis *Jonquil*, and I assure you she is terrified.”

Charlie pushed air past the catch in his lungs. He’d made a mull of things again. Of course he had.

“Any advice on how I ought to approach this?” he asked.

Clara smiled a little. “Ask any one of your brothers. They’ve ample experience landing in their wives’ black books.”

“Then I come by my stupidity rightly?”

Clara didn’t take the bait. True to form, she quietly motioned him away, a silent suggestion that he go address the mull he’d made.

He left the drawing room and headed to the first place he could think of to look for Artemis: the bedchamber they would be sharing.

The room was dark. He left the door a bit ajar, allowing the dim light of the candle sconces in the corridor to spill a bit inside, enough to spy a candelabra on a nearby table. He took a moment to light the candles using a corridor sconce. He wasn’t entirely convinced Artemis was inside the room, but he wouldn’t know if he couldn’t see. It was possible she’d fallen asleep.

Stepping back inside, he could see that she had, in fact, dozed off. She was on the chaise longue, curled against the arm, a blanket covering only her feet. The same handkerchief she’d held when he’d come across her in the circular sitting room at Brier Hill was clutched in her fist again.

He set the candelabra down securely on the lowboy and stepped over to her. While she was smaller and shorter than he—not an unusual thing, he having the legendary Jonquil height—she could not possibly be as comfortable on the benchlike bit of furniture as she would be on the bed. And she must have been a bit cold with the blanket all but lying on the floor.

He hunched down and set a hand on her arm. “Artemis?”

She took a shaking breath, precisely the sort one could not help when one had been crying. A closer study of her face revealed she had likely been more than merely crying. She appeared to have been sobbing.

Did I do this? He hated to think he had.

“Artie?” He nudged her arm a little more.

Her eyes fluttered open. She studied him a moment as sleep clung to her. She blinked a few times, watching him through a cloud of confusion.

"You'd be more comfortable lying on the bed," he said.

"It's not my bed." She was still slowed by her half-awake mind, though she did sit up a bit more.

"I'll help you over," he said. He reached for her handkerchief.

"No." She snatched it back with every indication of panic.

"I was only going to put it on the bedside table so your hands would be free."

"I can't lose it. It's the only thing he ever gave me."

The only thing *who* ever gave her?

Artemis took a shaking breath, still not entirely awake.

Charlie sat on the chaise longue beside her. "Have you been crying, Artie?"

"I don't cry." No one seeing her would believe that.

"What is your policy on forgiving idiocy in husbands?"

She sat up more fully and looked at him. Heavens, there was no misunderstanding the puffed, red-rimmed eyes and droplets of tears on her lashes. No matter her protestations, she'd most certainly been crying.

"I suppose that depends on whose husband has been an idiot."

He took her hand gently in his. "Yours, Artemis. Yours has been painfully stupid, and I'm hoping you'll forgive him."

"For *which* painfully stupid thing?" Oh, she was awake now.

"Take your pick."

She watched him, her closely guarded handkerchief still clutched in her hand. Who had given it to her? The question refused to dislodge itself from his mind.

"I wasn't going to insist you kiss me during the game," she said. "We could so easily have played the entire thing for a lark, chosen a kiss on the hand or cheek and then put up with a bit of teasing. You didn't have to humiliate me." A tiny break in her voice betrayed the emotion she was keeping very well hidden.

Charlie squeezed the hand he still held. "I truly am sorry."

Her brow inched down in thought. "I know you didn't appreciate the teasing from your brothers and me earlier, so I was quite careful tonight not to join any of their jesting in your direction. I am trying to make things at least a little better."

“Believe it or not,” he said, “I am as well. You will, to your horror, discover that I am utter rubbish at anything that isn’t mathematics. Ask anyone in this house. I’ve spent my entire life making a mess of everything.”

To his surprise, she leaned a little against him. “We did so well getting along at the inns. Why is it so much harder here?”

He slipped his hand from hers and put his arm around her, sitting with her in a side-embrace. They still were on delicate footing, but it was a comforting arrangement. “I suspect our difficulties are due to my family,” he said. “I fully intend to blame them.”

“I’ll support you in that.”

This was the sort of camaraderie they’d enjoyed on the journey here. It was welcome and fragile and desperately needed.

“I think we should lay most of the blame at Philip’s feet,” Charlie said. “But none of it at Mater’s. I’ll not say anything against her, even in jest.”

Artemis rested more heavily against him, cozily situated under his arm. It reminded him a little of the way Caroline would sit with him when she was sad or tired or simply wanting to talk. Except Caroline didn’t quicken his pulse. Artemis was doing precisely that.

“What is it like having a mother?” she asked in a whisper. “I’ve always wondered.”

If anyone had told him six months earlier that he would find himself heartbroken on behalf of the lady he’d long considered his nemesis, he’d have laughed. There was no laughter in that moment.

He pulled her in closer. “No one enters Mater’s familial sphere without being fully and completely adopted by her. Ask Crispin or your sister-in-law Arabella, or any of my brother’s wives. Allow her the opportunity, Artemis, and she’ll make certain you know precisely how it feels to have a mother, because she will consider you her daughter.”

“Even though I’ve ruined your life?”

“I suspect she has greater hope for the two of us than that.”

She looked up at him. “Do *you*?”

“I’m trying to.”

She took a steadier breath than she had up until then. “Perhaps, instead of trying to fool all your family into thinking everything is sunshine and flower-strewn paths between us, we should expend our effort on trying to have ‘greater hope’ that we can make something of this mess we’ve been

thrown into."

"I'll support you in that."

She smiled a bit, no doubt recognizing his exact repetition of her earlier words. "And let us begin by addressing the issue of this chaise longue."

What did she mean by that?

"There is no reason you should always be the one relegated to the less comfortable arrangement. It's not fair, and I won't be bullied into being selfish."

She put him a little in mind of the Dangerous Duke in that moment; implacable and determined in a way that might have been intimidating if not for the lingering mark left on her face from having slept against the seam of the chaise's arm.

His pride wanted to object to being tossed from his position of gentlemanly sacrifice, but his neck and back were cheering. "Perhaps we could alternate?"

She gave a quick, single nod. "Excellent solution."

"One I will accept without objection on the condition that you sleep in the bed tonight. I will consider it penance for having made such a mull of the game earlier."

Mere moments later, she was settled beneath the heavy blanket on the bed, resting against the feather pillows. Her handkerchief, the mystery he still hadn't solved, had been stored very carefully in the drawer of the bedside table.

Charlie returned to the chaise longue and sat silent and uncertain. He glanced upward in the general direction of the heavens. *What would you have done, Father? Ought I to have done something more? Something different?*

He didn't know his father's answer. And the heartbreak of it all was . . . he never would.

Chapter Nineteen

A WEEK PASSED AT LAMPTON Park. Stanley's family had not yet arrived. Neither had Arabella and Linus—they too had been called to Lampton Park, Arabella being an honorary member of the family. Charlie told himself that was what was weighing on Mater, but he wasn't fully sure. She'd grown quieter over the last couple of days.

He sat in the small sitting room the family had often used when there'd been fewer of them. Philip was inside reading the *Times*. Mater was there as well. A book sat open on her lap, but she wasn't paying it the least heed. Her fingers were wrapped around the silver and blue topaz pendant she so often wore. Her gaze was not focused on anything in particular, and her thoughts appeared to be miles away.

Charlie moved to where Philip sat. Voice low, he said, "I'm worried about Mater. She seems unhappy."

Philip talked to him from behind his paper, also speaking quietly enough to not be overheard across the room. "We are soon to be reopening Father's will and reading the last of his instructions. I suspect her grief is growing a bit raw again."

He did not at all like the idea of Mater grieving. "Could you not simply summarize what remains to be executed of Father's will and spare her the reading of it?"

Philip shook his head no. "I am not the one who is charged with unsealing and executing it. I am as helpless to spare her this as everyone else."

None of them could relieve her burden. "Do you at least know why this final portion is to be read *now*?"

"The instructions were that this final part of the will be opened once you either reached your majority or married, whichever occurred first."

His heart dropped. "Then I am the reason she's struggling."

"Neither of our parents would have wanted you to be a child your entire life, Charlie. Neither would they have wished you to be alone. Setting current events in motion is not an unfortunate thing."

Charlie slumped low in his chair. It wasn't a very gentlemanly posture but one he'd assumed again and again as he'd grown up. "It has not particularly been a *fortunate* thing either."

"If I could have thought of anything to allow you and Artemis to avoid

this, I would have stopped it. But there was no escape." Philip didn't generally go so long without making some outlandish comment. That his expression and tone remained somber was a bit disconcerting. "Sorrel, in particular, racked her brain for any possible escape. Neither of us could think of a thing."

If Philip was going to be responsible and insightful, Charlie would far rather his brother's focus be on something else. Things were a little better with Artemis but not enough to bear too much scrutiny.

"Speaking of Sorrel," Charlie said, "how is she faring?"

Philip folded his paper and set it aside. "She is not walking well. The pain is getting to be too much for her. I suspect it is time we begin considering a wheeled chair to help her get about, but she is not the least inclined toward the idea. My Sorrel is a bit stubborn, something I am certain will come as a complete shock to you."

Charlie pressed a hand to his heart in what he knew was an exact mimic of one of Philip's signature gestures. "A Jonquil marrying a lady with opinions? Shocking."

"What is it about us that we are so drawn to ladies who challenge us at every turn?" Philip asked with a laugh.

"Masochism?"

"More likely a fear of boredom."

Charlie pushed out a breath. "I am certainly not bored."

That brought on the very scrutiny he'd wanted to avoid. "Are the two of you going to work this out?"

Charlie shrugged. "What choice do we have? Neither of us wants to live the rest of our lives in misery. We'll have to sort something." They *were* trying. He felt increasingly hopeful that they would manage to reach some kind of contentment between them. But while he couldn't speak for her, mere contentment was not what he'd imagined when he'd thought of one day marrying.

He'd always wanted what his brothers had. What his parents had had. What Artemis's siblings had. But it felt out of reach.

Voices sounded in the corridor, with footfalls seeming to draw nearer.

"Never fear, Mater," Philip called out. "That'll be Stanley's brood and, I daresay, Arabella and Linus close on their heels. No need to worry further."

She glanced back at him and nodded.

Charlie didn't at all like how low her spirits were. What could he possibly

do to help? It seemed all he'd done these past weeks was add to her worries. Having all of her grandchildren there would bring her some happiness. Then again, she'd had nearly all of them with her of late, and she was still heavyhearted.

The butler did not step into the doorway to announce Charlie's one remaining brother or honorary sister. Indeed, it wasn't either of the anticipated arrivals who appeared there. It was, instead, one unknown gentleman after another. All at least two decades older than Philip, all complete strangers. They looked immediately to Mater, who sat facing the other direction.

At the very front of the group was a gentleman who rivaled Philip's flair for colorful and dandified fashions, the brightness of his attire marred only slightly by the black armband he wore. Another was dressed in the more somber tones Harold preferred. One of them put Charlie firmly in mind of a few of the dons at Cambridge. The remaining two were a study in contrasts: large scale with an aura of authority and a shorter, thinner gentleman one might be excused for not noticing. An odd grouping, to be sure, made even stranger by the fact that Charlie could not begin to identify any of them.

The fashionable one at the front spoke two words. "Our Julia."

Mater spun about. She pressed her hand to her mouth, and tears began immediately.

"Why is she crying?" Charlie asked, ready to rush to her defense. "They've made her cry."

"Calm yourself, Tadpole," Philip said. "Those are happy tears."

Charlie used to be known amongst his brothers as Tadpole. They didn't call him that often any longer.

Mater leapt from her chair and ran like a young girl across the room. The men embraced her on the instant. They all spoke at once. Charlie couldn't make out a single word. Mater affectionately touched each of their faces in turn. They were clearly not unknown to *her*.

"Who are they?" Charlie asked Philip.

With a grin, he said, "The Gents. Father's best friends."

That was, apparently, all the explanation Charlie was to receive. Philip abandoned him and crossed to the group of new arrivals. The men greeted him with handshakes, and he offered words of welcome. Mater remained among them, slipping from one friendly embrace to another. It was the highest her spirits had been since Charlie's arrival at Lampton Park.

Father’s best friends, and Charlie didn’t know a single one of them. Was there no end to the ways his father was a stranger to him?

Mater waved him over. “Come offer your greetings, dear.” To the gentlemen around her, she said, “You all, of course, remember Charlie.”

“This can’t be little Charlie,” the bespectacled, professor-like gentleman said.

“He can, indeed,” Mater said. “He’s grown now. And married, if you can believe that.”

The subdued gentleman chimed in. “He looks like Stanley.”

Mater nodded. “I think that every time I see him lately.”

Charlie couldn’t make heads nor tails of that declaration. “I don’t look *that* much like him.”

“Not *your* brother Stanley,” Mater said. “*My* brother, Stanley.”

“You all knew Uncle Stanley?” Charlie had only ever heard stories of his aunts and uncles. All of Mater’s and Father’s siblings had died by the time the two of them were married.

“And your grandparents,” one of them answered.

These gentlemen knew more about Charlie’s family than he did.

The fashionable Gent put an arm about Mater’s shoulders, but he spoke to Philip. “The lot of us intend to steal away your mother for a time. Don’t waste your breath arguing; you know you’ll never emerge victorious.”

Philip held up a hand in a show of innocent denial. “Arguing creates wrinkles. I’d not risk this”—he motioned to his face—“over a futile disagreement.”

The dandified one dipped his head regally. And quick as that, Father’s friends whisked Mater away.

Charlie swallowed back the temptation to call her back again. Had he not matured in the least since his early years at Eton when he’d cried and cried every time Mater had left him there?

“Thank the heavens they came,” Philip said with a tense sigh. “She needs them here.”

“They’ll be kind to her?” Charlie pressed. “Can you absolutely guarantee they will?”

With a firmness that would have shocked anyone who knew him as the dandified Earl of Lampton, Philip said, “If I couldn’t guarantee it, I’d have thrown every last one of them out of the house, personally and violently. I would do as much and more to anyone who dared to mistreat Mater.”

“And all of us would help you.”

Nothing stoked the flames of the Jonquil brothers’ fury as quickly and thoroughly as unkindness directed at their mother. Mater was the thread holding all of them together. She’d sewn up the wounds of this family’s grief again and again. If not for her, Father’s death would have fractured them all.

Her sons would do anything in the world for her. If Charlie and Artemis, in the end, could not find peace between them, he would spend the rest of his life hiding that from his mother. He would not burden her with that heartache, even if it meant carrying that weight all alone.

Chapter Twenty

ARTEMIS COULD SEW EXCEPTIONALLY WELL, but embroidery was her idea of absolute torture. She loved the look of expertly executed needlepoint. She had a deep appreciation for the skill needed. But she would far rather wield her needle in creating or reworking a gown or pelisse or riding frock. That type of sewing was not considered quite as proper and ladylike. So when the Jonquil sisters-in-law gathered in the drawing room for "a bit of sewing," she resigned herself to the acceptable variety and endured it as best she could, all while longing to sit with Rose for a spell to undertake one of their projects together.

Lady Marion, a remarkably friendly lady with curly red hair and an air of enthusiastic happiness, spoke as she worked at her needlepoint. "While I am grateful that the other brothers are here to interfere with Philip and my Layton's usual mischief, I worry that the lot of them under one roof will simply result in absolute devilment."

"They even pull Harold into the occasional lark," Sarah said. "I have spent the past dozen or more evensongs praying that Corbin and Jason would be a calming influence."

Clara smiled at Sarah's teasing remark but didn't offer one of her own.

"I have no such hope of good behavior." Jason's wife was originally from Spain. The notes of her homeland created a lovely symphony in her words. "They are likely in mischief even as we speak. And Stanley, you will see, will arrive with ideas for more trouble."

"I fear my brother will only too gladly join in any bit of trouble they undertake," Artemis said. Linus and his wife, Arabella, were soon to arrive. "I cannot imagine where he got that inclination. The rest of my family are unfailingly well behaved."

They all laughed at her exaggerated tone, as she had hoped they would. One could not miss that they were fond of each other. Even Sarah, who was the newest member of this exclusive sisterhood, other than Artemis, was at ease and welcomed among them.

Artemis, alone, seemed the outsider. At least it was a familiar role. But she was determined to find her place among them. She would have friends and sisters . . . and family. But she didn't know how to claim that. She fell back on her usual approach to being among people: theatrics.

"Your brother and your husband are likely to be up to their ears in

mischief," Lady Marion warned. "They became such fast friends at that house party."

"My brother is often a troublemaker, yes," she said in tones of overblown affront. "But the Jonquil *I* married is not the least prone to scrapes and never lands himself in any sort of predicament."

That earned her a chorus of laughter. Her entire marriage was "a predicament," the result of a monumental "scrape."

She shrugged. "I can't, for the life of me, understand why you are laughing. Ours is a life so sedate and well behaved that I fear we are actually dying of boredom. You will all have to bury us both whilst giving incredibly tedious eulogies. It will be exceptionally tragic."

Smiles and warm-hearted teasing answered her bit of silliness, just as she'd hoped. Being dramatic and entertaining was easy and familiar. That this family so quickly embraced it made it something more than a mask. It offered her a feeling of belonging.

Sorrel—Lady Lampton—hadn't done a great deal of embroidery during their gathering. Her eyes were on the expanse of garden beyond the window as often as they were on her needlework. Artemis was certain the lady hadn't undertaken more than a half dozen stitches. Here was something they had in common.

As Artemis was sitting directly beside Sorrel, she could address the lady personally and in a lowered voice. "Perhaps tomorrow, should a sewing circle be proposed, we could sneak outside instead and take a stroll about the gardens."

Sorrel's eyes remained on the vista, an unmistakable longing in her gaze.

Artemis felt a surge of hope. Here was something she could offer other than a performance. "I do not mind a bit of sewing, but I do adore being out of doors. Few things lift the spirits so entirely."

"Lampton Park does have lovely grounds," Sorrel said. "And the Trent runs nearby, offering a bit of unspoiled nature."

Artemis made a mental note of Sorrel's affection for nature. The gown she and Rose were designing to meet Sorrel's unique needs would benefit from that bit of information. They could incorporate the colors and patterns of nature, suiting it even more particularly to her. Artemis didn't yet feel confident enough to tell her plans to her new sister-in-law, but she had already found enjoyment and a very welcome sense of purpose in the undertaking.

“There is a lake on the Falstone Castle estate,” Artemis said. “It is one of my favorite spots. It is peaceful and, in the spring especially, absolutely beautiful. I like to sit on its banks and enjoy the quiet.”

Sorrel nodded. “Nature is good for the soul.”

Artemis leaned a bit closer, holding back the bubbles of excitement she felt. She’d offered a bit of a glimpse at her quieter and more vulnerable self. She’d reached out in a more personal way than she usually allowed herself to do. And her uncharacteristically personal offering hadn’t been rejected. “We should go for a walk tomorrow.”

But Sorrel’s expression closed off. “I believe I shall remain inside with the others. It would not do to abandon them.”

“Stepping out for an hour would not be considered abandonment.” She knew Sorrel preferred the out of doors. She could see it in her eyes every time she looked out the window. “We wouldn’t go far.”

“I would prefer to remain inside with the others.” Her tone left no room for further discussion.

With the others. That certainly put Artemis in her place. She would do best to slip back into her role of entertainer. Sincerity had not served her well. “Remaining inside *will* allow you to more easily learn of your husband’s mischievous plans with his brothers. One cannot overestimate the value of being forewarned about such things.”

All around her, the sisters-in-law chatted amicably about people they knew and things that had happened during their shared time in this family. They asked each other questions that only those who had grown quite close would even know to pose. They were dear to each other, welcomed, embraced. Wanted.

Artemis bent over her embroidery, playing yet another role: that of a lady who adored needlepoint and didn’t feel utterly, utterly alone. Her heart ached in a way that was both emotional and physical. A dull, sad ache she’d begun to fear would never ease.

She had once heard Adam tell Daphne, “If you faint, I will publicly and irrevocably disown you.” It had been his way of telling her to be brave and strong when her whole world was falling apart. Though the instructions had not been intended for Artemis, she’d taken them to heart. Again and again, she’d chosen to be brave. She’d learned to be strong. She had refused to faint, figuratively or literally.

Rose stepped inside the room. Their interactions were quite casual and

friendly when only the two of them were present. But when others were about, Rose defaulted to the expected deference most abigails showed their mistresses.

She dipped a quick curtsey and held Artemis's gaze.

"Pardon me," Artemis said to no one in particular, then setting aside her embroidery with an entirely feigned show of reluctance, crossed to the doorway. She dropped her voice to a whisper far less calm than she wished it were. "Please tell me you have come with an excuse for me to escape."

"Not an excuse," Rose said. "A bona fide reason. There is something you absolutely must see."

Rose was not prone to dramatics; that was Artemis's exclusive domain in their friendship. Her curiosity was decidedly piqued.

They walked side by side from the drawing room and through the house. After a moment, Artemis sorted that they were aiming for the back terrace. The out of doors. She felt some relief. Her expressed enjoyment of nature and sunshine had not been feigned for Sorrel's sake.

"My uncle pulled me aside with an eagerness he generally keeps hidden," Rose said. "He told me of a new arrival, and I had to find you."

A new arrival? "The some*thing* you wish me to see is, in fact, a some*one*?"

Rose nodded. They'd reached the terrace doors at the back of the ballroom. Rose pulled aside the curtains and motioned to a group gathered there. Mater, Artemis recognized, but the gentlemen gathered around her, clearly enjoying a quiet conversation, were not immediately familiar.

She studied them. She was nearly certain one of them was Lord Aldric Benick, uncle to the Duke of Hartley. Another, she felt certain she'd crossed paths with at some point but could not identify. Two of them were absolute strangers. The last, though, she knew the moment she truly looked at him.

He wore a burgundy jacket, tailored to utter perfection, over a waistcoat of paisley silk and trousers expertly fitted in a bold yet perfectly suited shade of dark blue. His hessians were polished to an almost blinding shine. His cravat managed that impressive balance between ostentatious and impressively simple that far too many gentlemen attempted and failed to manage. Even his black armband somehow felt fashionable.

She knew him, though they'd never met. She'd studied him before, though she'd never had the courage to speak to him. He was, in many ways, an idol to her.

This was Mr. Digby Layton, arbiter of fashion, who, if not for Beau Brummel's pushiness in asserting his inarguably less expert opinions, would have single-handedly directed the evolution of gentlemen's clothing. He had stood firm in opposition of Brummel's efforts to entirely eliminate color and flair and pattern from the fashions gentlemen of the *ton* embraced. Brummel had made a name for himself, but Mr. Layton had actual taste and fashion sense.

"From what my uncle told me," Rose said, "Mr. Layton and the late earl were the very best of friends. All these gentlemen were. They've come in support of the dowager."

"I've married into a family that counts Mr. Digby Layton as a close friend?" *Heavens.*

Rose nodded with emphasis. "It was Mr. Layton who first suggested my uncle be brought on as the current Lord Lampton's valet."

Artemis turned wide eyes on her. "Your uncle knows him? How have you not told me this before?"

Rose held her hand up in a show of innocence. "I only just learned of it today. I assure you, I gave him a thorough scolding for keeping that secret from me."

Artemis looked back out the windowed doors. Digby Layton. She'd wanted to meet him for so long, but now that an opportunity lay in front of her, she was nervous.

"You must go talk to him," Rose said, nudging her a bit. "You've been given an unforeseen opportunity. Don't squander it."

"What would I even say?"

Rose sighed, the sound one of fond annoyance. "You were raised by the Dangerous Duke. If he heard you were afraid to offer a good afternoon to a dandy, he'd toss you in his gibbet."

"If you faint, I will publicly and irrevocably disown you."

She steeled her resolve and stepped out onto the terrace. No one spotted her at first. Their conversation continued on.

"How is Raneé finding motherhood?" the dowager asked Lord Aldric.

"Not nearly as enjoyable as her mother is finding grandmotherhood."

"There are few things so satisfying," the bespectacled gentleman said, "than the indisputable right to hand a fussy child back to his or her parents."

The three of them laughed. The other gentlemen were in conversation with each other.

“I do wish the ladies had come,” the dowager said. “I’d love to see them all. And to hear all about everyone’s children and grandchildren. Our families are all growing so quickly.”

“They discussed it,” Lord Aldric said, “and came to the consensus that having all our wives here might be painful for Digby with his grief so raw yet.”

The dowager’s expression turned utterly empathetic. “I suspect that was wise.”

In the next moment, the gentlemen spotted Artemis and rose.

The dowager waved her over. “Artemis, do come make the acquaintance of my dear friends.” This was, without question, the lightest the dowager had appeared since Artemis and Charlie had arrived. The kind lady motioned to the most substantially built of them all. “Lord Aldric Benick.” To the bespectacled one, “Mr. Kester Barrington.” To the more sedate one with kind eyes, “Mr. Henri Fortier.” To the one who Artemis suspected would have preferred be left in a quiet corner, “Mr. Niles Greenberry.” Then she turned to the gentleman Artemis was both eager and nervous to meet. “Mr. Digby Layton.”

They all sketched quick and proper bows.

“Gents,” the dowager said, “this is my newest daughter-in-law, Artemis Jonquil. Until a few weeks ago, she was Artemis Lancaster.”

Understanding washed over their expressions.

“Sister of the Duchess of Kielder,” Lord Aldric said. “Our paths have crossed on a few occasions, but I am pleased to make your more particular acquaintance.”

Artemis dipped her head. Her eyes, of their own accord, shifted back to Mr. Layton. He was a pattern card of gentlemanly fashion. And she knew he had already taken an assessment of her attire and fashion choices. She knew because she did the same thing when she met people. It wasn’t an evaluation in order to dismiss or belittle them but rather her mind evaluating which aspects of clothing were suited to which people, which didn’t work as well, which were surprising, and which were expected. Her mind couldn’t help it. She was always learning, always exploring. She hadn’t the least doubt he did the same.

“I have heard report of you, Mrs. Jonquil,” Mr. Layton said.

“You have?” Her voice quavered a little. Bless her, she was nearly shaking. No one who knew her would guess she was ever anything but

entirely confident. She worked hard to make them think that. Even the Huntresses were presented with her most confident facade.

"My associates in London tell me you have cut quite a dash in Society," Mr. Layton said. "Your eye for fashion is widely spoken of."

She swallowed. "As is yours, sir."

He dipped his head in acknowledgment.

"Do you realize," she continued, "the drapers still speak of the run on diagonally printed patterns you caused in 1813 when you staunchly refused to allow your tailor to fashion a waistcoat for you with roller-printed fabric of any other variety?"

He tugged at his cuffs. "Why make do when one can make waves?"

Oh, she liked him already. But she could see the others were not nearly as keen on the topic at hand. She would not burden them with it, especially since she had interrupted whatever they were discussing before her arrival. "I would enjoy hearing your thoughts on current fashions," she said to Mr. Layton, feigning a degree of confidence she did not entirely feel, "when you have a free moment."

"I would enjoy that as well," he said.

She dipped a curtsy and slipped quickly from the terrace back through the ballroom doors. Rose had already left. Artemis would give her a full report when next she saw her. At the moment, though, she wanted nothing so much as to skip about gleefully.

Digby Layton, a legend of fashion, had heard of her, and what he'd heard had impressed him. She could have shouted and cried with joy all at the same time.

With effort, she kept herself to some degree of decorum as she rushed from the ballroom, intent on tucking herself away for a bit in her bedchamber. The sting of rejection she'd endured with her sister-in-law had eased with the ready acceptance of a gentleman she'd long wished to meet.

Oh, how she had needed that.

She crossed paths with Charlie in the corridor of the family wing.

He eyed her with a touch of confusion. "Ought I to be afraid at such a broad grin as that?" Enough teasing sat in his tone to take the edge off.

"I've just met Mr. Digby Layton." She took his hands and bounced a bit, her excitement overcoming her dignity. "He's as delightful as I'd hoped."

He laughed a little. "I've not seen you this giddy in . . . well, ever."

She sighed and didn't bother hiding her grin. "I haven't been this happy

in ages.”

She spun about as she made her way into the bedchamber. What had been a miserable day had turned into a ray of absolute sunshine.

Chapter Twenty-One

CHARLIE COULDN'T SHAKE FROM HIS mind the image of Artemis so delightedly excited when he'd seen her in the corridor the afternoon before. Her entire demeanor had been light and natural and genuine. Her voice had rung with very real pleasure and excitement.

He had, in that moment, seen Artemis with no walls, no armor, no pretense, and his heart had yet to recover.

He'd watched her throughout the evening as she'd spoken with Father's friend Mr. Layton. Though Charlie hadn't been privy to their conversation, he could see she had enjoyed it. Genuinely enjoyed it, not merely making a show of being interested and entertained. Her expressions had ranged from intrigued to pondering to confident. There had been no theatrics, no feigned ennui, no hint of the actress she so often was. And she had thoroughly enjoyed herself.

He'd lain awake most of the night on the chaise longue, trying to make sense of the change in her, wondering what could be done to keep her from disappearing once more behind her defenses.

By breakfast the next morning, though, she was unreachable once more, indulging in dramatics and off-hand dismissals. He wanted her to be her true self, her real, unfeigned self. He'd seen *that* Artemis only in glimpses, and he missed her.

And so, after the morning meal, he went in search of the only person he knew who could bring out such happy sincerity in her.

He found Mr. Layton on the back terrace in light conversation with Mr. Barrington, the Gent who put Charlie in mind of so many of the dons at Cambridge. Mr. Layton, with his brightly colored, highly tailored clothes and exaggerated mannerisms, put him in mind of Philip. It made these strangers feel surprisingly familiar.

"Charlie." Mr. Layton waved him over. "Come join us."

Neither appeared the least put out by his arrival and interruption. He took a seat near them and dove directly into his inquiry. "What did you and Artemis talk about last evening?" he asked Mr. Layton.

The question had clearly not been expected.

"A great many things," he said. "Nothing of terrible import."

A frustrating answer. "She seemed to enjoy your conversation. Sincerely enjoy it. She very seldom does."

“She doesn’t enjoy conversation?” Mr. Barrington asked.

“She does,” he said. “At least she goes to great lengths to *appear* that she does. She goes to great lengths to appear to be a lot of things.”

Both men eyed him with unmistakable interest and surprise. Only upon looking at them did he realize he had, in his exhaustion and desperation, allowed his tongue to run away with him. Without thinking, he’d spoken ill of his wife.

“What sort of rubbish husband manages to get everything wrong all the time?” he muttered.

“One with the surname Jonquil, in my experience,” Mr. Barrington said.

“Indeed.” Mr. Layton’s theatrics rivaled Artemis’s but were somehow less frustrating. Perhaps the difference was that he gave no impression of trying to hide behind his antics. It felt, instead, like a bit of entertainment. “I have made a petition to the Crown to create a medal to be awarded to any lady who endures being married to a Jonquil.”

“They are, without question, the bravest of us all,” Mr. Barrington answered with a slow nod.

They both looked at Charlie and burst out laughing.

“You cannot convince us,” Mr. Layton said, “that any of you boys are less dense in matters of the heart than your father was.”

“But was Father married to a lady who hated being married to him?” Charlie tossed back.

In perfect unison, they said, “Yes.”

Charlie knew his parents’ marriage, arranged as it had been, hadn’t been a love match to begin with, but he’d not once heard the word *hate* attached to their feelings on the matter.

“Do you suspect your Artemis hates being married to you?” Mr. Barrington asked.

“I have more than mere suspicions,” Charlie said. “We’ve disliked each other for a very long time and were forced to marry due to a rather stupid misunderstanding. I would declare myself entirely certain of her hatred of our current situation, but—”

“But she doesn’t have sincere conversations.” Mr. Barrington nodded his understanding. “And you find yourself wondering not only what your future now looks like but also who the lady you’ve married actually is.”

Lud, that was a discouraging summary.

He scratched at the back of his head. “She was so open with you, Mr.

Layton. And when she told me yesterday how pleased she was to have met you . . . ” He emptied his lungs, letting his arm drop once more to his side. “I felt like I was seeing her—the *real* her—for the first time.”

Mr. Barrington leaned forward, watching him with a searching gaze. “And did you like who you saw?”

He didn’t say anything, but the growing grins on the gentlemen’s faces told him he didn’t need to.

“I remember all too well your father realizing he’d begun falling in love with your mother.” Mr. Layton laughed quietly, then looked to Mr. Barrington. “Heavens, Lucas was caught unawares by that change, wasn’t he?”

Mr. Barrington nodded. “And, miraculously enough, managed to salvage the mull he’d made of it all up to that point.”

While there was something reassuring and heartwarming about hearing stories of his father, it was also frustrating. “If he were here, he could tell me how he managed to turn his marriage around. I’m stumbling my way through mine.”

“Charlie,” Mr. Layton said kindly, “*we* were with him as he managed that.”

A fragile bit of hope blossomed inside.

Mr. Layton rose and motioned him to do the same. “Take a stroll around the grounds with us. I think we can give you a bit of the advice your father would have, and perhaps warn you of a few of the missteps he made along the way.”

“And a few of the missteps the rest of us made as well,” Mr. Barrington added. “The Gents rather bumbled our way through the 1780s.”

“And beyond,” Mr. Layton added.

They took the stone steps down to the pebbled path and began a meandering circuit of the grounds.

Somehow, Mr. Layton looked regal even during something so unrefined as an afternoon ramble about the back lawn. Mr. Barrington looked utterly academic. How would an onlooker describe Charlie? Probably “desperate.”

“I think our first question must be, What is your goal for this marriage?” Mr. Barrington asked. “Do you wish for a love story for the ages?”

“I would settle for anything that isn’t a complete disaster.”

The other two exchanged glances.

“Sound familiar, Digby?” Mr. Barrington asked his friend.

Mr. Layton nodded. “His father’s son through and through.”

Charlie wasn’t often compared to his father. Even though this similarity was less than flattering, he liked hearing it. “Father clearly managed to avoid disaster. He and Mater had the sort of marriage most people only dream of.”

“The deep love they had for each other was not his initial goal,” Mr. Barrington said. “His first focus was to build a friendship and a much-needed degree of trust.”

Friendship and trust. Two things Charlie’s marriage didn’t yet have, though there’d been moments when both had at least seemed possible.

“How did Father approach that?”

“He chose activities that could be easily enjoyed by two people who were not in love; many, in fact, were the sort of playful pastimes one indulges in during childhood.” Mr. Barrington adjusted his spectacles as he spoke. “He was operating under the theory that Julia could enjoy the undertaking without worrying that she was opening herself up to being hurt.”

Hearing Mater referred to by her Christian name was so odd. She’d been Mater all his life. He had some vague memories of Father calling her Julia, but no one else ever did.

“She worried a lot about being hurt,” Mr. Layton said. “She had suffered through so many losses and so much pain in her life. I don’t know that she could have endured another blow. Though she made a good show of being strong and unbreakable, Julia was quite fragile. Once Lucas realized that, once he truly appreciated the fear she carried with her, the pain that rested just below the surface, it changed his entire approach to his marriage. His frustration gave way to compassion. His railing at being forced into a marriage he hadn’t wanted gave way to a deep desire to build a life with her. His desire to avoid being hurt himself became nothing compared to his need to protect her from further suffering. It changed him.”

Charlie spun a leaf in his fingers as he listened. So much of what they were describing could be applied to him. His frustration, his railing against what he’d lost, his seemingly strong but undeniably hurting wife. “*Changed* him?”

Mr. Barrington nodded. “Your father was always a good man and the best sort of friend. But letting himself love your mother, deciding to be the kind of person she deserved to build a life with, brought out something more in him than had been there before.”

“He was always *good*,” Mr. Layton said. “He became remarkable.”

“And he and Mater were happy in the end.” Charlie knew that for a fact.

“My boy,” Mr. Layton said kindly, “they were happy long before the end.”

“How did he go about building a friendship between them?”

Mr. Barrington nodded his approval. “The best place to begin. Well chosen, Charlie.”

The compliment warmed him. These gentlemen, who had been unknown to him days earlier, were proving reassuring and strengthening. Hearing their approval felt nearly like hearing it from Father himself. Nearly.

“Take what opportunities you can find to undertake a lark or two,” Mr. Layton said. “Laughter is a glue too many underestimate. You can build a bond through happy moments that will see you through the sad ones.”

Charlie nodded. He’d seen the truth of that already. Playing catch us, catch us with Artemis, Oliver, Persephone, and Hestia had been just one of those happy and joyous moments. It had given him hope.

“Discover what her interests are,” Mr. Barrington said. “And share yours with her. Your parents built their connection on a foundation of mountains and mathematics.”

That last caught Charlie’s attention. “Father was a mathematician?”

Again, the men exchanged the sort of look one saw only between friends with decades of connection behind them. It was a knowing, amused look.

“No,” Mr. Barrington said. “He wasn’t.”

“You did say mathematics,” Charlie insisted.

“We did,” Mr. Layton said, “but you assumed which of your parents had the passion for it.”

Charlie stopped on the spot, shock holding him perfectly still. “*Mater* had an interest in mathematics?”

Mr. Barrington nodded. “When I was visiting them at Brier Hill early in their marriage, I came upon your mother teaching herself differential calculations.”

All Charlie could do was stand and stare at them. Why had no one told him this before?

Mr. Layton slapped a hand on his shoulder. “At the risk of shocking you further, Charlie, your mother is, in my estimation, likely a genius. Were she a gentleman, she would have proven herself an academic legend at Cambridge.”

“You’re having a laugh at my expense, aren’t you?”

Mr. Layton shook his head. “As fond as I am of a laugh and a bit of absurdity, we’re in earnest.”

“Entirely,” Mr. Barrington said. “I’m in the Royal Society, have lectured here and there, have published extensively on scientific topics, and I do not believe I have ever met your mother’s intellectual equal. Life limited her opportunities for building on her natural abilities, but, I assure you, we are telling you the truth of it.”

“Hare and hounds,” Charlie muttered in shock.

They laughed and nudged him forward.

“To add to your feeling of being overwhelmed,” Mr. Layton continued, “I suspect the lady you have married is remarkably intelligent as well. Her area of interest and expertise lies with fashion. I was impressed with her ideas on the topic last evening. And she was clearly excited to speak about it.”

“She spends hours sketching and sewing clothing,” Charlie said. “She has dedicated an entire room at Brier Hill to that undertaking. But I know nothing of fashion. I don’t know that I could have a one-minute conversation with her on the topic, let alone build a friendship around it.”

Mr. Barrington tipped his head in Mr. Layton’s direction. “You’ve an expert here. There’s no end to his ability to speak on the subject.”

“I think I’d do better to resurrect a few childhood games. I’m less likely to humiliate myself there.”

“You are Lucas’s boy,” Mr. Layton said by way of warning. “There will be no avoiding humiliation.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I HAVE BEEN SO PLEASED to see the fashion plates in *La Belle Assemblée* favoring slightly lower waistlines and bolder colors." Artemis was in absolute heaven in this deep discussion about fashion with Rose and Mr. Layton. "We are convinced that ladies' fashions are moving permanently in that direction but wish they would make the change more quickly."

The three of them shared this passion. Artemis had no worries that she would be looked down on for her area of interest. Rose had always been dependable in that way. Now she had Mr. Layton as well. It was freeing. She felt safe enough to be more herself than she generally ever allowed.

"If only gentlemen's fashions were moving in an encouraging direction," Mr. Layton said. "That dolt Brummel has convinced the lot of them to be afraid of anything but the most mundane fabrics and adornments."

"Lord Lampton is not afraid of eye-catching choices," Rose pointed out.

Mr. Layton smoothed his sleeves with a look of self-satisfaction. "And who do you suppose undertook *his* fashion education?"

Artemis made a show of pondering the question all the *ton* could have guessed the answer to. "Wilson?"

Amusement tugged at Mr. Layton's mouth. He was a decidedly handsome gentleman. He had likely been entirely devastating when he first entered Society. "The same person who taught Lord Lampton how to cut a dash also taught Wilson the finer points of fashion."

"That someone was you, of course," Rose said.

"They both already possessed a knack for such things," Mr. Layton said. "I simply showed them how to improve upon their talents."

"My uncle did much the same for me," Rose said. "I'm grateful he did."

"As am I," Artemis said.

"And I, Miss Narang." Mr. Layton dipped his head to her.

Rose, Artemis had discovered over the past almost two years, didn't allow sentimentality to last long. "Artemis and I believe the lowered waistlines would be best complimented by a widening of necklines and dropping of sleeves. We, unfortunately, do not have the ears of those who decide such things."

"For my part," Mr. Layton said, "I believe you should *be* those ears."

"Not possible." Artemis knew that perfectly well. "Society forbids a lady of my position to be involved in any sort of venture. And the deeply

engrained prejudices of this country prevent Rose from doing so."

"Artemis." Charlie quite suddenly arrived in the room, his gaze eager and excited. "The little ones are gathered in the portrait gallery, eager for some games on this rainy day. Will you come play with us?"

"You count yourself amongst the 'little ones'?" Mr. Layton asked.

"I have always been counted amongst the little ones," Charlie said. "I can't imagine better company could be found anywhere."

Mr. Layton smiled. "Your father felt the same way."

She had heard that about the late earl. "Do all of the Gents share that ideology?"

"I cannot say there is one among us who, upon seeing a child in need, even if that need were simply to be cheered, would not immediately commit ourselves to the undertaking," he said. "I cannot say we are saints—Henri is likely the closest—but we'd not any of us be able to turn away from a child in need."

Artemis studied him a moment, trying to imagine his face years earlier, attempting to picture him in the fashions of more than a decade ago. He would have come to the aid of a lost and lonely child; he had said as much. But had he? Had he found a little girl in Heathbrook? Had he held her? Told her he loved her?

"You should go join the children for their games," Mr. Layton said. "They are the most enjoyable of companions."

It seemed so possible that he might be the gentleman she searched for, and yet, he didn't seem to recognize her as the little girl he had once shown such love and devotion. Perhaps he assumed she didn't remember him. Or perhaps he wasn't the person she sought. How she wished she had answers.

Charlie had crossed to them. "Do come, Artie. They're calling for a rousing game of huckle buckle beanstalk, and it promises to be an absolute ruckus of an afternoon. You can't miss it."

"You want me to join in?" She waited for the answer with bated breath.

"You were brilliant at catch us, catch us. We need your game-playing expertise." His eyes danced. He was, in that moment, utterly endearing. And undeniably handsome. "Kendrick is proving rubbish at it. So disappointing."

"He is only one year old."

Charlie shook his head theatrically. "No excuse."

Artemis looked once more at Rose and Mr. Layton, reluctant to inflict

offense at abandoning their conversation and wanting some bit of direction. So much with Charlie was uncharted territory.

"Go," Rose said.

Mr. Layton shooed her away. "It is the very best way you could spend your afternoon."

"You won't be upset that I've abandoned the both of you?"

"On the contrary," Rose said in her typical dry manner.

"This is a matter of utmost importance," Mr. Layton said. "Learning that the tiny Lord Jonquil not only has very little hair—something I'd hoped he'd outgrow—but is rubbish at huckle buckle beanstalk is a disappointment I was not prepared to endure. You must go salvage the Jonquil name, my dear."

She appreciated the bit of humor, but she had concerns. "I don't think the Jonquils are too pleased that I have laid claim to their name."

He leaned forward and squeezed her hand. "I assure you, Artemis, that is not true."

"You've asked them all, have you?"

His dazzling smile was the sort only a true dandy could produce. "I've asked the ones who matter."

She laughed. Oh, Mr. Layton was a delight.

Charlie held out a hand to her. "Come join in the games, Artie. The family name needs defending, and you are just the person to do it."

She liked that answer very much indeed. "You will remember from our long-ago game of lawn bowls that I take competition very seriously indeed," she warned him lightheartedly.

One corner of his mouth tipped up. If not for their difficult history and equally difficult present, she'd have described the expression as flirtatious. "Why do you think I've asked you to be on *my* team?"

She set her hand in his, still outstretched toward her, and rose. He didn't drop her hand, as she'd assumed he would, once she was standing but walked at her side, with her hand in his, their arms swinging between them like two old friends.

Charlie's show of happy friendship was calming and reassuring. It may not have been the adoration and fervor she'd let herself imagine over the years, but there was something so steady in it. She was not hiding herself behind her shield of theatricality, and yet, he seemed pleased to be with her.

"Do many gentlemen take such delight in time spent with children?"

Artemis asked.

"In this family, yes." He looked over at her with a flush of embarrassment. "That likely makes us seem rather pitiful."

She shook her head. "If more people were kind to children, were willing to make certain little ones knew they had value and were loved, what a difference that would make."

He raised their clasped hands to his lips and kissed her fingers. "I am sorry your father did not make certain you knew that."

Artemis leaned her head against him. Father had neglected her in every conceivable way. But Papa, her beloved, darling, elusive Papa, had given her reason to hope. He was out there, somewhere. Perhaps somewhere nearby.

How tempting it was to tell Charlie of her suspicions regarding Mr. Layton. But, then, Charlie didn't know about Papa. No one did.

They reached the portrait gallery. All the Jonquil grandchildren were there, except for Edmund, the oldest at ten and likely feeling himself too old to indulge in games with the youngest of his cousins, and Stanley and Marjie's little one, who had not yet arrived at Lampton Park. It was quite a gathering. They all looked over at the door, and their eyes lit. A chorus of "Uncle Charlie!" filled the high-ceilinged room. There could be no doubt they adored their youngest uncle.

"I've brought your aunt Artemis to join the fun," he said. "She is an excellent game player."

The children cheered and called the two of them over, begging for the festivities to begin.

Charlie pulled Artemis directly to the center of them all, where they sat on the floor in front of them.

"Have you decided on an object to hide?" he asked the group.

Caroline took the lead, something Artemis suspected was a well-established dynamic. "This carved horse." She held out a small, well-crafted toy.

"Excellent choice," Artemis said. "It's large enough for the littlest seekers to spot without being so large that it would be difficult to hide."

"I picked it." Oh, how well Artemis knew the look of hesitant hope on the little girl's face.

"Clever girl," Artemis said.

Caroline grinned broadly, tender pride surging in her expression. Charlie

put an arm around Artemis and gave her a side hug, whispering, “Thank you for that.”

“Who is hiding the horse first?” Caroline asked.

“Perhaps you could help one of the youngest ones,” Charlie suggested. “Aunt Artemis and I will help the others look.”

Caroline chose her two-year-old brother, Henry, to be her partner. He watched his sister with an eager adoration.

Charlie and Artemis gathered the others, nearly all of whom were under three years old, into a clump of childish glee. Alice, one of the older children, at likely five, set herself beside Charlie, watching him, utterly besotted. Artemis held Julia in one arm and the ebony-haired Isabella in the other. Charlie held Kendrick, with little Robert and William tucked up against him.

“No peeking,” Charlie told the lot of them. “Close your eyes.”

Alice did so immediately. None of the others seemed to understand what he was telling them.

“Have them cover their eyes with their hands,” Artemis suggested. Her nieces and nephews had been able to do that at this age, though perhaps not for long stretches of time or with any degree of reliability.

Charlie demonstrated with exaggerated movements. They watched him intently, doing their utmost to copy him. Artemis’s armfuls were too little to comprehend much of it and wouldn’t have the least idea what Caroline and her brother were up to.

The little boys watching Charlie from the floor were entranced. Repeated attempts at mimicking his actions dissolved into giggles. Robert stood and put his tiny hands on his uncle’s eyes.

“Cover your own eyes, silly,” Charlie said.

William, sitting on the floor still, giggled and pulled himself to his feet, joining his cousin in the effort to cover Charlie’s eyes.

Caroline and her brother returned in the midst of the silliness. “Did you see where we hid the horse?”

“We didn’t,” Artemis assured her.

Caroline looked down at her little brother. “Don’t tell them where it is.”

He shook his head.

Getting up with so many little ones underfoot and in arm took some doing, but they managed it. After only minutes, the reality of how young most of their brood was became quite clear. They hadn’t the first idea what

was happening or what they were looking for. Caroline, good sport that she was, simply laughed at her little cousins' antics. Henry was very good about not revealing the hiding place of the toy horse.

But Alice, still clinging to Charlie's side, was growing frustrated. "I want to find the horse. The boys are being bad."

"Not bad, dear," Charlie said. "They are just too little to understand the game."

"Then why are they playing?" she asked.

He met Artemis's eye. She managed not to laugh out loud at the exasperation in his eyes.

"Hers is a point well made, Charlie. I cannot wait to hear what your answer will be."

"You are no help." But he smiled at her.

Eventually, Charlie found the horse hidden beneath a chair. He then hid it, and Artemis discovered it beside a long table. The littlest ones lost interest by the time Caroline found and hid the horse once more. The two nursemaids who'd been in the room in case of just such a defection, were quick to gather up the tiniest of the cousins and whisk them away, no doubt to the nursery.

Charlie bid them each an individual farewell. He was so tenderly sweet with them. Not one of these children would ever wonder if someone cared for them.

Only she, Charlie, Alice, and Caroline remained in the large and impressive portrait gallery. The older of the two girls set out to hide the horse. Alice sat on Charlie's lap.

"Do you think I'll find it this time?" she asked.

"I think you might," he said. "If I don't find it first. I am a very good seeker."

"I'll find it," she said eagerly. "I know I will."

Caroline announced the horse well and truly hidden, and they all opened their eyes to begin the hunt. Alice ran around, searching beneath every chair and under the sparse bits of furniture. Sweet thing, she wanted so badly to emerge triumphant.

Artemis knelt in front of the child. "You keep searching, love. Caroline and I will convince your uncle Charlie to look for it on the far side of the room."

"What if the horse is over there?" Alice asked.

Artemis met Caroline's eye. The older girl shook her head. To Alice, Artemis said, "I am certain it isn't on that side of the room. You look over here."

Alice bounced a bit, eyes darting around with excitement as she took up the search in earnest.

"I'll tell Charlie to look over there," Caroline said.

"Excellent idea."

While Alice searched near the windows, Caroline turned to Charlie. He, of course, would have overheard every word they'd said. Still, he played along, allowing Caroline to pull him by the hand to various pretended hiding spots.

"I can't find it," Alice said, frustration and disappointment heavy in her voice.

"Go help her, Caroline," Charlie said.

"But you'll escape and find the horse." Poor Alice looked near to tears.

Artemis didn't wish for Charlie to be forced to reveal that he'd been playing a role the entire time. "I'll stop him," she declared and rushed over, making a show of blocking his path.

Charlie laughed and pretended to try to get around her.

"I'm holding him back, girls." She could hear giggles behind her. "Look quickly before he escapes."

She glanced back at them. Caroline took Alice's hand and pulled her toward the apparent hiding spot.

"They are darling little friends, aren't they?" Charlie spoke quietly. "Caroline was the only grandchild for quite a while. She was often lonely."

"It is so hard to be a lonely child," Artemis said.

"Yes, it is."

She looked at him once more. "Were you lonely, too, Charlie?"

The laughter that had been in his expression only a moment earlier disappeared. Heaviness pulled at his brows. Sadness hung in his eyes. "All my brothers were away at school. My father had died. My mother was in deepest mourning. I often felt entirely alone."

"I wish you'd lived closer," she said. "We could have been friends, and neither of us would have been so alone."

He set an arm around her waist. "We could have launched paper boats in the Trent and played on the old stone bridge." He set his other arm around her. "We would have climbed trees and caused endless mischief."

Artemis set her hands on his chest, watching as a smile played across his lips. “I would have liked that.”

Charlie rested his forehead against hers. “We could still do all those things, you know.”

“Even the ‘endless mischief’?” she whispered.

His voice as quiet as hers, he said, “Especially the mischief.”

“What sort of mischief do you have in mind?” Her heart pounded so loudly she could hardly hear her own words.

“I have a few ideas.”

“She found it! She found it!” Caroline’s voice called out.

Charlie pulled back. In the blink of an eye, he transformed from unexpectedly enjoyable husband to fun uncle. He rushed over to his nieces, taking the game up once more.

Artemis took a moment to breathe and regain her equilibrium. He was proving a surprise. A wonderful, confusing, delightful surprise.

Chapter Twenty-Three

FATHER'S FRIENDS HAD DECLARED MATER a genius. Charlie was beginning to suspect they fell somewhere near that themselves. Their advice regarding his difficulties with Artemis had proven remarkably efficacious. The time he'd spent with her playing games with their nieces and nephews the day before had been encouraging. They'd recaptured much of the friendliness they'd enjoyed while her family had visited Brier Hill and some of the ease they'd had at the final inn on their journey to Lampton Park.

She'd looked happy. There'd been no arguments or resentment. And she'd let him hold her. He'd thought about kissing her. Heaven knew he'd thought about it. If not for Caroline interrupting the moment, he might have tried. It was likely for the best he hadn't. He was aiming for friendship. He was working toward a future in which they could have some happiness. Pushing beyond that too quickly would likely have proven disastrous.

The family gathered on the back terrace after breakfast the next morning. Stanley and Marjie had arrived late the night before, and everyone was anxious to see and visit with them. Their little boy was enjoying crawling about with his cousins.

Charlie took a seat beside Mater, something that hadn't often been possible since the arrival of Father's friends. They clearly enjoyed her company, and she was seldom seen without at least one of them.

She watched him fondly. "How are you faring?"

"Better," he said. "I don't think Artemis hates me any longer."

"Oh, my boy, she never hated you."

Bless her maternal optimism. She likely couldn't imagine anyone hating any of "her boys." And she likely wanted to believe that all the brothers got on well with everyone.

"I can see you do not believe me." Far from offended, she smiled all the more. "I daresay when you met at the house party we had here, you both found each other intriguing and confusing, handsome and clever. I would wager neither of you had the first idea of what to do with those feelings. She, as beautiful as she is, with her large dowry and significant connections, has likely endured a constant stream of insincerity from those looking to befriend her for the benefits they would receive. I have no doubt she has learned to treat others with that same insincerity as a means of protecting herself. And you, being a younger son, with a very loyal and open heart and

the opportunity to surround yourself with sincere friends, didn't know how to respond to someone you could tell was playing a role."

Charlie shook his head in amazed surprise. "I think Mr. Layton and Mr. Barrington were correct."

She tipped her head. "About what?"

"They told me that you are a genius."

She laughed. "What an odd thing for them to say."

Charlie eyed her more closely. "Is it true you had a passion for mathematics when you and Father were first married?"

"Ah." Understanding dawned. "I have always had a passion for learning new things, but mathematics was, for me, the most intriguing."

"Why did you never tell me?' he asked. "All the times I've spoken of my mathematical interests, you gave no indication that you shared the same."

She took his hand and held it as she had often done. "You have struggled to feel you have your own identity in this family. Every interest you expressed over the years had already been claimed by someone. I couldn't bear to take this one away from you as well."

"But I am happy to know we have this in common," he said. "It does a fellow good to know he shares a trait with a parent. Gives him a sense of connection, like he belongs among his own family."

"You are so essential a part of all of us," Mater said. "I hope you feel that."

"For my part, I hope Artemis feels that. She's been lonely."

Mater looked out over the gathering. "I have not seen her this morning. Have you?"

"Not since I came down for breakfast." He rose. "I'd imagine someone has though."

But when he asked those gathered there, the answer he received over and over again was no. Only when he posed the question to Mariposa, his most outspoken sister-in-law, did he get more information than that. "An invitation to join all of us was sent to her, but she has refused it."

"Refused?"

"*Sí*." Mariposa did not speak in disapproval or judgment, simply confirmation. "She has insisted she not be asked again."

That was unexpected. She'd been so much more at ease amongst them of late. Had he made less progress than he'd thought? Surely he'd not imagined her softening the day before. Yet, she was refusing the hospitality

of her new family members.

"I suppose I had best go discover the nature of her objections," Charlie said.

"The 'nature of her objections' might be the prospect of all our company at one time," Mariposa warned. "We are many, and we can be overwhelming."

That wasn't entirely untrue. But the enormity of this family was not going to change. If Artemis was unwilling to endure that, she'd never find her place among them. That rift would eventually either tear Charlie from his family or would become a chasm in their marriage.

Was he never to be permitted to hope without it being so quickly snatched away?

He made his way back toward the terrace doors. His feet took him past one of Father's friends, Mr. Fortier, who stopped him.

"*Excuse-moi*, Charlie," he said. "A moment, please."

Charlie nodded, indicating he should say what he wished.

"You will, I am most certain, receive ample advice from the Gents. Your father would wish that of us, he not being here." Mr. Fortier had very kind eyes. And something about his soft-edged French accent made his words even more gracious. "I will take a moment to suggest you approach your sweet wife with patience. Making assumptions tends to land one in greater difficulties."

It was a good reminder, really. "I will," he said.

"And I must warn you, should you injure the feelings of your *doux ami*, Mr. Layton will likely murder you. He has shown a very paternal fondness for her." Mr. Fortier looked amused enough that Charlie knew his life was not actually in any danger.

"I consider myself amply warned."

Mr. Fortier motioned him along. Having friends of Father's nearby wasn't the same as having him there, but it was proving helpful just the same.

With the reminder to be patient in his thoughts, he made his way to his bedchamber.

She was inside, sitting on a chair facing the window. She was fully dressed for the day, though she had a blanket spread over her lap and still wore her nightcap. Artemis never appeared anything short of perfection. Was she ill? Surely she would have said as much rather than simply saying she refused to join the family.

“Everyone’s wondering where you are.” It was not the most elegant opening, but he wasn’t certain where to begin.

“I know my company is highly sought after, but I am certain they can endure my absence for a day.” That tone was all too familiar. Artemis was on her high horse again.

But why?

“I understand the sisters-in-law plan to make their way to the vicarage in an hour to create charity baskets for some of the struggling people in the parish. They could use your help.”

She shrugged a shoulder, still not looking back at him. “They’ll manage without me, though they will certainly suffer for the loss of my company.”

Be patient. Don’t assume the worst. It was an easy thought to have, a harder one to follow through with when she was enveloping herself in the cloak of arrogant theatrics. *It is a shield, not a window.* He repeated the duke’s declaration, reminding himself to not assume the worst in her.

“The entire family is currently gathered on the back terrace. I should very much like to spend time with them. Heaven knows I’ll have few opportunities now that my home is in Cumberland.” She needed to see that this was important. He crossed to the window to face her. “Could you not —” Every drop of fight evaporated. She looked utterly miserable. “What’s happened?”

She turned her head a little away. “You’ll laugh at me.”

He hunched down in front of her. “When have I ever laughed at you?”

That brought her gaze to him, both dry and accusatory. “‘Miss Shamcaster’?”

Lud. She’d heard the name he used to call her.

“You cannot tell me with any honesty that that moniker was meant to be anything other than mocking,” she said.

He set his hand atop hers, where it rested on the chair arm. “I wish I could tell you I’ve grown wiser and more mature of late, but it is a sad truth that Jonquil men are doomed to unending idiocy.”

She didn’t pull her hand from his, which he hoped was a good omen.

“Do tell me what’s upset you,” he said. “You are so seldom truly overset. It worries me to see you upset.”

“Do you promise you won’t ridicule me?”

He threaded his fingers through hers and held her gaze. “You have my word of honor.”

She sighed and pulled off her nightcap. A riot of absolutely chaotic curls shot out in all directions. “Rose isn’t feeling well, and I wanted her to rest. One of the maids helped me dress, but not one of them would know how to tame this monstrosity. I can manage it to an extent myself, but it’s particularly bad today.” Her next breath shook. “I can’t join your family looking like this. They would all laugh at me. I couldn’t bear it.”

Artemis seldom allowed herself to seem vulnerable. This degree of fragility was heartbreaking. And yet, her emergency was something he was actually equipped to help with. He was never the right person at the right time. This was an opportunity he did not mean to waste.

He stood, keeping hold of her hand, and nudged her to her feet.

“I won’t go down there like this, Charlie. I won’t.”

“I have no intention of insisting you do.”

She eyed him doubtfully. “What *do* you intend to do?”

He knew his expression held a fair bit of mischief. “I intend to fix your hair.”

Her look of shock was everything he could have hoped for. He laughed out loud.

“Sit on the bed,” he instructed. “I need to grab a couple of things.”

“You are in earnest?”

He nodded and motioned for her to sit. He snatched the very wide-toothed comb from the dressing table and a length of ribbon. Artemis watched him with equal parts interest and confusion.

Perhaps he ought to take pity on her and explain.

“Caroline and I have spent large swaths of my school holidays running around the grounds of Lampton Park and Farland Meadows. She has curly hair as well, though not as curly as yours. Almost without fail, her hair would grow wild and unmanageable. She would become utterly frustrated with it, and our games and walks would have to end early.” He sat on the bed beside Artemis. “So I asked Marion to teach me how to tend to Caroline’s hair. I’ve grown decent at it, though I can’t do anything particularly fancy or impressive.”

“That you can do anything at all with curly hair is impressive.” Artemis glanced at his hair. “Yours has a bit of wave to it.”

He nodded. “All of us brothers inherited some degree of our father’s very wavy hair.”

“You told me once his hair grew curly and difficult in the rain,” she said.

“Mine is the same way.”

“I believe you.” He set the ribbon beside him. “Turn about, if you would.”

She did, placing her back to him. He took up the comb and began to slowly, carefully untangle her hair.

“Do your friends at Cambridge know you are a coiffeuse?” she asked.

“No, and you’d best not tell them. I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Do they not already have ample ammunition, you being a mathematician and, therefore, terribly easy to mock?”

He was growing more adept at hearing the amusement underneath her dramatics. “Fortunately, I am so suave and sophisticated that they are too in awe of me to jest overly much.”

“If they grow excessively mocking about your overfondness for numbers, you can always challenge them to a game of catch us, catch us. They would be bested so thoroughly they would never tease you again.”

He worked carefully at her knotted curls. “Your hair is considerably thicker than Caroline’s.”

She pushed out a frustrated breath. “There is far too much of it. When you arrived, I had very nearly convinced myself to cut it all off.”

He paused, his heart dropping to his stomach. “You wouldn’t really, would you?”

“If I had, you could be with your family just now. I’d not be proving a bother.”

“You have beautiful hair, Artie. It’d be a tragedy if you cut it all off.” He took an untangled bit of it between his thumb and forefinger. It was so soft and thick. Many ladies would have been swallowed up by it, the sheer volume overshadowing the lady herself. But Artemis carried it off beautifully. “Combing through it is no bother.”

“I still can’t believe you know how to style curly hair.”

“I am a gentleman of hidden talents: hair arranging, children’s games, mimicry, flower arranging, falling off roofs.”

“Flower arranging?” She turned her head the tiniest bit toward him. “*You* are the one bringing the flowers?”

“Of course.” He began working on another section of her hair. “My father taught me a lot about flowers, with his most important lesson being that many ladies like to have fresh flowers to add a bit of color and beauty to their home.”

“Were the flowers in my room at Brier Hill from you as well?”

“They were.”

He didn’t realize she hadn’t known that. “Though things have not always been easy between us, I have only ever wanted you to be happy in our home, Artie.”

She didn’t speak for a moment. Charlie couldn’t see her face. He didn’t think he’d upset her, and he was being very careful not to pull her hair as he combed through it.

“Why do you call me that?” The question sounded not upset but genuinely curious.

“‘Artie’?”

She nodded.

“Do you not want me to?” If she truly hated the name, he’d stop using it. But though it had begun as a way to irk her, he’d come to like having a pet name for her.

“Only one other person ever called me anything other than Artemis. I suppose I’m simply not used to it.” She didn’t sound upset. “Not anymore, leastwise.”

He was making progress with her hair, but there was so much of it. “Who else called you by a different name?”

“That is a very long story.”

“Well, you have a lot of hair,” he said. “We will be here for a while.”

“You won’t laugh?”

Never in his wildest imaginings would he have thought that Artemis Lancaster had any uncertainties or vulnerabilities. Yet, for the third time in short succession, she had hesitated to tell him something because she feared being laughed at. He was discovering she was not nearly as unshakably, arrogantly confident as she went to great lengths to appear.

He set down the comb and scooted around so he knelt on the bed a bit beside her and a bit in front of her. He took her face gently in his hands and held her gaze. “I’ll make you a promise right here, right now, Artemis Jonquil. I will not ever, ever laugh at you. *With* you, yes, but never *at* you.”

“Thank you.” Emotion clogged her voice. “And thank you for helping with my hair.”

“Thank you for not cutting it off.” He slipped his hand back enough to slide his fingers along one of her thick ringlets. “That would’ve been an absolute tragedy.”

Artemis blushed, something he thought he'd never see her do. She was proving full of surprises.

Charlie resumed his earlier position and took up the comb once more. It was an odd thing to feel heroic about, but he did.

"What was this other name that someone used to call you?" He resumed his work on her tangle of hair.

"Princess," she said.

That sounded like a name given to a young girl. "How old were you?"

"I was very little."

He'd thought as much.

"I went with my sisters to Heathbrook one day, and I was separated from them. Our village isn't large, but I became hopelessly lost. I plopped down against the outside wall of a shop and cried. A gentleman saw me there. He asked me why I was crying, and when I explained, he promised to help me find my family."

A kindness that warmed the heart.

"He held my hand, and together we walked up and down every little lane and peeked into the shop windows. When I grew discouraged and teary again, he sat with me and told me I didn't need to be afraid, that he would keep me safe."

"You were fortunate to have found him."

"More than fortunate," she said. "I consider it to have been a miracle. I was so lonely—not merely in that moment but always. My sisters took care of me, but I needed something more than that. I needed a parent to love me and show me that I was worthy of being loved. His kindness was my first taste of that."

"And he called you Princess?"

"He did," she said. "And when I asked if I could call him Papa, he wasn't shocked or disgusted. And he didn't laugh at me."

"Did he live nearby, then?"

"I don't think so," she said. "I went to Heathbrook regularly after that, watching for him. I saw him four more times over the next two years. Looking back, I suspect he was passing through the area, not a resident of it."

A realization washed over him. "He is the one who gave you your handkerchief."

The tiniest of nods. "On that first day, when I was crying."

“That is why you treasure it.”

There was so much more depth to her than she ever let on.

“He bought me a sweet in the sweetshop each time I saw him.”

Ah. “Your five sweets.”

“I never felt more loved than I did when he was with me and called me Princess and said that he loved me.” Her shoulders drooped a little. “He was the only one other than Persephone who ever said that, you know. I wanted my father to. I silently willed him to, concentrating so hard I often gave myself a horrible headache. But he never did.”

He wished Artemis had lived closer to Lampton Park. Just as the family had unofficially adopted their neighbor Arabella Hampton, they would have embraced Artemis as well. She wouldn’t have been the least bit alone.

“When Papa—I still think of him that way—and I crossed paths after that first time, he remembered me and recognized me. He scooped me up and hugged me so tight and so lovingly.” She sighed. “It was the most wonderful feeling in all the world.”

“And you saw him only those five times?” He was making progress with her hair. More importantly, they were making progress in their connection. She was sharing personal memories and doing so without her protective armor.

“We left to live at Falstone Castle after that,” Artemis said. “He likely passed through the village again and again. He probably does so now, but I’m not there.” Unmistakable sadness hung in the words. “I’m frantic to see him again, but it often feels like an impossible dream.”

“Could you not send a letter or reach out to a family member of his?”

“I never knew his name,” she said.

He began plaiting her hair, the only style Marion had taught him but one that worked well with Caroline’s curls.

“And I don’t know that he ever learned my name,” Artemis said. “We were Papa and Princess, only ever crossing paths in Heathbrook.”

“Surely your sisters would have known who he was.”

“They didn’t see him on that first encounter. Once I spied them, he didn’t want me to lose sight of them again and urged me to run over to them. When I was safely with Persephone, I looked back and he was gone already. After that, I encountered him on my own. Our family life grew more difficult and chaotic, and it was very easy to slip away unnoticed.”

His heart broke for that little girl. It was little wonder the lady she was

now kept everyone at arms' length.

"I was so young when I last saw him, and my memories of him are broken by the passage of time. I remember that he dressed finely, considerably more so than my father. And I recall that his manner of speaking was very proper and refined, though I cannot recall the exact sound of his voice. I don't remember what he looked like. I have guesses, but how much of that is my imagination and how much is actual memory, I can't say."

"How do you mean to find him if you remember so little of him?"

"I am dependent on him remembering me. I think he would, don't you? He cared a great deal about me; he said he did. I think he would remember me." She took a somewhat shaky breath. "He told me during our first time together to 'keep to the light.' He meant it literally then, but I've adopted that as a maxim these past years. I require myself to find a way to keep hoping, but sometimes, it grows very difficult. Sometimes it feels impossible."

Charlie tied the ribbon around the tail of the plait he'd created. That would hold her hair in place. "There you are, Artie. Tamed and manageable hair."

She reached up and touched it gingerly with her hand. "It feels far less chaotic. I might even be able to put on a bonnet."

He slid around again, sitting at her side and facing her. "Do you look drastically different than you did the last time you saw your Papa?" he asked.

"I don't think so, other than being older, obviously. My hair was the same color, the same curliness. My eyes are green, which is unique enough to be memorable. I think if he happened to see me or take note of me, he would realize who I was. He was an adult when we knew each other. Adults remember things far more clearly than little children do." She looked at him with an expression of greater uncertainty than her declaration would indicate.

Here was someone who needed reassuring. "I haven't the least doubt he remembers you. But with you not living in Heathbrook any longer, and he living elsewhere also, your paths aren't as likely to cross. Not finding him yet, I am certain, is more a matter of geography than forgettability."

She turned a little so she faced him more directly. "I have pinned all my hopes on crossing his path in London. Everything I remember of him

indicates he is a gentleman and would likely be there for the social whirl. I am there every Season and, heaven knows, I draw enough attention that he ought to at least glance my way at some point. I make certain of it." She sounded almost exhausted at the recounting of her whirl of activity in Town. "Thus far, he hasn't found me, but I have hope that he still will. Well, not this Season; it ended too abruptly."

When they'd departed for Brier Hill, she had been upset about leaving London when the social whirl had only just begun. He'd assigned her frustration to shallowness and bitterness. *Making assumptions tends to land one in greater difficulties.* "I was lonely and desperate for someone to care about me," she said. "That likely lent our time together more meaning for me than for him. He told me he had a home and family of his own. I was likely very easily forgotten."

He slipped his hand around hers. "No one who has met you could possibly forget you."

She leaned forward a bit, resting lightly against his chest. "But what if my Papa did? What if I can't ever find him?"

Charlie wrapped his arms around her, holding her to him. "Keep to the light, Artie."

"I've spent my entire life waiting for him to come back to me," she said, curling into Charlie's embrace. "I even dreamed of him being at my wedding and a guest in my home and a loving and important part of my life." She sounded as though she'd lost hope.

"I don't think you should give up hope. He must be somewhere."

"But I don't know how to find him."

"I'll help you. I don't know anywhere near as many people in Society as you do, but between Philip and Crispin and Marion, there's likely not a member of the *ton* we can't track down."

Her arms wrapped around him as well. "I couldn't bear for everyone to know about him. I'll sound so pathetic. And he might be ridiculed for his kindness. I don't want him to . . . to resent me the way you—" She stopped abruptly, but he knew what she'd been about to say.

He slipped his hand under her chin and gently raised her face to look at him. "I don't resent you, Artie, though I understand your worry. I have the same one at times."

"I don't resent you," she said. "I do wish this situation hadn't been forced on us, but I don't think we're as miserable as we were at first."

He brushed his thumb over her cheek, the touch setting his pulse pounding a bit. “I don’t think we could rightly even use the word *miserable*. We’re finding our way.”

“I’m glad.” Her voice emerged as little more than a whisper.

Charlie reminded himself to breathe, something his lungs had suddenly decided was optional. But looking into her emerald gaze, he found obeying those self-directed orders was difficult. So he leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. The scent she always wore filled the slight space between them.

“I never have been able to sort your perfume,” he whispered. “I’ve tried.”

“It’s made from walnut blossoms.”

“Walnut.” He wouldn’t have guessed. “Wasn’t walnut one of your namesake’s symbols?”

Her hand moved to rest against his chest. “Most people don’t remember that about Artemis of old.”

He leaned closer. “I am not ‘most people.’”

Her fingertips tentatively touched his jaw. “No, you’re not.”

Her breath danced across his lips, an invitation he found himself unequal to ignoring. He brushed his lips over hers, a tentative touch, an unspoken question. She answered with a whisper of a kiss as well.

Bell-like chimes broke the moment.

“The clock.” Artemis pulled back. “The ladies will be leaving for the vicarage.” Her belabored breathing broke the words up a little.

He opened his eyes, trying to shake off the spell that had been woven around them. Her cheeks were as flushed as he suspected his were. She watched him, confusion and, if he wasn’t mistaken, a little longing in her gaze.

“They’ll think poorly of me if I don’t join them,” she said.

Unable to summon actual words yet, he simply nodded.

She slid off the bed but didn’t look away from him. “Thank you for fixing my hair.”

Again, he could manage only a nod.

“Charlie, I—” Her eyes lowered a moment. “I really am not miserable.”

“Neither am I,” he said quietly.

She looked at him once more, sincere pleasure spreading slowly across her breathtakingly beautiful face. Quick as anything, she spun about, snatched her bonnet from the wardrobe, and left the room with eager

enthusiasm and that same lightness and authenticity he'd seen in her the day she'd first made the acquaintance of Mr. Digby Layton, authentic and open and sincere.

Watching her go, he realized that while he wasn't entirely certain what to do with the feigned version of her she often put forward, the real Artemis Jonquil had, in short glimpses and encounters, stolen his heart.

Chapter Twenty-Four

CHARLIE KNOCKED AT THE DOOR of Philip's bedchamber after the Jonquil ladies had left for the vicarage. Nothing short of his newly discovered affection for his unexpected wife could have pushed him to contemplate the course of action he was now undertaking.

Wilson opened the door, which was a spot of luck since Charlie's request would involve the renowned valet.

"Is Philip in?" Charlie asked.

Wilson motioned Charlie inside. Philip was indeed there, as was Mr. Digby Layton. The three men present constituted quite possibly the most fashionable and dandified trio to ever grace Society. Oddly enough, that was precisely what Charlie needed.

"How proceeds your courtship of your wife?" Mr. Layton asked.

"Slowly."

He saw empathy in their expressions rather than the pity he'd feared.

"I recently received the advice that I ought to learn more about Artemis's interests," Charlie said.

Philip nodded too somberly to be sincere. "Sound advice from one of your very wise brothers, no doubt."

"The suggestion was made by Mr. Layton and Mr. Barrington."

"Ah," Philip said. "Intelligent gentlemen, both."

"We speak not from intelligence," Mr. Layton said, "but from having mangled our own courtships years ago."

"It is not merely a Jonquil tendency, then?" Charlie asked lightly.

"No one manages it quite to the extent of Lucas or his boys," Mr. Layton acknowledged. "But no."

Philip indicated Charlie ought to take a seat among them. As the bench at the foot of Philip's bed was the only available place to sit, he did so there, the three of them watching him with unabashed curiosity.

"Spill your budget," Philip instructed.

"Artemis has a very significant interest in fashion." He felt foolish the moment he said it. "You all, of course, know that. Anyone who has spent more than five minutes with her knows that."

"You are not going to be scolded for moments of inarticulacy," Mr. Layton said.

"Perhaps not by *you*," Charlie said. "Older brothers have no such

qualms.”

Philip held up a hand as if taking a solemn oath. “I will behave.”

Charlie had ample reason to doubt that. In the meantime, he would count on the steady characters of Wilson and Mr. Layton. “Fashion is a deeply held interest of Artemis’s. She knows far more about it than I do, obviously.” He motioned to his lackluster attire and appearance. “Being so careless with my appearance when I know that she takes such pleasure and delight in the intricacies of fashion feels . . . unkind, I guess. Dismissive of her interests, at the very least.”

Philip looked to Mr. Layton. “That was far too insightful for a Jonquil. I think we should check the tadpole for a fever.”

“Even Jonquils can have moments of enlightenment,” Mr. Layton said. “Rare and fleeting but not unheard of.”

“I’m taking advantage of this one while it lasts.” Charlie looked to them all. “I’ve come in the hope that the three of you would help me address the shortcomings of my wardrobe, within the constraints of my income.”

At this declaration, the ever stoic, ever regal, often silent Wilson spoke, emotion a bit thick in his words but not so much as to render him difficult to understand. “Every one of your brothers—other than his lordship—dresses like vagabonds. You haven’t the first idea how to dress to advantage, and it is an absolute waste. Lest I make my opinions known on their dereliction of duty, I have had to refrain myself from so much as speaking to any of your valets—those of you who actually employ one.” He added the last bit with a look of scolding flung at Charlie.

Behind his hand, Charlie asked the other two, “Am I in trouble?”

“Get thee a valet,” Mr. Layton replied.

He didn’t know that he could afford one, but that was a discussion for another time. At the moment, he simply needed to adjust his appearance so that—what was that phrase Artemis had used?—she needn’t expend the “enormity of her endurance” looking at him. “I would appreciate whatever advice you can give me,” he said to them all, but with extra emphasis when he looked at Wilson.

His emotions in check and his baring regal once more, Wilson turned to Mr. Layton with an air of alliance. “Digby, we have work to do.”

“Yes, indeed.” Mr. Layton rose and followed Wilson toward Philip’s dressing room.

Charlie attempted to stop them. “My clothes are in the clothes press in

my—”

Wilson stopped on the spot and turned slowly back to look at Charlie, an ebony brow raised imperiously.

“Allow me to translate,” Philip said. “Your clothes are likely to be burned before this is said and done, so retrieving them from where they are currently being stored is a waste of Wilson’s time and talents.”

“I cannot afford to replace them,” Charlie said, panic beginning to surge.

Mr. Layton laughed. “Consider whatever needs acquiring to be a wedding present from the Gents. In the meantime, Wilson and I intend to steal unabashedly from your brother.”

“Which one?” Charlie asked.

“The only one with taste,” Wilson replied, then spun about with something of a flourish, and glided from view to where Philip’s fashionable clothing was kept, Mr. Layton on his heels.

Charlie pushed out a breath. “This might have been a bad idea.”

Philip rose and moved to sit on the bench next to him. “Anything that will bring your wife joy is never a bad idea.”

“Is that your latest bit of advice for me?”

“That is advice I obtained from a much wiser source than me.”

Charlie relaxed a little, growing more confident that he was not about to be bombarded with brotherly instruction. “From whom? Sorrel?”

“She is inarguably my intellectual superior. But the advice was Father’s.” Philip offered him an encouraging smile. “He had fetched me from Cambridge to bring me home for term break—and we were returning by way of Derby, no matter that it was terribly out of the way, because a merchant there had in his shop a shawl that had caught Mater’s eye. I told Father I thought it an overly long diversion from our path for something that felt rather insignificant. He told me, ‘It will bring your mother joy. No effort a husband makes in contribution to his wife’s happiness is ever a waste.’ I have reminded myself of that any number of times in the years since Sorrel agreed to take her chances on such a sop-head as I. His words have saved my neck more times than I can count.”

Bring your wife joy. “Artemis likes the flowers I gather for her. I mean to continue doing that.”

Philip nodded. “Wise. She also seems to enjoy moments of nonsense and amusement. I would suggest continuing to find opportunities to laugh with her.”

“That may very well be the best advice I have received from any of my brothers.”

With a quick and knowing smile, Philip said, “That is because the advice is actually *Father’s*.”

“I hardly remember him.” The admission emerged quiet and a bit broken. He dropped his gaze to his hands. “Sometimes it feels like everyone knows him better than I did, or ever will.”

“I remember him well,” Philip said. “I can tell you so much about him, Charlie. The Gents knew him almost his entire life. And anything we don’t know, Mater does. Between all of us, you could come to know anything and everything about him.”

“Mr. Barrington said he liked mountains.”

Philip nodded. “He did. Do you remember walking up the mountain near Brier Hill with him?”

“I don’t. I do remember spending time with him in the flower garden.”

A nostalgic smile spread over Philip’s face. “He was very particular about that garden, wasn’t he?”

“Very.”

“Green.” Wilson suddenly returned to the room with that single word as if he were making a prophetic pronouncement.

“Am I supposed to know what that means?” Charlie asked.

“It’s a color,” Philip said in overly serious tones, his dandified mien making a very abrupt reappearance. “A bit more cheery than blue but less jaundiced than yellow.”

Wilson, it seemed, had little patience for jesting just then. “Henri wore a waistcoat of green paisley yesterday, which was quite fashionable, shockingly so when one considers how seldom he is in London.”

“The man is regularly in Paris,” Philip returned. “They’ve at least a basic knowledge of clothing and fashions in France.”

Again, Wilson did not take the teasing bait. “Henri’s green waistcoat with your navy jacket and buff trousers.”

“Charlie’s hair will appear more ginger if you dress him in green,” Philip said, rising and crossing to his valet.

“His hair has an *appealing* hint of red, one that warrants accentuating, not diminishing.” Heavens, Wilson couldn’t have sounded more imperious if he were the Prince Regent himself. “That he regularly dresses in the drabbest of browns and robs his coiffeur of its depth of color is a crime.”

“I have reclaimed the role of squire for this neighborhood,” Philip said. “Shall I arrest Charlie?”

“I would have you arrest his manservant, but he does not keep one.” Wilson tossed Charlie yet another scolding look.

Charlie held his hands up. “I know. Get me a valet.”

“I am off to obtain a green waistcoat.” Wilson moved with singular purpose out of the room.

“Did he call both Mr. Layton and Mr. Fortier by their Christian names?” Such familiarity with distinguished gentlemen, especially ones by whom he was not employed, was unheard of for a valet.

Philip nodded. “Wilson has known them for thirty years, since not long after he arrived in England from India.”

Thirty years. Father had only been gone for thirteen. That bit of quick mathematics revealed something unexpected: Wilson had almost certainly known Father and known him for twice as long as Charlie had. That list was growing.

Mr. Layton emerged from the dressing room with a few bits and baubles in his hands. “Accoutrements can change one’s appearance entirely.”

How he hoped Artemis would appreciate all of this; he was having second thoughts. “I would feel ridiculous donning dozens of fobs and rings and bells on my waistcoat.”

“My dear boy,” Mr. Layton said, “Wilson can be a bit much, but I assure you he is exceptionally good at what he does. And I have played a not insignificant role in his training on these matters. We do know the difference between choices that highlight a person’s true self and those meant to hide him. We’ve no intention of fashioning you a disguise.”

“Artemis might prefer if you did,” Charlie said.

Mr. Layton pushed out a breath, the sound one of lighthearted annoyance. “Lud, all you boys are as thickheaded as your father was.” He held up a few watch chains, eyeing them and Charlie in turn before, for reasons unknown, selecting one.

“I do have a leather strap for my watch,” Charlie told him.

“I know,” was the dry response.

Philip laughed. “We have our father’s featherbrainedness but our mother’s implacable stubbornness.”

Mr. Layton chose a cravat pin and set it beside the watch chain on the chairside table. “Charlie is far more agreeable in these matters than you

were when Wilson and I undertook your transformation not many years past."

"I had my own ideas about fashion," Philip said. "Charlie's opinions are reserved for mathematics."

"Mathematics is not subject to opinions. Mathematics deals in facts." Charlie made the observation almost without thinking.

Mr. Layton grinned at him. "Your mother's child, for sure and certain."

"I still cannot believe no one told me of her mathematical interests and aptitude," Charlie said.

Philip's laughing expression turned to surprise. "Her *what*?"

"Your mother is a lady of remarkable depth." Mr. Layton set a pair of cufflinks beside his other selections. "Now that you boys are grown, I suggest you come to know her as something other than your mother."

Wilson returned, a green paisley waistcoat draped with care over his arm. "Divest the boy of his current monstrosity. We will have him well togged in a moment."

Charlie met his brother's eye. "He is a dictator."

"I have never claimed otherwise."

Wilson motioned to the adornments on the table. "Excellent choices, Digby." To Charlie he said, "Henri's valet is an expert in matters of hair. He will be here shortly to cut yours."

Heavens, this was more extensive than he'd been expecting.

"I'll quickly take in the side seams of this waistcoat; Henri is not as beanpole-like as a Jonquil."

"No one is," Philip tossed back.

Wilson ignored the jest. "The rest of the items are your brother's, and you two are very near in height and build."

Charlie looked to Mr. Layton. "Will Artemis actually appreciate this?" The man had undertaken enough conversations with Artemis to reliably answer the question that lingered in his mind.

All three men nodded emphatically.

With a deep breath of determination, Charlie stood. "Then work your miracle," he said. "Heaven knows I need one."

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE SISTERS-IN-LAW HAD BEEN DIVIDED into two groups to deliver baskets in the area of Collingham. Mater, who had insisted Artemis call her by that familial name, had returned to Lampton Park with Sorrel. Artemis was going about with Catherine and Marjie. Catherine put Artemis firmly in mind of her quietly discerning sister Daphne. Marjie had curly, golden hair similar to Artemis's but fell somewhere between Catherine and Artemis in the matter of her talkativeness.

The three of them had easily fallen into friendly conversation. Both ladies had a son, and Artemis learned a great deal about the boys as they made their way from house to house. She also discovered, by listening closely to tiny clues left here and there, that they had both endured very difficult childhoods, that they were now quite happy, and that the Jonquil sisters-in-law were as close as sisters could be.

"Are you thoroughly overwhelmed amongst all of us?" Marjie asked her after they'd finished the last of their basket deliveries. "We number twenty-five now, thirty with Mater's gentlemen friends."

Artemis grinned. "Her *gentlemen friends*. We should begin calling them that. I suspect every one of her sons would be up in arms, panicked at the very thought."

"They are very protective of her," Catherine said, "and so loving. I wish I had known the gentleman who taught them to be thoughtful of her. He must have been remarkable."

"Did your husband know the late earl?" Artemis asked. Catherine's husband, after all, had been unofficially adopted by the Jonquil family, but Artemis wasn't entirely sure when that had happened.

"He did," she said. "And my Crispin speaks very highly of him."

"The late earl raised seven exceptionally good sons and proved a remarkable influence in the lives of both Crispin and Arabella." Marjie looked to Artemis as she added the second name; the Arabella she referred to had married Artemis's brother, after all. "Though we did not know him, I feel like we see him all around us. And not a day passes when I am not grateful to him for raising his boys to be good and kind."

Good and kind. Charlie had shown himself to be both those things. He'd listened to her on the occasions when her grief or exhaustion had rendered her a puddle of frustrated emotions, and he'd done so sincerely and without

complaint. He'd been as good as his word and not done anything to embarrass her ever since the disaster that was the game of questions and challenges. And she knew as long as she lived, she would never forget the tenderness with which he'd combed and braided her hair that morning. Or the all-too-brief kiss that had followed.

Her heart still jumped to her throat at the mere thought of his arms around her, his forehead pressed to hers, the warm fall of his breath on her lips, the spicy, woody scent of his shaving lotion. Her fingers had shaken as she'd brushed them along his jaw. And the momentary feel of his lips on hers . . . *Heavens*.

If not for the ringing of that infernal clock.

"Oh dear." Catherine's worried whisper pulled Artemis back to the present.

On the road up ahead of them was a gentleman Artemis did not know. Catherine looked a little afraid.

"Who is that?" Artemis asked.

"Mr. Finley," Catherine said. "He is . . . " She swallowed down whatever she meant to say, but Artemis felt she understood. This Mr. Finley was a bounder, though of what variety she did not yet know.

There was no real means of avoiding crossing paths with him. Catherine grew more nervous as they drew closer. Marjie hooked her arm through Catherine's, offering her silent support but appearing nearly as unsure of the coming encounter.

If only her new sisters-in-law understood how long Artemis had been preparing for these moments. Adam had not allowed her or Daphne to grow up without the weapons necessary to put people firmly in their place, and Artemis had learned long ago how to appear utterly unshakeable.

She kept her expression uncaring as they approached the gentleman. He offered a bow, his gaze lingering on Catherine. The required curtsy she answered with was too abbreviated to go unnoticed.

Mr. Finley didn't seem to care. "A pleasure, as always, Catherine."

"Oh dear," Artemis said innocently. "It is pronounced *Cavratt*. And you've neglected to include Lady." She gave him a look of commiseration. "I know it is a lot to remember."

For just a moment, he looked confused, but he quickly regained his oily composure. "The newest Mrs. Jonquil, I believe, and the legendary diamond of Society."

“No, sir, she is *Lady Cavratt*, not *Mrs. Jonquil*.” Artemis looked to her companions, assuming an expression of bewilderment. To the ladies she said, “Do you know him? Ought we to see to it he is safely returned somewhere?”

“He is Mr. Finley,” Marjie said. “He lives on the other side of Collingham.”

“Then he has wandered very far afield.”

Mr. Finley dipped his head. “My home is Finley Grange, a fine and grand estate. Large and spacious and . . . cozily isolated.” He stepped a bit closer to Artemis. “The perfect place to escape an overly large family and an unwanted husband.” He moved nearer still and lowered his voice, assuming a husky tone. “I assure you, *ma chérie*, I am a very accommodating host.”

She studied him a moment, making certain she gave the impression of being a bit baffled. Then, brows drawn, she turned to her sisters-in-law. “I think this old man is attempting to flirt with me.”

Marjie bit back what was clearly a laugh. Catherine even looked a little less ill-at-ease.

“Do you suppose he has skipped his powders?” Artemis looked at them both with a feigned expression of concern. She turned back to Mr. Finley. Speaking very slowly, drawing out and overpronouncing each syllable, she said, “Who is meant to be assisting you?”

He clearly had no idea what to make of her. “I am not doddering.”

With the same indulgent tone one used with very little children and a pasted-on look of clearly feigned agreement, she said, “One is only as old as one chooses to feel.” She pointed down the road behind them and spoke slowly again. “Collingham is in that direction. Your house is on the other side of it. Should you grow confused, do not fret. Many people are only too happy to help the frail and aged.”

Artemis took Catherine’s free hand and led her sisters-in-law away from the gentleman who had, without question, intended to importune them, at the very least. She made one last comment before leaving him behind, and she spoke loudly enough to be overheard without being obvious that such was her intention. “Perhaps the vicarage can add Mr. Finley to its charitable efforts, check on him now and then to make certain he is not wandering about lost and confused.”

They walked on, silently, increasing their distance from him. Their conversation didn’t resume until they’d passed through the gates of

Lampton Park.

"Your handling of him was masterful," Catherine said to Artemis. "I've never seen anything so brilliantly done."

"You should see how my brother-in-law the duke handles difficult people. He makes my efforts look amateurish."

They laughed good-naturedly as they stepped inside and were divested of their gloves, coats, and bonnets, then walked arm in arm to the drawing room, where a good number of the family were gathered.

"You appear to have enjoyed your deliveries," Sarah, the vicar's wife, said.

"It was lovely," Marjie said, "until Mr. Finley crossed our path."

Crispin was on his feet in an instant, moving swiftly to his wife. "Did he mistreat you again?"

"He tried," Catherine said, "but I had a very able champion."

Marjie took up the tale. "Artemis was brilliant. She kept 'correcting' Mr. Finley's pronunciation of Catherine's name and inquiring as to where his nursemaids were and if he'd taken his powders. And then, when he turned his attentions on her, she said, in such hilariously innocent tones, 'I think this *old man* is attempting to flirt with me.'"

The room erupted in laughter and applause.

"He was put so neatly in his place, I suspect we'll not be bothered again by him for some time," Marjie said.

Crispin took Artemis's hand in his and bowed gallantly over it. "You have my deepest gratitude, Artemis."

"The horrid man needed a setting down. I was pleased to deliver it."

From across the room, someone—Artemis was nearly certain it was Philip—called out, "Charlie, come hear the miracle your wife wrought while she was away."

She searched the room for Charlie. He would enjoy hearing her retelling of the morning's events. He might even put his arm around her again. Hold her near him. Kiss her more than fleetingly.

Her eyes found him, and she could not look away. He wore a very handsome green waistcoat, not so bright as to feel inappropriate for one who preferred subtlety but with color enough to be pleasantly striking. It had been paired with a jacket and trousers in complimentary but neutral colors, again in keeping with his personality. And the green brought out a bit more of the red in his hair. Hair that had been cut and fashionably

arranged.

He was, in a word, devastating.

He moved toward her, and she toward him.

“You’ve changed your clothes,” she said when he was near enough for words to pass between them.

“I thought I ought to make a little more of an effort,” he said.

“You look very handsome.”

He smiled a gorgeous, heart-flipping smile. “Wilson said he was pleased that I no longer looked like a land pirate.”

“Wilson helped you?” She ought to have seen the hand of a genius in the transformation.

“And Mr. Layton. And Philip.”

As much as she liked seeing him look a little less like he hated his life too much to even try, she fully realized he had likely not enjoyed the undertaking. “Those three together are a great deal to take in at one time.”

“I have suffered greatly, Artie. But not, apparently, as much as Mr. Finley.” He grinned. “Did you really call him ‘an old man attempting to flirt’?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “Did the trick.”

“You are a wonder, Artemis Jonquil. An absolute wonder.”

She could feel the eyes of every person in the room, though she did not know how many of them were actually watching. She dropped her eyes, unsure what to say or do in that moment. Give her an enemy and she could strategize better than Wellington himself. But allies weren’t quite so familiar.

Charlie stepped up close enough to her to whisper, “Did I do something to embarrass you? I really do intend to keep my promise not to do that again.”

Artemis leaned against his chest, resting her hand on the silk of his green waistcoat. He set his arms around her and held her softly.

“Catherine was right,” she said.

“Right about what?”

“That you and your brothers are good and kind gentlemen.”

She was nearly certain she felt him kiss the top of her head. “I am trying, Artie,” he said quietly.

The whole room grew quiet at the sound of carriage wheels. The drawing room windows overlooked the front drive, and several people moved to

look out.

Philip, who was among those at the windows, announced, “It’s Arabella and Linus. Best send word to the dower house. Mater will wish to know they have arrived.”

Charlie stepped back, his arms slipping away. “We should go greet them.” He held out a hand to her, which she gladly accepted. They walked hand in hand to the front portico, arriving just as a footman handed Arabella down from the carriage, followed by Linus.

Artemis resigned herself to waiting while her brother greeted Charlie, the two being quite good friends. But Linus surprised her.

He pulled her into a fierce embrace. “Oh, Artemis. I should have been there.”

“Been where?” she asked, letting herself enjoy the firm, brotherly hug.

“In London. For your predicament and your engagement and wedding. What good is a brother if he can’t protect you against anything?”

“No good at all.” She stepped back and assumed her most dismissive air. “You’d best return to Shropshire.”

He knew her too well to be fooled by her theatrics; she’d not have wielded them otherwise. “I’ll leave it to you to tell Arabella. She will, I warn you, shoot the messenger, as the saying goes.”

“She is fond of this family, is she?”

“Extremely. And you, my dear sister, are now one of them. It boggles the mind.”

“Believe me,” she answered dryly, “I am thoroughly boggled.”

He laughed lightly. “We will soon be accosted by six or seven thousand Jonquils—however many there are now—but please promise that sometime this evening, we can sit down and talk. I’ve not seen you in an age, and I need to be assured that you are well.”

She readily and happily agreed. Had Linus arrived mere days earlier, she would have struggled to pretend she was unconcerned, but she would have done her utmost. To do otherwise would have led to prying questions she did not wish to answer. But now she felt confident she could honestly tell him she felt hopeful.

For the first time in years, she felt hopeful.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE CLOCK IN CHARLIE'S BEDCHAMBER struck one. Artemis had not yet retired for the night. She had been in the drawing room, deep in conversation with her brother, when Charlie had taken his leave nearly two hours earlier. He did not begrudge her the time with her sibling, but he was growing a little concerned. He had, on more than one occasion, come upon her when she had either been tucked in the shadows weeping and unhappy or had fallen asleep in a place and position that could not have been comfortable. He did not like the thought that she might be somewhere in this house suffering.

He pulled on a pair of loose trousers—ones he meant to hide so they would survive Wilson's upcoming cleansing of Charlie's wardrobe—then snatched up his dressing gown. He tied it on and slipped from the room. He knew this house too well to be confused while navigating it, even with all the wall sconces extinguished. He made his way, without hesitation or difficulty, to the drawing room on the ground floor.

Other than two candelabras still lit across the room, all was in darkness. In that lone spill of light, Artemis sat on a sofa opposite Linus. Their voices were low, their words indistinguishable, and their tone impossible to identify from a distance.

Charlie moved closer, determined to intervene if Artemis seemed the least unhappy. He'd nearly reached them when Artemis's laughter rang out. Relief washed over him. Close on the heels of that reassurance was the realization that he had very nearly made a fool of himself, searching her out in a state of dishabille because he'd let himself fret enough to overcome his usual logic.

He fully meant to turn around and slip out quietly, but Linus spotted him there.

"Couldn't sleep?" Linus asked him.

That brought Artemis's gaze to him. She didn't look unhappy, but she did look tired.

"You hadn't come up," he said to her. "I only wanted to make certain you hadn't dozed off in a chair or been upset by something."

She smiled softly. "You were worried about me?"

He sat beside her and assumed a jesting tone. "More worried that you would wake me when you eventually wandered in, and then I would be unbearably sleepy tomorrow."

“I suspect I will be precisely that,” Artemis said. “But it will be well worth it to have had time to talk with Linus. I’ve not seen him since we were all in Bath last year.”

Her brother seemed pleased to hear her speak highly of his company.

Charlie settled more comfortably on the sofa. “How have you been?” he asked Linus. Linus had been something of a brother to him at a time when he’d needed one.

Linus looked to his sister. “Would you like to tell him, or shall I?”

“Ooh.” Artemis shifted onto her knees on the sofa beside Charlie and turned to face him. “You will never guess.”

“He’s brought you bread pudding?”

She grinned. Heavens, she was beautiful when she smiled that broadly and sincerely.

Linus laughed. “Didn’t take long for that partiality to become known, did it?”

“Not bread pudding.” Artemis hadn’t looked away from Charlie.

“Peppermint candies?”

She shook her head, bouncing a little in place.

“I am discovering you enjoy guessing games.”

Artemis dropped back against the sofa, as dramatic as ever but in a way that felt sincere. “I adore guessing games.”

He tucked that tidbit away for future reference. “Has your brother brought you a new book of fashion plates?” he continued his hypothesizing.

Artemis looked to Linus. “Have you?”

“I have not.”

She pouted, pulling a silent but shoulder-shaking laugh from her brother.

“I do not know how you endure her theatrics, Charlie.” There was no malice in the comment.

“Easily enough. I simply begin drawling about mathematics, and boredom soon renders her unconscious.”

She took his hand and squeezed it. “You still haven’t guessed what Linus is allowing me to tell you.”

Charlie adjusted his hand enough to intertwine their fingers and set his gaze on her once more. “I think you had best tell me; I have exhausted my guesses.”

“Linus and Arabella are going to be parents.” Her shoulders rose with an excited breath. “Is that not wonderful news?”

He looked over. “Congratulations, Linus.”

“Thank you. We’re pleased.”

“And you do mean to allow the little one’s aunt and uncle to shamelessly spoil him or her, I hope. We are quite good at it, you know.”

Artemis leaned her head against Charlie’s arm. “We are, in fact.”

“Although, I hate to break the news to you, Linus, Artie is rubbish at huckle buckle beanstalk.” Charlie shook his head as if it were a great shame.

He could feel Artemis laughing. “I found the toy horse more often than you did.”

“Because you were distracting me.”

She curled a bit tighter, leaning against him. He slipped his hand from hers and set his arm around her.

“You truly played huckle buckle beanstalk?” Linus asked.

Charlie nodded. “I told you we spoil our nieces and nephews. We are, by far, favorites with the nursery set.”

“You do have a history of larks and jests and jumping off roofs,” Linus said.

“I didn’t jump; I fell.” Recovering from those injuries had been awful. He’d never been in so much pain in his life.

“She checked on you quite often during your recuperation.” Linus motioned with his chin toward his sister.

“Did you?” Charlie looked down at her only to discover her eyes were closed and her expression soft and empty. “Lud, she fell asleep fast.”

“She’s been growing drowsier the past quarter hour.” Linus watched her, his expression growing a touch more somber. “I ought to have suggested she go up to bed, but I’ve needed the reassurance that she is not entirely miserable.”

“I’ve been hoping for a bit of that reassurance myself.”

Linus met his eye. “I had no idea what to expect when I arrived here. Arabella will testify to my unsettled thoughts regarding the two of you. You might have forged a cease-fire or murdered each other, with neither option surprising me in the least.”

“Things are a little better between us the past day or two,” he said, “but this marriage has been a mess. It still is a mess. She tolerates me, but I can’t say how long that’s likely to last.”

“*Tolerates* you?” Linus looked at him like he was a few variables short of

a function. “Is that truly how you evaluate the situation?”

“There is no reason to evaluate it otherwise.”

Linus leaned forward, elbows on his legs. He met and held Charlie’s gaze. “I have known her all her life, and I have not seen her fall asleep against anyone, not since she was little more than an infant. She *never* allows herself to be vulnerable or at ease with another person. Not even her family. This”—he motioned to Charlie’s current arrangement, Artemis curled up against him, sleeping soundly—“is something of a shocking sight. All my siblings would attest to that.”

“Artie is not as frigid as you are making her out to be.”

“And that is another matter,” Linus said. “You have fashioned her a pet name, and she does not seem to object.”

Charlie rubbed at Artemis’s arm. Her skin had grown cold in the chilled air. “At first, she did, but she told me she’s come to like it.”

Linus leaned back once more, shaking his head. “You have no idea how significant that is. She keeps even her family at bay, hiding behind dramatics and theatricality, and you have somehow forged a path around her defenses.”

“His Grace said, ‘Her walls crumble for no one.’”

“Except you, apparently.”

It was more credit than he had earned and more optimism than was truly warranted. “Her walls are still firmly in place.”

“But not all of them.” Linus stood. “I’ve worried about her more with each passing year. You’re giving me reason to hope, Charlie.” Linus placed a hand on Charlie’s shoulder as he passed. “Don’t give up.”

Charlie remained there for long moments after Linus left the room. He kept his arm around Artemis, trying to decide if he ought to cling to the hope Linus offered or if he would do best to proceed with continued caution.

Things *were* better between them. He’d even kissed her, however briefly. And he would never in all his life forget the look on her face when she had first seen his sartorial transformation. She’d found him attractive; the truth of that had been writ in her expression. For the first time in his life, he’d outshined his brothers in someone’s eyes.

Charlie turned his head in the direction of the family portrait. The room was too dim for him to actually see it, but his mind filled in the details. He fancied he could see Father’s expression turn a little proud, a little pleased.

And though the voice in his mind was Philip's, Charlie could imagine his father saying, "Anything that will bring your wife joy is never a bad idea."

Charlie whispered, "I'm beginning to sort that out."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ALL THE BROTHERS AND THEIR wives, Crispin and his wife, Arabella and her husband, the Gents, and Mater were gathered in the drawing room, according to the instructions left behind by Father, for the reading of the final portion of his will. The Jonquils were seldom together without laughter and jests and general merriment, but this occasion was a solemn one.

Charlie sat beside Artemis, doing his utmost not to look too closely at any of his family members. His emotions were proving exceptionally raw, and he knew if he saw the same grief in any of their faces, he would lose his composure.

Mr. Layton stood in front of them all, beneath the family portrait, a twine-tied packet in his hands. The room sat silent as he dropped his gaze to it and began to read what was written on the wrapping parchment. "Upon my youngest son either reaching his majority or marrying, whichever should occur first, this packet is to be opened by the executor of my estate, Digby Layton, in the presence of my beloved Julia, my sons Philip, Layton, Corbin, Jason, Stanley, Harold, and Charlie, their wives, if any, Crispin Handle and his wife, should he be married, Arabella Hampton and her husband, should she be married, and the Gents."

Mr. Layton was managing the thing with unwavering dignity and focus. Charlie found he could keep his attention on that gentleman without worrying about his own composure.

The twine was untied and the packet opened. It contained a stack of letters tied together with a ribbon, what appeared to be a leatherbound book, and a folded missive consisting of several pages.

"It is addressed to me," Mr. Layton said, "with the instruction to read what he has written."

He, of course, was Father.

> *It is my hope that I am writing a letter that will never be read, but I remember all too well my father's description of how he felt in the months before his passing, symptoms which matched my grandfather's in the months before he left this world, and I am feeling those same things myself. I cannot be ignorant of what is soon to befall me.*
>
> *At the point this will be read to all of you, my boys, Crispin, of*

course, included in their number, will be grown and most, if not all of them, married. My sweet little Arabella likely will be as well. I wish I were there. I wish I were with you all.

Father's words. His actual thoughts and words. It was almost too much to bear. Charlie dropped his eyes to his hands, trying to keep his emotions in check.

I am struggling with the realization that I will miss so much. I will not be afforded the opportunity to meet my new daughters and Arabella's beloved, to hold my grandchildren. I will not sit with you, Julia, amidst the chaos I can so easily imagine, drinking in the beauty of the family we have created together.

And so, I have endeavored to write out those things I feel in my heart I would wish to say to each of you.

Digby, I have asked so much of you already, but I must ask one thing more. Please distribute the letters herein to those to whom they are addressed, along with reading the very brief notes included below. Thank you, my loyal friend. Thank you for so very many things.

With all my love to each of you,
Your friend,
Your father,
Your husband,

Lucas

Charlie swallowed thickly. He hadn't known what to expect from that days' proceedings, but something this personal and emotional had not been anywhere near the forefront of his mind. His brothers were likely a bit emotional as well. Mater most certainly was, but Charlie didn't look over at her. He could not endure that sight. So he looked to Mr. Layton, avoiding even the briefest glance at anyone else.

"You are all instructed to leave your letters unopened until all have been distributed and I read to you the last bit of direction on this page." He crossed to where Philip sat, Sorrel at his side.

"This letter," he held up a single missive, "I am instructed to give to Julia without identifying its recipient to the group." He handed it to her. "He asks that you deliver the letter when doing so can be accomplished with the needed degree of privacy."

Mr. Layton then crossed to Philip.

“‘To my eldest, Philip,’” Mr. Layton read from his paper. “‘You carry quite a burden now, a title and lands and the well-being of this family, but I haven’t any doubt that you will carry it well. I’m proud of you.’”

Charlie had to look away as Mr. Layton handed a letter to Philip because the tears in his brother’s eyes were too much to endure.

“‘To Crispin, whom I consider a son,’” the distribution continued. “‘Your home life has been far from ideal, but your presence in our home has been a blessing to us. Please allow Mater to serve as a source of advice as you build your own family. She will be able to guide you to do so in a way that shakes off the painful examples of your own childhood.’

“‘To my son Layton. Yours is a compassionate and caring nature, a trait you owe very much to your mother. Just as I treasure that in her, I treasure it in you.’

“‘To my son Corbin. We live in a world that too often discounts the strength of a quiet and loyal heart. Do not allow yourself to believe that. You have depths of strength and goodness that will serve you well all your life if you can learn to value them.’

“‘To my son Jason. You are an unwavering port in a storm, with a firm and abiding sense of right and wrong and an admirable dedication to the cause of the vulnerable. I admire that in you and hope you value that in yourself.’”

Charlie was a small boy when these messages were written. Father would have known so little of him he’d likely not have much to say.

“‘To my son Stanley. You dedicate yourself so entirely to helping those who need you. I know I need not ask you to be a support to your mother, as I feel certain you will be without a second thought. The goodness of your heart brings peace to mine.’”

Mr. Layton was drawing nearer to Charlie. Panic was beginning to grow.

“‘To my darling little Arabella. It is my hope that my health held fast long enough for you to become an official part of our home and family. I have imagined you here among us many times. I hope you have grown up surrounded by these honorary brothers and a mother who loves you.”

She had not. Father had died before the arrangements could be finalized.

Only one brother remained before Mr. Layton would reach Charlie. One note. One letter. One moment in which to breathe and try to hold himself together.

“‘To my son Harold. You are young yet, and I cannot say with certainty what you will choose to do with your life. Your options are many, but I hope you choose something that brings you joy and allows you to serve others, as I see such happiness in you when you know you are making a difference in the lives of those you care about.’”

Charlie took a shaking breath. It was his turn. His moment. If Father hadn’t quite known what to say to Harold on account of his being young, he’d have *nothing* to say to Charlie.

Artemis took one of his hands between hers.

“I don’t think I can do this,” he whispered to her.

She wrapped an arm around him, leaning against him in a tight-knit embrace. Charlie did his best to push air in and out of his lungs as he braced himself to hear what his father had written to him.

“‘To my son Charlie, my favorite little playmate, the sunshine in our lives, my companion in so many adventures. My heart worries for you. You are so young, and I fear you will not remember me.’”

Tears began to obscure Charlie’s vision. Father’s fears had been confirmed; he remembered very little of him. Artemis held him more tightly.

“‘I have for you, my dearest Charlie, a letter, as with the others, but also this book. I hope it will help.’”

Mr. Layton held the book and letter out to him, but Charlie couldn’t force himself to reach for it. His tears were threatening to fall, and he knew he hadn’t the strength to add to his emotional upheaval.

Artemis accepted on his behalf and set both items under her chair. “I will safeguard them until you are ready,” she whispered as she set her arms around him once more.

Relief surged over him. He wouldn’t have to hold or touch those things or even admit to himself that they were real until he was strong enough to do so.

Mr. Layton continued his reading.

“‘To the Gents, the truest and most loyal friends I could have ever hoped for. We have walked with each other through countless difficulties, celebrated triumphs, and been part of one another’s lives for decades. I have been honored to count myself among you.’” Mr. Layton managed to read the words, but the emotion in his voice could not be mistaken.

After distributing their letters, he turned to face Mater. The entire room

stilled, more so even than it was already.

The sight of Mater weeping tore at Charlie's heart. He jumped to his feet and moved swiftly to her, reaching her just as Mr. Fortier sat beside her. Charlie met his eye and motioned subtly for him to give over his seat. No argument was made. No hesitation.

As Charlie sat, he realized he was not the only one to have rushed to her side. All his brothers were there. Some stood behind her chair. Some sat on the floor around her. Not a one had left her to face this heart-rending moment alone.

Through her tears, Mater nodded for Mr. Layton to proceed.

Charlie held her hand. Stanley set a supportive hand on her shoulder.

"'My beloved Julia,'" Mr. Layton read, "'I wish I were there to drink in the sight that surrounds you. I wish fate had proven kind enough to overlap our years more than it did. I love you with every breath I take and every beat of my heart, and I wish I were able to tell you so again. Pressed into the wax seal of your letter is a key. That key opens a box, the location of which Digby knows. When you are ready, please open it. Above all, remember that I love you. I always will.'"

Mr. Layton held Mater's letter out. Philip accepted it for her, not requiring her to hold it as grief tore at her once more. All her sons moved in closer, offering a physical defense against the emotional darts. Charlie wished he could have saved her this pain.

Mr. Layton returned to his position beneath the portrait and faced the gathering once more.

His composure remained intact, but there was no missing the fragileness in his expression. He swallowed audibly, then read what remained of Father's final words to them all.

> *Where and when you choose to read my letters, I will not dictate. Be good and true to one another. There is strength among you that, if depended upon, will see you through life's difficulties. Fortitudo per Fidem. Love each other. Defend each other. And know that I love you all.*
>
> *Think on me fondly, with smiles and laughter. Dry your tears. Hold fast to hope.*
>
> *Forget me not.*
>
> *Your friend,*
>
> *Your father,*

Your husband,
Lucas

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE GATHERING AT LAMPTON PARK had been somber over the twenty-four hours since the reading of Father's final messages to them all. Mingled with the feeling of renewed loss and longing was also a sense of peace. They'd been granted an almost miraculous moment of his presence among them again. Painful as it was to hear him speaking almost as it were from the grave, they'd had new words from him after thirteen years of believing he had said to them all that he ever would.

Charlie had not yet read the letter written to him, nor had he so much as looked at the book that had come with it. True to her word, Artemis had seen to both, assuring him they were safely placed where she could retrieve them the moment he was ready for her to do so. The lady whom he had, not long after first making her acquaintance, dismissed as too flighty and shallow to be depended upon, had shown herself to be a solid and dependable foundation. As remembrances of the emotional gathering the day before threatened to overwhelm him, he looked to her for reassurance and stability.

They were both in the small sitting room on the ground floor that afternoon, whilst those of his siblings who had little ones spent the day on the back lawn undertaking games and diversions. Charlie would normally have joined them, but he found his heart too heavy for the excursion.

He was sitting on a sofa, Artemis curled up beside him, her head resting on a pillow against his leg. He had hardly slept the previous night. His mind had refused to settle enough to allow him to even keep still. He'd paced the room whilst Artemis had slept fitfully on the bed. Her sleep had not appeared the least restful. It was little wonder she was sleeping so soundly now.

Mater slipped inside. She spotted him and smiled. He'd come to depend so much on her the last thirteen years; she was the one person in all the world he knew would always be pleased to see him.

Her gaze dropped to Artemis, and a look of empathy touched her expression. "Have we exhausted her?"

"We are a lot to endure when all together." He brushed his hand over Artemis's hair before settling it on her shoulder. "She told me, the day all the sisters went to the vicarage, that she very nearly cut off all her hair out of frustration with it."

“Heavens, I’m glad she didn’t.”

Charlie nodded. “She has the most beautiful hair I’ve ever seen. And it is amazingly soft.” He ran his fingers over the golden curls again. “I like the feel of it.” He looked to Mater, cringing a little. “That’s probably strange of me, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Charlie,” she said kindly. “That is not strange at all. I daresay your brothers feel the same way about touching their sweetheart’s hair.”

“She’s not really my sweetheart,” Charlie said.

“Isn’t she though?” Mater moved her chair closer, then took his free hand in hers. “I watched the two of you yesterday during the reading of your father’s will. She comforted you as naturally and expertly as any of your sisters-in-law comforted their husbands. She held you to herself, and you clung to her in return, and nothing in either of your postures spoke of doing so simply because the other was conveniently located.”

Charlie wanted to believe her, but his heart warned him to proceed with caution. “Comforting someone in distress is not proof of a tender regard.”

“Then allow your current arrangement to serve as evidence,” Mater said. “A lady does not sleep as deeply as she is sleeping now in such close proximity to a gentleman for whom she has no ‘tender regard.’ And yet, she has not so much as stirred. She feels safe and protected and entirely at ease with you. That, my dear Charlie, is a remarkably good sign.”

“Linus said much the same thing.” Some of the tension around his heart began to ease. “Things have been better between Artie and me of late. Father’s friends have offered me some insights, things Father apparently did when you two were first married.”

A fond nostalgia touched Mater’s eyes. “What did they tell you?”

“That he focused on gaining your friendship, finding things you could do together that would be enjoyable without requiring either of you to suddenly be madly in love.”

She laughed lightly, leaning back in her chair and resting her clasped hands on her lap. “Did they suggest hide-and-seek? Because I would personally recommend that.”

Charlie grinned. “We played that with you and Father often growing up. I don’t remember much of him, but I remember that.”

“What else do you remember of him?” Mater asked.

“He used to run around the grounds with us and take part in our larks.”

“Your father had more energy than anyone I’ve ever met, and heavens, he

loved being with children. Loved the games and the silliness. Their happiness mattered to him more than anyone else's, I suspect."

"Not more than yours," Charlie said. "I *do* remember that about him. None of us harbored even the tiniest doubt that you meant more to him than anything or anyone else in the entire world."

She sighed, the sound as peaceful as it was sad. "I hope that is something each of you boys has carried into your own marriages. If your wives can know they matter to you, that will make all the difference in the world."

"He used to bring you flowers," Charlie said. "I've done that with Artemis, and she has told me she likes them, though I don't know if the gesture has made a difference on a truly personal level."

"I get the impression she is a very guarded person," Mater said. "Acknowledging that something matters to her likely feels too vulnerable."

"She has mentioned that she likes my new wardrobe," he said. "I know she takes great interest in such things, has studied fashion almost academically. I had hoped a bit of effort on my part would show her I was listening when she spoke of it and that I care about the things that matter to her."

"That is worth a great deal, Charlie."

Artemis adjusted her position a little, though she didn't wake in the slightest.

"Would you fetch a throw from the window seat?" he asked. "She never sleeps this soundly; I don't want her rest ruined because she's cold."

"Of course." Mater returned with a heavy throw and spread it over Artemis, tucking it a bit around her before retaking her seat.

"Artie asked me once what it was like to have a mother." Charlie laid his arm on Artemis once again. "She never had one." He looked at Mater. "I told her she has one now. I hope she believes me."

"So do I," Mater said. "And I suspect Mr. Layton would be more than happy to take up the role of father, should she allow him to. He is quite fond of her."

"She has someone to fill that role . . . somewhere."

"I thought her father passed away."

Charlie nodded. "He did, a few years ago, but he was never part of her life. Not truly."

"Then someone else?"

He didn't know how much of the history he could share with Mater.

Artemis hadn't told him her wishes on that matter. And yet, how could they hope to find her Papa if those who might be able to help identify him were not enlisted to do so?

"If I tell you something she told me in confidence . . . "

"You can depend upon me," she said.

There was no one Charlie trusted more than his mother. "When Artemis was a little girl, she crossed paths with a gentleman who showed her particular kindness. He found her when she was hopelessly lost—figuratively and literally—and showed her love she did not feel from her own father. Her memories of him are vague; she was very young during their first encounter. She does remember that he was a gentleman, likely about the age of her father—"

"Of *my* generation, then, more or less," Mater interjected.

Charlie nodded. "He told her he had a home of his own and children. This would have been about fifteen years ago. She saw him a few more times in Heathbrook but not often. It is likely he did not live in the area but passed through somewhat regularly. When her oldest sister married, Artemis left the area to live in Northumberland and has not seen him since."

Mater hmmm'd, the sound one of pondering. "That corner of Shropshire does not rest on a main thoroughfare. I would wager the number of people who regularly passed through is somewhat limited. We traversed Shropshire now and then on our way to visit Aldric at his estate, though that was not always the path we took."

"Would Lord Aldric have passed through Heathbrook, do you suppose, or any of the other Gents?" Charlie asked. "They are all the age of the gentleman she is seeking."

"I would guess they have all passed through Shropshire, though whether through her village, I don't know."

Charlie hadn't realized that. "It feels like such an impossible mystery to solve. But you should see how her entire countenance changes when she speaks of her Papa. There is hope in her eyes. She speaks of him as someone who loves her, as the one man whose love and tenderness and devotion she depends on. She speaks of finding him again with so much eagerness and longing. She told me she'd always dreamed of him being at her wedding and loving her children as his own grandchildren. She even admitted one of the reasons she draws so much attention when she is in Society is to increase the likelihood that he will take note of her and realize

who she is.”

“The poor dear.” Mater pressed a hand to her heart. “And she has no clue as to his identity?”

“None. She is entirely dependent on him recognizing and remembering her. That it hasn’t happened yet, I think, has dealt her a greater blow than she admits. Her father never acknowledged her—literally never did. To be forgotten by her Papa would devastate her.”

“And she has always called him Papa?” Mater asked the question as if it were of great import.

“It is the only name she has for him.”

“And does she suspect he knows her name?” Mater pressed.

“She is certain he doesn’t,” Charlie said. “He always called her Princess.”

“Oh, Charlie.” Mater took in a sharp breath. “When did she last see him?”

Something had just changed. The conversation quite suddenly held a note of earnestness.

“Not long before her eldest sister married. Artemis moved away after that.”

Mater stood, her eyes darting about in that frantic look one got when pieces of an overwhelming puzzle were beginning to fall into place. “Everyone is out on the back lawn, I believe.”

“I think so.” He watched her, unsure what had her so quickly flustered.

“Give me a moment, Charlie. I will be back.” She moved toward the door.

“Where are you going?” he called after her, twisting a bit to look at her.

“I believe I know the identity of her Papa.” She disappeared on that declaration.

Charlie had moved enough that Artemis awoke. Sleep hung heavy on her, but she sat up, looking around in confusion.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” he said. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Is something the matter? You seem overset.”

“I—There was—” What ought he to say? If he told her of Mater’s suspicion, but in the end, Mater was wrong and she didn’t know who Papa was, Artemis would be heartbroken all over again. Perhaps she would be upset that he had shared her history at all, even with someone as dependable as Mater. “I told Mater that I was grateful you had something of a mother figure in her now, a role she is anxious to take up if you will allow it.”

“Of course I will.” She watched him, brows drawn. “Why should that upset you?”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t. But she and I discussed our sorrow that you haven’t someone to take on a fatherly role in your life, which began a slightly different discussion.”

Artemis stiffened. “Did you tell her about . . . ?”

“Your Papa.” He nodded. “I did.”

“Did she—?” Artemis dropped her gaze to her hands, her fingers fussing with each other. “Did she laugh at me?”

He reached out and set his hand gently on her cheek. “Not at all, Artie. She asked a great many questions, clearly attempting to learn all she could so she could help us identify him.”

“Do you suppose she would help?”

“My dear.” He scooted closer and dropped his hands to her shoulders, then slid them to hold her hands. “She left here on the declaration that she believes she knows who he is.”

“Truly?” The word emerged quiet and broken.

“Truly.” He lifted their entwined hands so they rested against his heart. “I cannot promise that she is correct. Her suspicions may prove incorrect.”

She nodded. “I will try not to let my hopes soar too high.”

“But they will, won’t they?” He hated the thought of causing her more sorrow in an area of her life that already weighed on her heart.

Mater returned in that moment, holding fast to the hand of Mr. Layton.

“I thought it might be him,” Artemis whispered.

She kept one hand in Charlie’s as she sat forward on the sofa. Mr. Layton moved another chair to where Mater’s still sat.

“I’ve brought Mr. Digby because he can confirm if my suspicions are correct,” Mater said, as much to Charlie as to Artemis. She then turned to her companion. “Artemis grew up in Shropshire. When she was very little, she met a gentleman there, one she believed was merely passing through, though he did so more than once. She came to call him Papa, and he called her—”

“‘Princess,’” Mr. Digby finished, understanding dawning in his features. “Oh mercy.”

“She has to be that little girl, don’t you think?” Mater pressed.

Mr. Digby studied Artemis. “Golden curls. Green eyes. Likely quieter then than she is now. And to have produced the names Papa and Princess.

That cannot be a coincidence."

"And she last saw him in 1805," Mater said. "I remember perfectly well in which year the Duke of Kielder invited us to his wedding."

"You were there?" Artemis asked.

Mater shook her head no. "But we *were* invited." To Mr. Layton, she said, "I am not wrong, am I?"

"I don't believe you are."

Artemis's gaze had settled firmly on Mr. Layton. The hope in her expression was almost painful. "Are you he? My Papa, I mean?"

Mr. Layton leaned forward and took her free hand. "No, Artemis. I am not."

"Then who?"

Gently, quietly, and with emotion, he said, "Lucas."

Artemis froze. Charlie's eyes darted to Mater, hardly believing what he was hearing.

"He passed through Heathbrook in 1803 on his journey home from visiting Lord Aldric," Mater said. "He told me about a stop he made and a little girl he'd spent an afternoon with, attempting to return her to her family. He'd clearly come to love her during their brief time together. He worried and wondered about her, afraid she would get lost again with no one to find her. From that moment forward, whenever making a journey north, he did so through Shropshire, no matter how out of the way."

Artemis was shaking her head in small, quick movements.

"He asked Digby to pass through there whenever possible"—Mater indicated Mr. Layton—"but without knowing your actual name, finding you was all but impossible. He would have asked Lord Aldric, but that gentleman doesn't always utilize finesse in such matters, and Lucas didn't wish to cause you or your family distress by drawing attention to his notice of you. I know Lucas saw you a few more times; he told me he did. He ought to have asked your name, but he likely feared doing so would scare you away. His Princess was seldom from his thoughts."

Artemis pulled her hands free and wrapped her arms around her middle, not looking at any of them.

"You moving away didn't interfere with seeing him," Mr. Layton said. "*You* didn't cause your separation from him."

"We didn't attend your sister's wedding because we were still in mourning," Mater said. "Lucas died in 1805, before you left Shropshire."

Artemis stood, still embracing herself. She hadn't the look of one pleased to have solved a life-long mystery. She looked almost angry.

"You're wrong." She shook her head again and again.

"I truly don't think we are," Mater said softly.

"No." Her voice snapped. "He is someone else. He has to be."

Charlie rose as well, unsure what he ought to say or do. He was reeling as well. "I know your connection to this family has not always been a pleasant —"

"My Papa is someone else," she said firmly. "He is out there somewhere. I know he is. And he loves me, and he has been looking for me. Just as I've always known he was. He is. I refuse to believe he—" Emotion broke her voice. "That I—" Tears began to pool in her eyes. "He is the only reason I haven't felt utterly alone for fifteen years. He is still out there somewhere, Charlie. I won't believe otherwise. I can't." She spun about and ran from the room, leaving behind an utterly bewildered Charlie.

They'd found the gentleman she'd been looking for, and he had proven to be none other than Charlie's own father, something he himself was struggling to wrap his mind around. But finding Artemis's Papa and discovering he was gone, and had been gone through all the years she had searched for him, had only hurt her further.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

FOR THE SECOND NIGHT IN a row, Artemis sat in her night rail on the floor of the dim drawing room long after everyone had gone to bed, her knees pulled up to her chest, her arms wrapped around her legs, looking into the face of the late Earl of Lampton.

She had studied him in the large family portrait these past nights when she ought to have been sleeping, trying to force his face to grow familiar to her, all the while hoping it never would. So long as he remained a stranger in her memory, she could tell herself that Mater and Mr. Layton had been mistaken. Her Papa was still somewhere, looking for her and loving her. She could still have hope that she would find him, and he would embrace her as he had before, that all the dreams she'd had of him could still come true.

But in her heart of hearts, she knew they were not wrong. They'd known too much she hadn't told them. And all she'd learned of Charlie's father matched what she'd known of her Papa.

Looking into his kind eyes and seeing the way his family gathered around him in the large portrait, love and togetherness emanating from them in palpable waves, she knew this was the man she'd been looking for. She knew it, and it shattered her very soul. There was no one left in the world who loved her the way he had. He'd sworn he would keep coming back. She had always assumed he'd kept that promise. But it wasn't true. He had left her, just as everyone else had.

"Charlie told me you had been leaving your room at night." Linus's voice broke the silence of her grief. "He's worried about you, you know."

Artemis didn't look back at him. "Please leave me be, Linus."

"I can't do that." He sat on the floor beside her. "You see, I promised our brother before he died that I would look after you and Daphne. I am not one to break my promises."

She dropped her eyes to the empty fireplace. Seeing Papa's face, knowing he was gone, was too painful. But neither had she the strength to look at Linus and see pity there.

"Why didn't you tell me about your Papa?" he asked.

She shrugged. Talking about this was not making it any easier.

"Maybe we could have helped you find him."

"You had a father. All of you did but me." She picked at the lace on the

hem of her nightdress. “You wouldn’t have understood.”

“Perhaps not entirely.”

“It’s too late now anyway,” she muttered.

“You are in a house full of people who could tell you more about him,” Linus said. “It might help.”

“Nothing will help,” Artemis said, pulling her legs closer.

He set something on the floor between them. “The dowager gave these to me with instructions that I should give them to you.”

She glanced long enough to ascertain that the items were sealed letters.

“Though she did not offer an explanation, I suspect they were written by the late earl either to or about you.”

She looked away again, tears dripping off her chin.

“If you would rather, I can give them to Charlie to safeguard until you are ready, just as you did for him during the reading of his father’s will.”

She rested her cheek against her knees, still turned away from her brother.

“Watching the two of you my first night here and again the day of the reading set many of my worries at ease,” Linus said. “I believe you could be very good for each other, something I’ve worried about since hearing of your forced nuptials.”

“Every dream I have has died since I married him,” she whispered.

“I have my doubts,” he said, a bit of a light laugh in his voice.

“I should have turned him into a stag like I told the Huntresses I would,” she muttered.

Linus’s arm dropped around her. After a moment, she leaned against him. There was little true comfort to be had, but she would accept what he offered.

“Did it ever occur to you, Artemis, that Charlie might not be your Actaeon?”

“Of course he is.” She heard the pain in her voice but could not prevent it. “Everything was grand. I had my friends. I had my future. I had my Papa to find. Charlie presented himself as someone harmless, just as Actaeon did, then he ruined it all.”

Linus sighed a little. “I sometimes feel I am forever recounting mythology, yet here I go again.”

She let herself lean more heavily against him.

“Artemis of myth had an excessively difficult history with men.”

That was something of an understatement.

“Many of them betrayed her. Others abandoned her. She learned to guard herself well, to reject them all, to punish them for coming too close or showing too much interest. Some of those upon whom she exacted revenge inarguably deserved their punishments.”

“I cannot think of a single one who didn’t,” she said.

“That depends on which version of Orion and Artemis one espouses,” Linus said.

She let a lungful of air slip from her. His brotherly embrace was proving more comforting than she would have expected.

“The version of that myth I have always preferred,” he continued, “offers a different view of Artemis than one usually sees. She and Orion were friends, the very best of friends, in fact. She, who seemed to trust few beyond her group of huntresses, grew to trust and value him. Indeed, it is generally asserted that she, who had solemnly vowed never to love anyone, loved him. Truly and deeply loved him.”

Artemis closed her eyes, trying to hold back the tears that threatened to fall anew.

“A time arose when she was injured, not physically but emotionally and, in her pain, was convinced that she needed to prove how very stalwart and independent and able she was. She shot one of her legendary arrows at a target far in the distance, knowing that should she hit it, everyone, including herself, would be alleviated of any doubts as to her strength and independence, something she insisted she valued above all else.”

“She hit her target?” Artemis asked quietly.

“She always hit her target,” Linus said. “This time, however, the target she hit with such deadly accuracy was, unbeknownst to her, Orion.”

Artemis did not remember that. She swallowed against the thickening lump in her throat. “She killed him?”

“In her determination to prove her strength and resilience, she lost the man she loved. Do not repeat her mistake, my dear Artemis.”

“It isn’t the same,” she insisted, pulling away from his embrace.

“It is though,” he said. “He has touched your heart in a way no one else has been permitted to.”

She shook her head as she stood. “I don’t love anyone. I *won’t*. My heart cannot endure it. Not again.”

Linus didn’t follow when she left the room. She didn’t want him to.

No one could make this ache go away. There was no light left to keep to,

and she would rather endure the darkness alone.

Everything was easier when she was alone.

Everything.

Chapter Thirty

ARTEMIS WAS UTTERLY UNREACHABLE. SHE kept entirely to herself. She spoke to no one and did not emerge from their bedchamber, except at night when the house was still. Charlie's concern only grew when Linus said he had also failed to chip away at the walls she had so firmly re-erected. He'd been hopeful about the future ahead of them. All of that felt lost now.

Fortunately, his brothers had provided him with a welcome distraction. Sorrel had reached the point where she needed the aid of a wheeled chair. She had, however, adamantly refused to accept the aid of a Bath chair. As Philip had explained it, her objections arose from the fact that Bath chairs provided the user with almost no true independence. They were large and cumbersome and could not be used without a second person being involved.

The task had been set to all the brothers to sort the matter of a wheeled chair that was a blessing rather than a curse. The lot of them had navigated any number of tricky puzzles over the years, including lowering a soon-to-be sister-in-law out of a window using ropes. They were determined to sort this latest quandary as well.

Charlie was seated at a table with Corbin and Jason, the three of them bent over a stack of parchment, sketching out various ideas for a wheeled chair better suited to Sorrel's needs.

"Bath chairs are designed like pony carts," Corbin said. "Pony carts aren't meant to be self-operated or agile."

Jason nodded. "Its elongated shape is a significant part of the problem. If it were more like a proper chair without the wheel in the front . . ."

Charlie shook his head. "Without that wheel, the chair would constantly tip over." He made a quick sketch as he explained. "It's like an unbalanced equation: it will defy sorting until symmetry is achieved. The front wheel of a Bath chair prevents the chair from spinning forward on its axis, while the weight of that front extension prevents the chair from spinning backward. Having only the one axis leaves it unbalanced."

"Perhaps small feet in the front?" Jason suggested, using his lead pencil to add little feet to Charlie's one-axled sketch. "Short enough that if she leaned back a bit, they'd be off the ground and the wheels could move."

"She would tip all the way back," Charlie said. "It cannot be stable with only one axle. That is the reality of physics."

Corbin rubbed at his chin. "Cabriolets tip when not hitched up."

“Precisely,” Charlie said. “So long as our design has only one axle, Sorrel’s chair will tip as well.”

“But putting a second axle in front, like in a Bath chair, renders the contraption too cumbersome to navigate the house and corridors and rooms filled with furniture. She would be limited by it, not liberated.”

“There is an answer. I know there is.” Charlie looked to his brothers. “The missing variable is there somewhere if only we can identify it.”

Corbin dropped a hand on his shoulder. “None of us will abandon this or *her.*”

“Of course we won’t,” Jason added his determination. “We are the Jonquil Freers of Prisoners. No one is abandoned. No one is forgotten.”

The deeply familiar motto, one adopted by the lot of them in childhood and recited whenever they came to one another’s rescue, proved both a reassurance and a bit of sadness in that moment. They were helping Sorrel, and Charlie was glad of that. But Artemis was so very alone. She felt entirely abandoned and forgotten. Charlie wanted to help her, but it was more than he could do alone.

A knock sounded at the library door, odd since the door was not closed.

Charlie looked to Jason and Corbin, neither of whom rose to investigate. He was seated closer to the doorway, likely the reason they were leaving it to him.

As he approached the threshold, he spied Wilson standing still and silent, his chin tipped upward, his perfectly bald head held at a dignified angle. In his right hand, he held a battered black rod.

Charlie looked back at his older brothers. “Black rod,” he said.

Laughter answered the explanation.

Every one of the brothers knew what was expected of them, this ceremony being a long-established one amongst them, having been adopted from the centuries-old ritual calling parliament to session.

Charlie slammed the door shut—that was what he was required to do.

Three hard raps echoed off the door. Wilson would have done the knocking with the rod; that was an important part of the undertaking. Charlie opened the door again.

Wilson declared, “Mr. Corbin Jonquil, Mr. Jason Jonquil, and Mr. Charlie Jonquil, you are hereby commanded to remove immediately to the House of Peers.”

Their version of Black Rod’s summons to the House of Commons at the

State Opening of Parliament was a bit muddled and simplified. Charlie thought he'd heard that Philip and Layton had reworked it while they were still young. Most of this had been decided upon when Charlie was a baby, perhaps even earlier than that. Being the youngest of so large a family meant he'd missed out on a lot of their adventures.

So while resuming their playacting with the Black Rod ritual was a bit juvenile, he was excited. There were few opportunities for him to feel connected to his brothers. He clung to every last one of them.

Wilson handed the rod over to Charlie before bowing and walking away. In the actual ceremony, the members of the House of Commons followed Black Rod with as much disinterest and ruckus disrespect as possible without actually injuring their dignity to the House of Lords. The brothers undertook the thing a bit differently; they traveled in whatever groupings they were summoned to the gatehouse, the brothers' version of the House of Lords, where Philip and Layton reigned supreme. Both brothers had claim on titles, making them peers amongst the Jonquils.

"Seems to me we've a trek to make," Jason said as he and Corbin passed Charlie. "Don't neglect to bring the black rod with you."

They made their way across the grounds. Corbin was as quiet as ever but appeared to be enjoying this favorite childhood adventure. The door to the gatehouse had been left open in anticipation of the arrival of the House of Commons.

The three of them stepped inside only to find all the other brothers had arrived already. Harold sat not far from the door. Stanley lounged comfortably in an old, battered chair. Philip, Layton, and Crispin were seated and waiting, appearing to be quite thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Charlie set the black rod on an obliging table. It was not meant to be removed from the gatehouse, except when used to extend the summonses. He was the last of them to take his seat.

"I see the House of Lords is well represented today." Charlie motioned to the three of them.

"Couldn't toss Crispin in with you lot," Philip said. "He's quite a fine and proper baron, you know."

"Baron, yes," Layton said. "Fine and proper . . . " He gave a shrug.

"I defer to the earl," Crispin said in condescending tones. "Please, your lordship, begin the proceedings."

"Thank you, your lordship." Philip turned toward Layton. "Your future

lordship.”

Stanley made a show of being sick in his mouth. Jason muttered something along the lines of “Off with their heads.”

“We have assembled here today to address three pressing matters,” Philip said. “The first is my wife’s current difficulties.”

“We’re not going to do away with you, no matter Sorrel’s suffering,” Jason tossed out.

The brothers snickered and grinned. Philip pretended to be deeply offended.

“Allow me to slip us all past the theatrics,” Layton said. “Has anyone sorted out a better version of a Bath chair for Sorrel?”

“We worked on it a bit this afternoon,” Jason said. “Charlie pointed out the many ways in which we were dunderheads about it, but we’ve not found any solutions.”

“I do not believe I used the term *dunderhead* even once.” Charlie made the objection in a tone of dramatic disapproval.

Crispin laughed. “That is a tone I have heard your wife wield to great effect. She is having an influence on you.”

“And on your fashion sense,” Philip added. “I’m pleased to see you’ve kept it up.”

He was undeniably pleased at the thought that Artemis’s influence on him was both positive and apparent, and he hoped the same could be said in reverse. If only he knew how to lift her spirits and help her endure the heartbreak currently crushing her.

“We have sorted out that it is the front axle of a Bath chair that makes it so cumbersome,” Jason said, “but our very intellectual brother has rightly informed us that the front axle is also what makes the chair stable. We can’t simply do away with it.”

“Could the axle be moved behind the chair?” Harold asked.

Charlie nodded. “But it would only shift the cumbersomeness to the back.”

Philip rubbed at his temple. “She is quickly losing hope. I have to find a means of giving her back what she’s lost before she gives up entirely.”

How painfully familiar that sentiment was.

Stanley sat up a little straighter. “Philip, none of us is simply going to toss our hands up and say ‘Too bad, it’s not worth sorting.’ If your Sorrel needs a chair she can maneuver about in, then we will stop at nothing to get it for

her. You know that."

"We are Jonquils," Harold said. "We save people."

Philip's composure returned once more. "Which, actually, brings us to the next matter before Parliament: the happiness of our newest sister."

He was speaking, of course, of Artemis.

Philip continued. "She has been so obviously grief-stricken and downcast these past days. And though we all suspect Mater, Mr. Layton, and Artemis's brother are aware of the reason for her sorrow, we are not so well-informed. And it is plain to see that her happiness is vitally important to Charlie's."

There was no point denying it. As featherbrained as his brothers could be at times, they were right on this score.

"Our marriage did not begin the way any of yours did," Charlie acknowledged. "We weren't granted the joy of marrying because we were in love. But I've come to know her better and . . . " How did he put into words what he himself barely understood? "I can't bear to see her unhappy without at least trying to—She tugs at my thoughts and—I would do anything—"

Philip waved a hand. "Yes, yes. You love your wife. We don't need to sort that bit out."

You love your wife.

"They had seemed to be doing better," someone said.

"Hard to tell sometimes though," someone else chimed in.

Charlie was too distracted to even identify the speakers. *You love your wife.*

"So what changed?"

You love your wife.

"Hold a moment, brothers," Layton said. "Charlie's either having an epiphany or a stroke."

"I *like* Artemis better than I used to—I like her quite a lot, in fact—but I don't know that I love her."

"You do," they all answered in near unison.

Charlie pressed the balls of his palms against his forehead. "I hated her not three months ago."

"No, you didn't," Harold said. "She confused and frustrated you, but that's not the same thing."

Charlie shook his head. "None of your wives drive you mad."

That was met with snorts and outright laughter.

“Perhaps not so mad as we drive them,” Jason said.

“But you love each other,” Charlie said. “You’ve known that from the beginning of your marriages. That makes a difference.”

Layton assumed the kindly, knowing bearing he was rather famous for among them all. “Mater and Father didn’t know that at the beginning of theirs, and I can’t imagine any of us don’t still aim to claim half the love they shared. Beginnings do not determine endings, Charlie.”

“But how do I skew our chances toward a happy ending?”

“You let us help you.” Corbin didn’t often break his silence. When he did, everyone listened. “Tell us what’s causing her pain, and we’ll—we’ll do all we can to—to alleviate it.”

It would help to talk about the situation. It would help even more to not be alone in facing it.

“Artie’s mother died when she was born, and her father was—let us just say that ‘neglectful’ falls horribly short of the mark.” Charlie rose and began pacing the small, crowded gatehouse. “When she was still little, a gentleman passed through her village. Through a series of circumstances, they sort of adopted each other. He passed through a few more times, and their connection grew to the point that she thought of him as a father. She has spent the years since looking for him, hanging all her hopes of healing from her own father’s neglect and dismissal on finding the man she came to refer to as her Papa and being reassured by his fondness for her that she was a person worth caring about.”

Charlie rubbed the back of his neck.

“I promised her I would help her find him. If you’d heard her recount her history with him or seen the pleading in her eyes, you wouldn’t doubt how important it was for her to have him in her life again. He was clearly a member of Mater’s generation, so I recounted what information I had to her, and she knew very quickly who he was.”

They were watching him closely, listening raptly.

“It was Father.”

A collective intake of breath. A couple whispered exclamations of surprise.

“He had been passing through after visiting Lord Aldric and happened upon her weeping by a shop because she was lost.”

“He never could turn away from a crying child,” Stanley said.

“After that, Father changed his usual route when traveling to either Lord Aldric’s home or Mr. Barrington’s to make certain he always passed through her village. From what Mater and Mr. Layton have told me, he did what he could to learn her name without raising any alarms in the area or in her family. He never was able to, but he worried about her, just as he worried about Arabella and Sarah and Scott—”

“And me,” Crispin added.

“Realizing the gentleman she pinned all her hopes on passed away and has been gone for the entirety of the years she’s been looking for him has devastated her,” Charlie said. “It’s as if every breath of hope was squeezed from her and she has nothing left. She won’t talk to anyone, interact with anyone. She has entirely collapsed in on herself, suffocated by her grief, and I don’t know how to reach her there.”

For a moment, there was no discussion, no movement. Had Charlie finally found the crisis his family was not equal to addressing?

“She’s mourning the loss of a dream,” Philip said. “That is a very deep and personal grief. Has she other dreams to cling to?”

He thought on it. Artemis hadn’t expressed many hopes or aims or wishes. Marrying for love had at least been implied, but that dream had also been snatched away. “She said once that she wished ladies of birth were permitted to open dress shops. She and Rose, her abigail, are remarkably good at designing and fitting gowns; they are constantly undertaking it. But that’s not something I can give her.”

“Why not?” Jason asked.

Charlie looked over at him. “Ladies cannot run shops. Her reputation would be ruined, and no one would patronize it.”

“Ladies and gentlemen alike run establishments quite regularly, actually,” Jason said. “They simply do so with the help of a go-between.”

“Truly?”

Crispin joined the discussion. “My brother-in-law, Henley, has some experience in such things. He could likely offer insights and warnings of potential pitfalls.”

Those pitfalls were numerous. “Is he dependable enough to entrust with such a secret?”

Without hesitation, Philip and Crispin both said, “Yes.”

He didn’t want to get his hopes up. The thought of giving Artemis one of her dreams, especially one that she had never imagined was possible, filled

him to bursting. But what if they were wrong? What if he tried, only to disappoint her again? He knew in his bones she would not recover from that.

"What else can we do for her?" Harold asked.

"Bribery?" Crispin suggested.

"There's not enough money in all the Lampton coffers to make her happy about being one of us," Philip said. "A comedown for one with her sense of fashion and Society. Except for me, of course."

Laughs and looks of lighthearted annoyance were tossed about in abundance.

"Could we offer her a puppy?" Layton suggested.

"Ginger biscuits?" Jason tossed out.

They were jesting, but Charlie had every confidence they were taking the matter seriously. "Make it bread pudding and sweetshop peppermints, and you might just be on to something."

They looked at him, curious.

"Bread pudding is her favorite dessert," he explained. "And Father purchased her a peppermint at her village sweetshop more than once."

"He did like sweets," Corbin said.

With a look of nostalgia, Philip said, "He probably was as excited about going inside the shop as she was."

"I don't remember that about him," Charlie said. "Maybe I should tell Artemis about that. It might help." He shrugged. "But then, what do I know?"

"Don't fret," Layton said. "We'll not let you drown."

Relief rolled over Charlie. Far from stumped, his brothers were going to help him. Better still, they were going to help Artemis.

"What is our third item for discussion?" Jason asked Philip. "You indicated three matters, and we've discussed only two."

Philip steepled his fingers and eyed them all with a look a pirate captain would have been hard-pressed to match for authority and mischief. "Brothers, I think it is time and past we did something about George Finley."

Chapter Thirty-One

THE DAY ARRIVED FOR THE first of the brothers' plans to be put in place, plans they likely should have acted on years earlier. Charlie dropped into his bedchamber to fetch his gloves and hat, preparatory to making the journey to Finley Grange.

Unsurprisingly, Artemis was inside. She hadn't left the room in the daytime for days.

Charlie set his hat and gloves on the bedside table—both far finer than what he'd worn before Wilson, Mr. Layton, and Philip had undertaken his transformation—and sat on the bed next to her. "I'm going to be passing through Collingham. Can I bring you back anything?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

He took gentle hold of her hand. She'd been very distant these past days. While she didn't speak much, and certainly not on the topic that clearly weighed most on her, she had let Charlie hold her hand. He clung to that small connection and the hope it offered that she wasn't entirely out of reach.

"Perhaps when I get back, we could go for a walk down to the Trent or take the pony cart over to Collingham," he said.

"Mr. Finley lives on the other side of Collingham. Despite his . . . *kind* offer, I do not wish to go anywhere near his home."

Charlie turned toward her. "What 'kind offer'?"

She took a weary breath. "He told me, in decidedly oily tones, that he was a very accommodating host and would be quite pleased to play intimate host to a married lady."

For a moment, he couldn't respond. Through his shock and anger, he said, "Finley propositioned you?"

"And he made perfectly clear his evaluation of my character, that I was the sort of lady who would unabashedly accept such an offer." She shuddered a little. "I required all of two seconds to realize the man is a snake. The look on his face after I called him a doddering old man left me with no worries that he'd try again, at least not with me. But I suspect there are plenty of other women he mistreats."

That was, unfortunately, true. "He has harassed Catherine for years. It's infuriating."

Artemis's gaze settled on the window. "The skies are heavy. I hope you

aren’t caught in the rain while you’re out.”

“Philip would never remain out in weather that might render his coiffeur unflattering. And now that *I* am quite fashionable, I must worry about such things as well.” Doing his best mimic of his oldest brother, Charlie said, “How dare nature wreak havoc on perfection.”

Her fleeting smile was a bit forced, a bit sad. She looked so weighed down. He didn’t know what to do.

“Think about going for a walk with me,” he said. “If the weather doesn’t hold, we can always go tomorrow.”

She nodded, but there was no enthusiasm in it. A few months earlier, he would have dismissed her rejection as a sure sign of her conviction that she was above her company. How little he had understood her then. He saw more of her now. He saw loneliness and pain and a broken heart. He saw a little girl who’d been terribly alone and a lady who had endured too many losses.

Charlie pressed a quick kiss to her hand before rising and taking up his hat and gloves. Her gaze remained on the window, and he could see that her thoughts were far away. Perhaps she would be feeling better by the time he returned.

He was the last to reach the stables. All his brothers, along with Crispin and Linus, were gathered there. Beneath their jovial expressions was determination and focus.

“You’re late,” Harold said, his tone the one he used when sermonizing, yet there was humor in it.

“Artemis was talking,” he said. “She doesn’t do that much anymore. I wasn’t going to simply walk away.”

“How is she?” Layton asked.

All he could do was shrug a little. She wasn’t doing great, but she also wasn’t weeping or shaking her fists at the sky. She wasn’t cursing them all or pushing him forcefully away. She was simply painfully, heartbreakingly sad.

“She did tell me something pertinent to our task today.”

That brought eight pairs of eyes on him.

“The day Finley intercepted Catherine, Marjie, and Artemis on the road, he said more than we were told.”

Crispin’s jaw tightened. Stanley’s soldier’s bearing grew even more intimidating.

“He invited Artemis to join him at his estate, and not, you will understand, for afternoon tea.” Charlie took a calming breath. “No true gentleman would make such a brazenly insulting suggestion to a lady.”

“I’ll kill him,” Linus said firmly.

“Murder is off the table,” Philip said. No one could have missed or misunderstood the intensity in his posture and voice. “But that doesn’t mean we will allow this putrescence to infect the neighborhood any longer.”

They all mounted and set their horses in the direction of Finley Grange. Philip and Crispin led the group, with the others following, matching their pace.

“Did anyone tell Mater what we were off to do?” Charlie asked Layton, riding near him.

With an expression that clearly said, “Are you daft?” Layton shook his head no.

“Would Father have also disapproved?” Charlie didn’t care for the idea of doing something his father would have condemned.

“I did mention to Lord Aldric that we were undertaking a punitive mission at Finley Grange. He told me that Father once beat the tar out of Finley’s father.”

This was news. “For what, do you suppose?”

“He didn’t say. But Father wouldn’t have taken such drastic action if it hadn’t been warranted.”

“Would he consider our anticipated action warranted?” Charlie didn’t remember him well enough to know for certain.

Layton seemed to sense how much he needed a sincere answer. “I can guarantee, Charlie, if Father were here and knew how Finley had mistreated Catherine these past years, the things he said to Clara in the weeks before she married Corbin, and the insulting way he spoke to Artemis, Father would be leading this procession of justice. He was, generally speaking, lighthearted and jovial, but he was formidable and forceful when he needed to be.”

“You and Philip are both like that,” Charlie said.

“Someone should probably warn Finley that *you* are as well.”

It was one of the best compliments he’d ever received. He’d tried for so long to carve out a distinct place for himself among his brothers. But he’d also needed, as it turned out, to know he was *like* them.

Linus rode up even with them and spoke to Charlie. “I realize the earl has

declared that capital punishment is not on the day's agenda, but what, do you suppose, are the odds you and I will ignore the earl?"

"Considering what he said to our Artemis . . . " Charlie let the sentence dangle unfinished. He knew Linus didn't actually intend to murder Finley. Charlie didn't either. But that didn't mean they couldn't take a little satisfaction in hinting that they might.

"How is she today?" Linus asked. "I'm worried about her."

"So am I."

They rode on, the brothers talking amongst themselves. Linus kept his horse alongside Charlie's.

"Your mother gave me some letters for Artemis," Linus said. "But she wouldn't take them from me. I still have them. If I gave them to you, would you keep them safe until she's ready to read them?"

"Of course," Charlie said. "She's doing the same for me with my father's letter and book."

"I didn't know your father, but I will be forever grateful to him for his tenderness toward my sister when she was, unknown to all of us, drowning in loneliness and rejection. Your father was a remarkable gentleman."

"He was." Charlie might not have known everything about his father, but he knew that much was true. "And apparently, he once pounded the previous Mr. Finley to something of a pulp. Seems we're carrying on a family tradition."

"A tradition I am honored to be included in."

They reached Finley Grange, nine pairs of set shoulders, nine pairs of focused and determined eyes. Philip knocked on the door. The butler answered.

"We're here to see Mr. Finley," Philip said.

The bewildered servant eyed the gathering. "All of you?"

Crispin nodded. "Our business with him is of a very pressing nature. So if you think he'll slither off if told we're all here, we'd appreciate you keeping the details of our arrival to a minimum."

That the butler nodded his immediate agreement spoke volumes of what little loyalty Finley inspired in his staff. He, no doubt, mistreated them the way he did most everyone else. They were shown inside and led to a finely furnished but uninviting drawing room.

The avenging angels made themselves at home, some lounging at their leisure in chairs, a couple leaning against the fireplace mantel. Charlie sat

on the window seat, his eyes focused on the drawing room door, waiting for the arrival of their query.

"I recognize the look in your eye, Charlie," Jason said. "You really aren't allowed to murder him."

Charlie shrugged. "I know the local squire. He'll take my side."

Philip had recently reclaimed that role. He shook his head in amused understanding. None of them meant to resort to physical violence if it could be helped.

Footsteps approached. They all turned in that direction, though those sitting didn't rise, and those leaning didn't stand up straight. No one looking on could possibly have mistaken the utter lack of respect felt for the man who sauntered inside in the next moment.

"I understand I have visi—" Finley's smirk of self-satisfaction froze. His gaze swept over all of them. After a moment, he recollected himself. "What brings the lot of you around here?"

They'd all agreed to follow Philip's lead, so everyone waited to let him begin.

"We came to make certain you weren't deteriorating too quickly," Philip said. "One hears so many concerned whispers."

Finley's brow pulled in. "Whispers?"

Philip looked to Layton, assuming an expression of pity. "He's even repeating things. The situation is worse than we realized."

"Poor man." Layton clicked his tongue. "Dr. Scorseby should be called for."

"I haven't time for your ridiculousness." Finley turned as if to leave.

Linus had moved to stand in the doorway, blocking the man's retreat. "Make time."

"Who are you?" Finley asked in insultingly dismissive tones.

"Linus Lancaster. Former lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Brother-in-law of the infamous Duke of Kielder. Righter of wrongs. Dispenser of justice."

"Lancaster?" Finley said. "Your youngest sister—"

"Is not the topic of this conversation." Charlie spoke firmly as he rose to his feet.

Finley looked back at them all. Whatever uncertainty he might be feeling was tucked behind an air of condescension and arrogance. "I suppose one of you will decide to tell me what *is* the topic of this conversation."

Crispin stepped away from the fireplace and strode with slow, purposeful

steps toward Finley, never looking away from him. “The topic is your ailing health, your decreasing ability to go about in public and interact with . . . anyone. We’ve come because we are concerned about you.” Nothing in Crispin’s tone was solicitous. It was hard and unyielding.

Finley, no doubt, knew what they were actually discussing. Gentlemen did not bandy ladies’ names about. When matters such as these were settled, both parties abided by that part of the gentleman’s code. Both accepted the necessity of speaking in ciphers.

Corbin strode to where Crispin stood. Their quietest brother broke his usual silence with a firm and intense declaration. “The area around Havenworth is also no place for a man of . . . failing health.”

Havenworth was Corbin’s estate.

“I can go where I choose,” Finley said.

Harold set a conciliatory hand on Finley’s shoulder. “If you do, give me ample warning so I can administer your last rites.”

Finley looked them over. “Are you threatening me?”

“What reason would we have for threatening you?” Stanley asked in far too innocent a tone.

“Jealousy?” he sneered.

“George, George, George.” Philip shook his head slowly with a look of sorrow. “You’ve missed your nap, haven’t you? You’re not making the least sense.”

Finley’s lips tightened. “Do not act like a buffoon. I know perfectly well why you’re here.”

“Concern for your health,” Crispin said firmly, unyieldingly.

“We’ve butted heads before.” Finley’s eyes slid over all of them. “But this time, you’re not so secure in your position. And I know perfectly well why.” His gaze rested on Charlie. “She didn’t actually turn me down, you know.”

“Have at him, Tadpole,” Philip growled out.

Charlie hardly needed permission. He pounded his fist into George Finley’s nose, sending the cad to the ground. Layton yanked him back to his feet.

“You broke my nose.” Finley was bloodied and already bruising.

“You’re fortunate that’s all he broke.” Linus growled out the warning as he joined Charlie in glaring down the man who’d insulted a lady who meant the world to both of them.

Layton didn’t release his hold on Finley.

Philip nudged Charlie aside. His oldest brother looked, in that moment, terrifying. “The members of our family will be protected at all costs from *illnesses* such as yours,” he told Finley in a tone of stern warning. “We will do what must be done to safeguard them. But our protection extends beyond our immediate circle. So long as you make the women of this world feel unsafe, we will make certain this world is unsafe for you. We are everywhere, Finley, with more connections, more eyes and ears, more accomplices than you can possibly imagine.”

For the first time in Charlie’s memory, their bounder of a neighbor truly looked worried. The blood dripping onto his shirt added to the distress in his expression.

Linus joined Philip, inches away from Finley. “And you have now crossed a member of the Duke of Kielder’s family. I have seen what he does to people who hurt or mistreat those he cares about. And make no mistake, his youngest sister-in-law is precious to him.”

Finley’s worry turned to terror.

“The gentlemen in this room have vowed not to do you significant violence,” Linus said. “The Dangerous Duke *never* makes that vow. There is no law he cannot break, no punishment he cannot deliver with impunity. You have just made an enemy more dangerous than any you could possibly imagine.”

“Convalesce, Finley,” Philip said, patting him patronizingly on the shoulder. “Your health depends upon it.” He walked past the man and out the drawing room door.

“I ought to have pummeled you ages ago,” Crispin said. “Seems to me there are dozens now who will gladly do it for me. Or *with* me. Choose wisely.” He rapped a knuckle against Finley’s swelling nose. The man winced, but Crispin didn’t let up. “Noses can only be straightened so many times.” He patted Finley’s face, though it was more of a slap, then followed Philip’s path.

Jason approached him next. “I have contacts throughout London. You set one foot in Town and all the Jonquils and Lancasters will know.”

As he stepped out of the room, Corbin paused in front of their mutual enemy. He didn’t speak; he simply watched Finley with a calm focus that promised retribution should it prove necessary. Then, without a word, he left as well.

Layton still had hold of Finley, holding him firm and forcing him to face those who had come to deliver their message of impending doom.

Stanley offered the next warning. “Lest you think the north of England is safe, that is where I live, along with a great many men I served with. They will also be very concerned about the state of your health.”

Finley nodded, the movement small and quick.

Harold made his comment casually as he strode slowly past. “I’ll pray for you. Seems to me you need it.”

Charlie closed the distance between himself and Finley. He lowered his voice to a tense and threatening whisper. “Should there be a next time, I will do far more than break your nose.”

Layton released Finley with a shove. “Have a nice day.”

They left the house. The rest of the brothers were waiting for them.

Philip approached. When they’d first set out, Philip had been quite clear about his expectations for this encounter, and Charlie had violated them.

“I know you said we weren’t coming to do him any physical harm,” Charlie said, “but—”

Philip dropped an arm around his shoulders. “What he said about Artemis was unforgivable. He’s fortunate to have endured so little ‘physical harm.’”

“Do you think he’ll actually stop causing misery?” Charlie had his doubts.

Linus was the one who answered. “I don’t intend to leave His Grace in the dark about Mr. Finley’s behavior. With your family here keeping an eye on him and the threat of the most dangerous man in the kingdom looming beyond this area, I would wager the bounder will begin making some significant life changes.”

“I will make one final request.” Philip looked over them all. “No one tells Mater.”

They all agreed. Their mother wasn’t at all the fragile sort who couldn’t handle hearing of life’s difficulties. But she hardly needed more to worry about. They would save her that.

The brothers were soon on their horses and making their way back home. Philip rode beside Charlie, a rare opportunity for conversation. It seemed ages since they’d truly talked, just the two of them.

“I think I have a solution to the difficulties with Sorrel’s wheeled chair,” Charlie said.

“Truly?” Philip’s undivided attention was on him.

“A single wheel in the back, but near to the frame of the chair so it doesn’t get in the way when she’s moving about. And if the wheel is placed on a caster, it will work almost like a rudder, making it even more agile.”

Philip nodded. “But will it be stable? I will not put her at risk of being injured.”

“She’ll need rests for her feet—they can’t simply be left to dangle. If that rest is placed at the right height and angle, it would stop the chair from tipping forward without preventing it from moving.”

“You think it would work?” Philip pressed.

“I do, provided it can be made.”

“We need only have Sarah take your specifications to the blacksmith,” Philip said. “He’ll make any contraption she asks for.”

“Leaving you with the task of convincing your stubborn wife to use the chair.”

Philip let out a tight breath. “That is the trickiest part of it.”

“I wish you luck with that,” Charlie said. “I’ll keep to the far simpler world of theoretical mathematics.”

“I struggle to reconcile myself to the reality that you’re a mathematical genius, Tadpole. I still remember when you ate dirt in the back garden.”

Charlie didn’t remember that, but he believed it. “Why have you started calling me Tadpole again? You haven’t since I was little.”

“We used to call you that all the time before Father died,” Philip said. “Lately, I see more of the joyfully content little brother I knew then.” He tossed Charlie a smile free of his usual dramatics. “Having Artemis in your life has been good for you.”

Though Charlie never would have believed it possible mere months earlier, Artemis was a crucial part of his happiness and his hope for the future. He couldn’t imagine his life without her.

And he very much feared he was losing her.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A WEEK HAD PASSED SINCE the day a lifetime of dreams had been snatched away from Artemis, and she felt herself sinking deeper and deeper into despair. Charlie was being so very kind and tender. He'd brought her flowers every morning since she'd learned of her Papa's identity and fate. He hadn't pressed her to leave the room, sensing, it seemed, that she was not equal to doing so.

She had heard from him that all of the Gents, save Mr. Layton, had departed, though Charlie's siblings all remained. She'd heard in his voice a longing for her to join them all. How she wished the deep, throbbing pain she felt wasn't so debilitating; he deserved a friend and companion and wife who wasn't falling entirely to pieces. She didn't have the strength to be that person. She didn't have the strength to be anything but heartbroken.

A light knock at her door was followed by Rose peeking her head inside. "There is someone here to see you."

"Who is it?"

Rose opened the door all the way and motioned the visitor inside.

Adam.

Worry filled her on the instant. Adam was not known as the Dangerous Duke for no reason. He wouldn't hurt her or be cruel—she knew him well enough to not worry about that—but she had not known him to be terribly empathetic. Indeed, the two of them had been at odds more often than they'd been allies. And he could be very impatient when he thought someone was being overly emotional or lacking in backbone.

Rose slipped out once more. Adam turned his sights on Artemis.

She stiffened her posture and firmed her resolve. She would wear indifference like a shield. Without it, even a moment of criticism or lecturing would break her.

He moved directly to her and, to her shock, pulled her into an embrace. "I am sorry, Artemis. I know what it is to lose a father."

She'd braced herself for censure—she could have deflected that—but kindness from a man known to be harsh tore open every wound she had. She threw her arms around him and wept.

He held her, just as she'd always wanted her father to, *precisely* as Papa had. He held her with tenderness and caring, with every indication that he would protect her and look after her.

“I wish you’d told me,” he said gently. “I could have helped you sort the mystery.”

“He was dead by the time I became your sister-in-law. You couldn’t have changed that.”

“No, but Persephone and I could have softened the blow of his loss. And I knew the late earl. I could have told you about him.”

She shook her head. “Bowing acquaintances in Society is hardly the same thing.”

Adam put her a tiny bit away from him. “Fetch your wrap. We’re going to go for a walk while I tell you a story.”

“The Duke of Kielder doesn’t tell stories,” she said, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand.

“The Duke of Kielder also doesn’t rush across counties, yet here I am.”

“Why *are* you here?” It was testament to her distracted state that she hadn’t even pondered how odd it was that he was at Lampton Park.

“Your mother-in-law sent a missive telling me you were in distress and needed your family.”

Mater had done that for her? “But how did you get here so quickly from Northumberland?”

“I was in Lancashire, at Daphne’s home.”

She lifted a shoulder, a well-worn gesture of dismissal. “Trading Daphne for Artemis is quite a comedown for you.”

“None of your theatrics.” He motioned her toward the door. “I mean to be very forthright with you. I expect you to return the favor.”

They were soon walking along an outer path on the back lawn. Artemis didn’t think she’d ever “gone for a walk” with Adam before. He didn’t ignore her as her father had done, nor did he treat her like a nuisance. They didn’t always get on, but he was never unkind. Still, this level of personal interaction was not common between them.

“My father died when I was seven,” Adam said without preamble. “I was sent to a boarding house adjacent to Harrow where other young boys not old enough yet for formal enrollment were housed and educated whilst awaiting the passage of the necessary number of years. I’ve never felt more alone in all my life.” From Adam, easily the most private person she knew, this amounted to a shockingly personal confession. “Harry became my friend after I’d been there almost a year, he also having been shipped off early, but nothing came close to filling the hole left by my father’s passing.”

“This is not helping,” Artemis muttered but not petulantly. His retelling was breaking her heart further, and she wasn’t certain she had the strength to endure more pain.

Adam was undeterred. “Mere weeks before my father’s death, I made the acquaintance of a newly married couple who came to Falstone Castle to attend a ball. They showed me particular kindness. I received a letter from them shortly before my departure for Harrow expressing their condolences at my father’s passing and a wish to see me again. My mother had received many correspondences, though she did not remain at the castle for long after Father’s funeral. They were the only people who wrote to *me*, and they continued doing so. I heard from them regularly while I was away.”

Artemis had heard none of this history.

“When I returned to Falstone Castle at the first term break of my school career, I did so alone. Harry had not yet made himself my friend, and my mother was, as always, away. An invitation arrived from this heaven-sent couple to spend a bit of time with them at their home, which was not terribly far from Falstone. Arrangements were made, and I trekked to Cumberland to spend time with them. The lady filled the role of mother that I needed so desperately at that time. The gentleman managed the perfect balance of older brother and father figure. I don’t know what I would have done without them in those early years.”

He, too, had found solace and reassurance in the kindness of an assumed father. “Did he remain a part of your life?”

“After a time, life took them away from the home they had been living in, meaning they were not so nearby and not as able to visit or have me visit them. We did not see each other as often, but they never neglected me. I continued to receive letters. They even looked in on me at Harrow on more than one occasion. The gentleman visited me at Oxford, knowing from his own time at university that fathers often spent time with their sons during those formative years. He made certain I was not left out of that tradition.

“When I finished my schooling and began going about in London, my substitute father, for want of a better description, stood me for membership in his club, he introduced me to those people I most needed to know. As the time approached for me to take my seat in the House of Lords, he tutored me in the on-goings and politics of that body without ever attempting to substitute his judgment or viewpoints for my own.”

“He, then, was also a member of the House of Lords?”

Adam nodded. “And he had a family of his own yet never begrudged me the time he spent helping me. His wife was ceaselessly kind and thoughtful toward me as well, though I was by then the gruff and off-putting person well-known to all and sundry.”

It was difficult to imagine Adam as anything else.

“An invitation was sent to their family when I married your sister,” he continued. “I sent it personally. The only one I penned myself. The rest, you understand, were decided upon and issued by my mother.”

“Then you were able to have your honorary father at your wedding.” Her heart ached anew. “I had so hoped to have mine.”

“No, Artemis, I didn’t. They didn’t come.”

She looked to him, surprised. “Why not?”

“Because they were in mourning. The gentleman who had been, in many ways, a father to me had died earlier that year.”

“The same year as—” A suspicion began to form in her mind. “Brier Hill is where the Lampton heir lives. It’s very near to Falstone Castle.”

He nodded.

“And the Earl of Lampton claims a seat in the House of Lords.”

Again, a nod.

“Your father figure was . . . my Papa.”

“And he was remarkable,” Adam said. “I haven’t the least confusion at your very real and very immediate attachment to him and his to you. I’ve never met his equal. He and his wife taught me to always champion the cause of the vulnerable. They are the reason I rushed here three years ago to come to the rescue of their soon-to-be daughter-in-law. No matter that I insisted my attendance at the dowager’s house party was forced upon me, I came in support of *her* and in deference to the memory of *him.*”

“Is he the reason you tolerate the current earl? I know he irritates you at times.”

“That is a rather complicated thing, Artemis.” He actually looked a little embarrassed. What was happening? “I knew Lampton when he was a young child, though I’m certain he doesn’t remember that. Under different circumstances, we probably could have been friends.”

“What circumstances would have brought that about?” She couldn’t even imagine.

But Adam shook his head. “Let us simply say, life dealt a few too many blows.”

“Including Papa being—” The sentence refused to emerge. She struggled so much to accept that the man she had so long searched for was irrevocably out of reach.

“Charlie’s parents are the reason why, when your predicament with Charlie came about, I didn’t simply shoot the boy and have it over with. I see so much of both of them in him, and that gives me more hope than I can express.”

“He is very kind to children,” she said, hearing the softness in her voice.

“Just as his father was.”

Artemis took slow breaths, trying to take in so much so quickly. “Charlie is also very kind to me now.”

Adam nodded. “The late Lord Lampton was unwaveringly loving toward his wife. Charlie will have learned well how to be a tender and caring and respectful husband.”

“I have seen that side of him more often of late. I am trying to trust in it, but trust doesn’t come easily for me.”

He stopped their forward movement and turned to fully face her. He set his hands lightly on her arms. “We have not always got on, Artemis. We are enough alike that we have butted heads over the years. But I need you to know that I love you like my own sister. I have from the moment I overheard you telling Persephone that she was the best mama you’d ever had. I recognized in you the same pain and loneliness, the same feeling of being utterly lost that I had struggled with at your age. I wanted to be a support to you the way the late earl was to me, but I didn’t know how. I’ve likely done a terrible job of it over the years.”

Tears pooled in her eyes. Adam was never this vulnerable, never laid bare his emotions, and it was stirring her own.

“Why have you never spoken of your connection with them?” Artemis said. “When we were here for the house party, you didn’t say a word. At the wedding and the wedding breakfast, you didn’t say anything. Charlie’s parents were clearly a significant part of your life, but no one has any idea.”

“When the earl died, I felt very much at sea, trying to determine how to move forward. My father had told me, ‘Dukes don’t need people.’ I clung to that, told myself it was true. I needed it to be, because I could not bear to mourn another father.” Adam swallowed what appeared to be a lump of emotion. “I protected myself from that pain by pretending it didn’t exist. Life had permitted us a great deal less time together in the years before his

passing; he had a large family to look after, and I had a tremendous load of responsibilities. I told myself that I'd imagined the connection between us, that it had been less significant than I'd let myself believe it to be. If I didn't think very hard on what I'd lost with his death, then I was convinced it wouldn't hurt so much."

"Protective walls," she muttered, knowing full well she had plenty of her own.

"I didn't see the dowager for years, I'm ashamed to say," Adam continued. "I began to wonder if she wanted anyone to know that she'd had a hand in raising me. Perhaps she didn't approve of the person I became. Perhaps she would be embarrassed for people to know of our connection."

Artemis's heart broke for him. She had known Adam during the years he was referencing and would never have guessed he'd felt any of these things. He kept so much of himself hidden.

"I left it to the dowager countess to determine how much of our history was known," he said.

"You must have missed her," Artemis said.

"Terribly. Which is why I can appreciate what you have felt the past thirteen years." Adam met her gaze. "If you had told me of your search, I would have moved mountains to help you. You struggle to trust, but please trust me and trust your new husband, and I implore you, trust his family, especially his mother. I promise that you can."

"I will try."

He pressed a brotherly kiss to her forehead, something he had never once done. She almost didn't recognize her brother-in-law in that moment. She was more than a little shaken by the inexplicable transformation.

"Now." His gruff tone returned as he pulled back and dropped his hands. "You have been too distracted to notice, but there is a great deal of chaos nearby, and I think it best if you join in."

"Chaos?" She turned in the direction he indicated.

Her family. Her *entire* family. Persephone and her two children. Athena and Harry and their four children. Linus and Arabella. Daphne and James and their two little ones.

"We were all in Lancashire," Adam said. "It was the family's hope that once your business here was completed, Charlie would bring you to visit there. But when the dowager's letter arrived, the Lancaster sisters would hear no arguments. The entire brood was packed up and traveling in a

matter of moments, trusting on the generosity of the Jonquils to make room for us all."

"They came because . . . of me?" she asked.

"Because they love you."

"Do *you*?" She allowed a bit of a laugh to enter her tone.

"I tolerate you," he muttered.

She saw through his grumpiness. To an extent, she had for years.

From behind them came light footsteps. They both looked back. Mater was there, coming up even with them.

"Thank you for allowing us to descend upon you without warning," Adam said. "I will, of course, thank your daughter-in-law as well."

She smiled at him. Artemis, seeing the interaction, wondered how in the world she had missed the deeply caring, maternal way her mother-in-law looked at Adam. It had likely always been there, but she'd missed it. She had been so wrapped up in her own loneliness and fears for so long that she'd missed so very many things.

"Let us go join your family, Your Grace," Mater said. "I cannot tell you how pleased I am that they are here."

In the very next moment, Charlie rushed over, Hestia in his arms. "Look who's come, Artie."

Her heart was still weighed down by her loss and by the uncertainty of all she faced, but seeing her family there, knowing they'd come *for her*, and having Charlie nearby, as loyal and unshaken as ever, buoying her with a smile, she found she could breathe again.

Charlie bounced Hestia a little, having stopped directly in front of Artemis. "I mean to introduce this darling angel to Kendrick and Julia. I am determined that they will be friends."

"You said that if we ever had all our nieces and nephews together, we would play an enormous game of catch us, catch us," she said. "I think—" Her voice broke, but she pushed on. "I think Papa would have liked that."

Charlie set his free arm around her. "He would have *loved* that."

Artemis leaned against him, resting her hand against his chest.

He held her quite as if she were the most precious thing in all the world. "I've missed you this past week, Artie. You've felt terribly far away."

She closed her eyes, shutting out every sight and sound but him. "My heart hurts so much. I will struggle with this for a long time, I fear."

"I am not going anywhere," he said. "And I'm not leaving."

She’d spent so much of her life imagining a love story fit for a gothic novel and assuming that was what she wanted. This moment, though, this gentleman, this feeling of being cared for and cared about and important, topped every version of her own love story she’d ever imagined.

Chapter Thirty-Three

A CHORUS OF JONQUIL VOICES echoed around the back lawn of Lampton Park. "Catch us! Catch us!" Artemis had never seen grown men so excited to be playing a child's game. How easily she could imagine them up to their identical blue eyes in mischief as children. How easily she could imagine their father—her Papa—joining in.

All the Lancasters were participating. A neighbor, whom Artemis understood to be the older brother of Harold's wife, was there as well. Over forty people running around the vast lawn, laughing and chasing and calling out to each other. Mater held Hestia. Mr. Layton held little Julia. Adam sat beside Sorrel, Kendrick on her lap, watching the game and talking with each other.

Charlie was in the midst of it all, grinning as widely as Artemis had ever seen him. Even though he was not the one meant to be chasing down the other participants, he was such a favorite with the children that they seemed to be playing a separate game with him altogether. They would rush toward him, he would pretend to try to snatch them up, and they would run away giggling.

He had continued to dress with great care. Artemis was absolutely certain her husband was the handsomest of the gentlemen present and was the most enjoyable to watch. And she vowed there and then, she would make certain he always had a yellow silk waistcoat to wear, as the one he had donned that day looked quite splendid on him.

Her sisters Daphne and Athena arrived on either side of her. Both looked entirely pleased with the odd way their families were spending the afternoon.

"It is so easy to picture these brothers as children, isn't it?" Athena said. "This was likely a *very* happy home."

"Ours was not entirely miserable," Artemis said.

Athena set an arm around her shoulders. "I wish we had made it less lonely for you."

"I am certainly not lonely now." She sighed dramatically, not bothering to hide her amusement.

Even Daphne, who often had struggled with Artemis's tendency toward theatricality, smiled. "I don't know how Adam is surviving this impromptu house party."

Artemis didn’t know if Adam would want her to share the very personal recollections he’d shared with her. Instead of giving the answer she felt was most accurate—that Adam was grateful to be with the dowager again—she said, “Persephone is enjoying herself. That is reason enough for him to endure it all.”

“No one, though, is enjoying this as much as your husband,” Athena said not to Daphne but to Artemis. “I suspect Charlie Jonquil is destined to be the favorite uncle in more than one family.”

“He is rather remarkable, isn’t he?” Artemis said.

Daphne set her arm around Artemis’s middle. Two of her sisters stood on either side of her, hugging her, smiling with her. She’d needed this all her life but hadn’t realized until very recently that *she* had been pushing them away.

“Charlie is not at all the husband I pictured you choosing,” Daphne said. “I always assumed you would attach yourself to someone brooding and a little . . . ill-advised.”

“You expected me to marry Lord Byron?” she asked with a laugh.

Both sisters answered with a perfectly serious, completely unison, “Yes.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” she conceded. “Accident chose better for me than my daydreams did, I daresay.”

“Your personalities mesh well, despite how long you were at each other’s throats,” Athena said. “He lightens you. And, merciful heavens, Artemis, the way he looks at you . . . ”

What did she mean by that?

Harry had arrived mere moments earlier but in time, it seemed, to overhear his wife’s comment. “Charlie is a troublemaker. Every husband here is under pressure to make a good showing for himself so that boy doesn’t put us all to shame.” He took his wife’s hand. But before pulling her away, he said to Artemis, “Go join him. I can tell he wants you to.”

An instant later, only she and Daphne remained in their corner of the lawn.

“Harry has the right of it,” Daphne said. “Charlie is enjoying the game, but he keeps looking over here at you.”

“That is what Athena meant by ‘the way he looks at me’?”

Daphne shook her head. “I’ll let you sort that out. It’s terribly obvious to the rest of us.” She even gave Artemis a nudge toward the game. Daphne never used to be one for teasing or being unreserved, even with her family.

Life had not been easy for any of the Lancasters, but they were healing from the pain of a lot of difficult years.

Artemis wove her way around the rush of people, careful not to trip over the tiniest of participants.

Charlie called out “Catch us! Catch us!” to Philip, who was the one currently blindfolded. Crispin attempted to hide behind Charlie, but Charlie slipped away. Harry and James, Artemis’s Lancaster brothers-in-law, had added whistling to the game, which led to cries of “foul” from the blindfolded earl.

A wonderful bit of chaos, just as Charlie had predicted it would be.

He spotted her approaching and smiled. She was certain he was pleased to have her nearby. Without even a moment’s hesitation, he held his hand out to her. She set her hand in his, and he threaded his fingers through hers, then lifted her hand to his lips, turning it to kiss the inside of her wrist.

From nowhere, Layton and Linus appeared, snatching Charlie and dragging him away.

“Catch Charlie,” Layton shouted to Philip. “Please! He’s being nauseating again.”

“I am so grateful to be blindfolded right now,” Philip answered.

Laughter rang out from all around them.

Alice, one of the Jonquil granddaughters, snagged hold of Charlie’s leg and began tugging, clearly meaning to free him. Stanley scooped her up and said something that seemed to put her concerns to rest.

It was such a joyous gathering. How often she’d imagined being part of Papa’s family. And now she was.

Embracing the absurdity of it all, she assumed her goddess demeanor and moved with regal bearing directly to where they held Charlie as a friendly hostage.

She looked down her nose at Layton, Linus, Stanley, and James, all of whom were acting as Charlie’s prison guards.

“I am Artemis,” she declared with every ounce of drama at her very experienced fingertips. “Goddess of the hunt. Killer of men. Release him, or I will smite every last one of you.”

Alice watched her with wide eyes. Artemis winked at her and received an immediate smile in return.

“You are saving Uncle Charming?” Alice asked.

“I am.” She looked to him.

Charlie watched her with amusement but something else as well. Something warm and heart-fluttering.

His captors released him with laughs and bits of teasing. Layton paused long enough to slap Charlie on the shoulder and suggest he “make good on his debt to his wife with all possible haste.”

Charlie sauntered to her, not embarrassed, not laughing. The warmth in his look had turned to unmistakable heat. She didn’t look away.

His arm slid around her and pulled her flush with him. His gaze held hers across the ever-decreasing space between them.

“You’ve saved me, Artie,” he whispered, standing so close his breath tiptoed over her lips. “How can I ever repay you?”

“You’re a mathematician,” she answered. “You’ll find a solution.”

“I’m also a Jonquil, and we tend to bungle these things.”

She hooked her arms around his neck, finding she didn’t overly care about the game continuing on around them or the mussing it would cause to his collar and cravat. She wanted nothing more than for Charlie to hold her, to keep looking at her the way he was, to feel his breath dancing on her lips.

“Catch us! Catch us!” Harold called out as he passed.

Artemis removed one arm from her embrace and pointed at him. “Smite,” she warned.

He laughed.

“Excellently well done, dear.” Charlie spun her about with his arms firmly around her waist.

She giggled as he turned in circles. He brought a lightness to the somber Oliver, and he brought such joy to her. The Jonquils worked that magic on all around them.

But Charlie was special. He didn’t merely entertain whomever happened to be nearby. He saw her and noticed her. He’d not been fooled by the well-honed mask she’d worn since before she’d met him. He’d seen her behind her shield and had refused to be satisfied with the role she played.

She kept her arms around his neck. “Thank you, Charlie.”

His grin was filled with laughter. “For what, Artie?”

“For seeing me.”

“You are very difficult to miss, my dear.”

Caroline pulled him away in the very next instant. That happened all the time at Lampton Park. Though he’d struggled to see it during that long-ago house party, his family’s love for him and need for him was obvious to

anyone willing to look. She loved being there, surrounded by siblings and siblings-in-law and nieces and nephews. But for the first time since leaving Brier Hill and the unhappiness they'd experienced there, Artemis found herself anxious to return.

The house would feel different now.

It would, she was all but certain, feel like home.

Chapter Thirty-Four

CHARLIE WATCHED ARTEMIS WIND HER way around the back gardens a few days after her family's arrival. She laughed with her sisters, an expression of genuine happiness. The sun set her golden curls aglow. Her smile was as soft and as natural as he'd ever seen it. She was happy, and that did his heart good.

The Lancaster ladies reached the terrace door where he stood, and greeted him in turn. Artemis's family had begun to feel like his family as well these last days. He felt welcome among them, wanted and needed.

"I know having so many people here is a bit chaotic," Artemis said. "I'm so grateful Philip and Sorrel have permitted it."

He shook his head. "This house has always been at its most joyful when things were a bit boisterous."

She took his hand and walked with him into the house. "I've spent so much of my life trying to convince myself that I didn't need to have family around that I didn't realize how untrue that actually was."

"And *I* have assumed for a long time that my family didn't want me around," he said. "I am beginning to suspect that is not true."

She smiled up at him. "Oh, Charlie, they love having you here. Even the least observant person in all the world would notice that."

"There are a few members of this vast and complicated family who are actively requesting your company at the moment," Charlie said. "I've been sent to fetch you."

"Who is asking for me?" she pressed.

"I believe I will keep that a surprise."

She laughed lightly. "You do that a lot, you know: keep me in suspense."

"Are you lodging a complaint?"

She bumped him with her shoulder. "Not in the least."

He took her to the library. Her brothers-in-law and Linus were inside, as were Philip and Mr. Layton.

Artemis eyed them all with obvious curiosity. "This is an unexpected gathering."

"One I arrived for on time," Philip said. "The same cannot be said for Mr. Layton. That, I believe, makes me the king of the day."

"Mr. Layton has always been the king," Adam said, sitting in a nearby chair with his usual air of irascibility and a well-hidden inkling of

amusement. The duke was not one to be crossed or taken lightly, but Charlie was coming to know him better and wasn't nearly as afraid of him as he'd once been.

"Do find a comfortable seat, Artemis," Mr. Layton said. "I have my doubts the Odd Earl will cease his dramatics long enough to invite you to do so."

Philip assumed a very solemn expression. "Brother Adam would not recognize me if I ceased the 'dramatics.'"

"Stop calling me that," Adam muttered.

"I cannot call you Brother *Bob*." Philip never had been one to let an opportunity for a jest slip by unseized.

"Best take up your business, Charlie," Linus said, "before these two resort to fisticuffs again."

"We cannot begin until Rose arrives."

That brought Artemis's eyes to him once more. "Rose is joining us?"

Charlie nodded. "Along with Wilson."

He could see the interest growing in her expression. But Rose and her uncle arrived before Artemis could pose a single question. The two women sat together on a sofa, both eyeing the gathering with interest and confusion.

Wilson, who was privy to the reason for this meeting, sat near Philip and Mr. Layton and waited.

Charlie took a seat as well, the chair directly beside his wife. "Artie, you told me once that you wished ladies were permitted to be proprietresses of fashion houses and modiste shops, as you and Rose"—he glanced to the other woman involved in the scheme he was about to propose—"would be bang-up proprietresses. I've wished there were a way of making that happen. I've seen the work the two of you do in the sewing room at Brier Hill. And Mr. Layton has told me authoritatively that your work is second-to-none."

Artemis looked around the room, clearly unsure of what was happening and, if he was gauging her expression correctly, a little nervous. She exchanged a silent look of uncertainty with Rose.

"I mentioned your seemingly unattainable wish to Philip and Jason, Jason being something of an expert in contracts and legal-wrangling. They, in turn, consulted with Mr. Layton and Wilson, who are inarguable experts in the area of and various players in the world of fashion."

Artemis had grown very still. Hers was precisely the expression she'd worn while Mater had told her of Father's role in Artemis's earliest hopes and dreams. Artemis was terrified she was about to be let down.

Charlie took her hand and whispered, "Trust me, Artie."

She took a shoulder-raising breath and nodded.

"James"—Charlie motioned to the man in question, her sister Daphne's husband—"has experience protecting one's reputation in Society whilst undertaking a trade. And your brother-in-law Harry"—he was also present—"has successfully built a profitable venture from virtually nothing. Linus is here mostly because he's nosy."

"I suspect the lot of you have been scheming," Artemis said.

Charlie kissed her hand tenderly. "We have a proposition for the two of you." He looked at Rose and Artemis in succession. "One you needn't be afraid to hear out."

She slid her arm through his. "What is this proposition?" she asked the room.

"A modiste's shop on Bond Street," Mr. Layton said. "I know of a property there that could be obtained for a reasonable cost. Further, I am acquainted with a dressmaker who is not only remarkably talented but is also as reliable as a lighthouse in a storm."

"How does that involve us?" Rose asked.

"This modiste would make, in this shop, the dresses the two of you design, with the invaluable input of Wilson," James said. "A go-between, which is essential to avoiding scandal."

Artemis sat up a little straighter. Rose's gaze narrowed on them.

Mr. Layton retook the explanation. "We would put it about that this new shop, owned by a mysterious proprietress, the name of whom the two of you are welcome to invent, specializes in designing entire wardrobes for the very fashionable as well as one-of-a-kind gowns and dresses for those wishing to make a splash without looking a quiz."

"We would have our own shop?" Artemis held fast to Charlie's arm. Her head darted about as she looked to each of them for confirmation.

"There is some degree of risk," Harry said, "but it has every promise of being profitable. Assuming, of course, His Grace doesn't storm about the place, threatening to behead your customers."

As always, the duke ignored the jab. This was, Charlie understood, a long-established pattern with those two men.

“You really think this could work?” Artemis’s eyes darted about, hope warring with caution in her posture. She reached out with her free hand and grasped one of Rose’s. Her friend and abigail looked every bit as cautiously hopeful.

All the gentlemen nodded.

She looked to Rose. “A shop,” she whispered.

“I can hardly believe it.” Rose appeared to struggle with the possibility even more than Artemis.

“We would, of course, not proceed until we were certain both of you could do so without fear of reprisal or difficulties,” Adam said. “But it is more than merely possible, Artemis and Miss Narang. It is within your grasp.”

Rose was never one to appear overset or anything but utterly calm. In that moment, though, she simply shook her head, her expression that of a person entirely overwhelmed.

Artemis looked to Charlie. “We would have to be in London at least half the year. I know you do not care for Town. I want you to be where you will be happy.”

“My dear, wherever you are, I want to be. Wherever you are, that is where I will be happy.”

“If you two keep this up, I will vomit,” Harry tossed out in warning, earning a laugh from the room.

Discussions of the proposed business became more detailed, with Rose and Artemis joining Adam and James as they explained the calculations they’d made and discussing with everyone the complications they foresaw. Charlie watched with joy as Artemis came to life. The lady who had spent a lifetime hiding her pain behind a mask of indifference had growing reasons to be openly and unabashedly optimistic.

Mr. Layton moved to sit beside Charlie. “It is good to see her happy.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Your father would be proud of you, Charlie. I hope you realize that.”

Charlie slouched a bit in his chair, but not in frustration or defeat, as he had so often in the past. “You knew him better than I did. If my calculations are correct, and I’m certain they are, even Wilson knew my father longer than I did.”

Mr. Layton nodded. “Wilson has known all the Gents for thirty years. He was younger than you when we first met him.”

“I think I would have enjoyed knowing Wilson as a young man.”

Mr. Layton laughed. “The Gents had some grand adventures together, though we were as different from one another as night and day.”

“Why is it none of you have been part of our lives until now?” Charlie asked. “It seems so odd that you’ve been playing least in sight for so long.”

“Your father asked it of us in his will,” Mr. Layton said. “He knew our tendency to swoop in and fix things, whether or not they need fixing. He wanted to guarantee that your mother was able to raise you boys as she saw fit, to have the influence and importance in your lives that she needed and wanted to have and that he knew you brothers would benefit from. The best way to assure that was to ask us to tread lightly until you were all grown.”

“Then you haven’t seen Mother in thirteen years?”

Mr. Layton clicked his tongue. “Of course we have. We have visited during times when you boys were away at school. We have written to her and she us. Those who were in London anytime she was never failed to call on her. I assure you, we have not neglected her, but neither have we cast aside your father’s instructions.”

“And were you not at least curious how my brothers and I were getting on?”

Mr. Layton studied him a moment. “I suspect, Charlie, your brothers have not always been good about including you in their discussions.”

That was an understatement. “I’m the baby. Babies don’t take part in discussions.”

“Well, I’m including you in this one because I think you need to know you were never abandoned.” Mr. Layton leaned his elbow on the arm of his chair, as if settling in for a drawn-out topic. “Niles—Mr. Greenberry—has a son who served in the army alongside your brother Stanley. That was no coincidence. When the Duke of Hartley found himself searching out a vicar to offer three of the livings at his disposal, his uncle, Lord Aldric, suggested Harold. When Jason was contemplating asking a chance-met Frenchman to accompany him to the Continent and, later, to act as tutor to his wife’s brother, he talked to Henri, since he has vast connections amongst the French émigrés.”

Lud, that was a lot of connections.

“When Philip and Sorrel needed a doctor who created braces and other such devices, they spoke with Kes—Mr. Barrington—as he has vast experience in that arena. I have an estate not terribly far from Fallowgill

and sent detailed reports of its situation to Philip when it was struggling, which also put me in a position to offer help to Stanley and Marjie when they first took up residence there. Niles has experience with horse breeding and provided assistance to Corbin when he first began his efforts at Havenworth. Kes's brother-in-law is a barrister, attached to Lincoln's Inn, and he assisted Jason in beginning his studies there. When the love of Corbin's life found herself in horrible danger, Lord Aldric summoned his many connections to discover chinks in the armor of her tormentor, utilizing his nephew's high standing to add intensity to the counterattack. And each of us met often with Philip, Layton, and Crispin when they assumed the reins of their estates."

"You did all of that?"

"Your father would have guided each of you in your pursuits and concerns and decisions," Mr. Layton said. "He would have fought your battles with you. To do so on his behalf was our very real honor."

"All of my brothers seem to have known you other than me." Charlie still couldn't reconcile that. How could they have been such strangers to him when the rest of the family was so deeply acquainted with them?

"Harold doesn't know us as well as the others do," Mr. Layton said. "We ought to have introduced ourselves to you sooner. It feels a bit as if we blinked and you were suddenly grown."

"May I ask another question?" Charlie had a million of them.

"Certainly."

"Was my brother Layton named for you?"

"He was," Mr. Layton said. "Many of the Gents named children after each other. We have always been like brothers, family in a way that goes beyond blood and birth. We would do anything for each other."

"That is a legacy my father passed on," Charlie said. "His sons, I'm discovering, would do anything for each other. Crispin is one of us, of course, and now Linus. I suspect even His Grace would join our cause if asked."

Mr. Layton motioned to the other gentlemen in the room. "As would Mr. Windover and Lord Techney, I would wager."

Charlie didn't doubt it for a moment. "Imagine if they'd been here when we paid our not-entirely-friendly visit to Finley."

"Finley?" The name seemed to strike Mr. Layton. "Why were you calling on him?"

“He was harassing Catherine—*again*—and treated Marjie poorly. And he”—Charlie swallowed down the anger that rose up in his throat—“made an insulting and indecent proposal to Artemis, heavily insinuating that she was the sort who would welcome it.”

Mr. Layton’s jaw tightened. “The weasel.”

“We warned him to play least in sight,” Charlie said. “I hope he does.”

“He will.” Mr. Layton straightened his sleeves. “I wrote him a letter when he was harassing your soon-to-be sister-in-law Clara a few years ago, warning him that his behavior toward the ladies of the *ton* was being whispered to their husbands and fathers and brothers. He rushed to Town but was unable to salvage his standing. It seems instead of choosing to mend his ways, he has decided to continue his harassments here.”

“But you think he’ll stop now?”

“The Gents discovered something about his family years ago that we’ve kept in our pockets in case using it became necessary.” Mr. Layton stood, suddenly looking entirely intimidating.

“What are you going to do?” Charlie asked.

“He has been hurting your father’s daughters. I am going to *destroy* him.” On that pronouncement, Mr. Layton left the room.

Has been hurting your father’s daughters.

For so long, Charlie had felt like his father had abandoned them, that he hadn’t been there when they’d needed him, like he’d promised to be. But he had been.

He had been there through the Gents’ quiet efforts on his behalf.

He had been there through those he had adopted into this family.

He had been there through Mater’s unwavering love and support.

And he was there, living on in each of the Jonquil brothers.

He was there.

And he always would be.

Chapter Thirty-Five

WATCHING THE JONQUIL BROTHERS WITH their children and nieces and nephews, Artemis saw the undeniable reflection of her Papa in each of them. She missed him and mourned him—she felt certain she always would—but there was a bit of comfort in realizing she was now connected to him and, in a very real way, surrounded by him.

This was the last night all of the Jonquil siblings and honorary siblings would be at Lampton Park. The first wave of the exodus had begun a couple days earlier with the departure of all the Gents, except for Mr. Layton. They, in fact, had been gone by the time *her* siblings had descended on the estate. Mr. Layton would be leaving in the morning, along with Stanley's, Jason's, and Corbin's families. The Lancasters would be leaving in the morning as well, each to their own homes, but with a promise to gather again soon.

Charlie and Artemis could not delay their departure forever. How Artemis prayed she was not mistaken, that Brier Hill would not return to the place of struggle it had been in those early weeks. She sat on a sofa in the drawing room with her hand in Charlie's. A tenderness had grown between them in this house so filled with love.

"I propose," Philip said, rising as if about to make a royal decree, "we spend our final evening engaged in a game of questions and commands."

His suggestion was readily accepted by all. For her part, Artemis grew a little nervous. They had played this game once before, and it had not been a pleasant experience for her.

"Please promise me this will go well," Artemis whispered to Charlie.

"Trust me, dear." He'd asked that of her earlier that day when she and Rose had been offered the opportunity to live an impossible dream. Her faith in him had not been misplaced then, and she would allow herself to believe that it was not misplaced now.

A hat was procured and names written on slips of parchment.

"What is the forfeit?" Sorrel asked.

"Same as our last game," Layton said, "but with a slight change. Any couples called up together still have the option of a kiss. But for everyone else, rather than offering something kind to say about the one we are partnered with, we will, instead, offer a memory of any person in the room."

Everyone agreed, and the game began.

Layton's name was drawn first, with Harold chosen to offer either a question or a command.

"What is a favorite game you played with Father?" Harold asked.

"He and I enjoyed playing battledore and shuttlecock. We once were able to achieve a twelve-turn volley. He was so excited. I remember him telling everyone in the house. 'A full dozen! A full dozen!' He was more excited even than I was."

Mater laughed quietly. "Lucas loved games."

Clara was called on to offer a question or challenge to Harold. Her voice as soft as ever, she posed a question to her brother-in-law. "What was your father's favorite sweet?" she asked him.

"He never left a sweetshop without—"

"Peppermints," the older Jonquil brothers and Mater answered in unison.

Peppermints. Twice Artemis had chosen peppermints when she'd ventured with him into the Heathbrook sweetshop. It was one of her fondest memories.

Mater was called up, teamed with Lady Marion.

"What activity did your late husband enjoy that might surprise us?"

"Harold will not be surprised," Mater said, "but Lucas loved to climb. He took such delight in scaling mountains and standing on the top of the world. When he was younger, he climbed peaks all over Europe. The mountains around Brier Hill were a favorite of both of ours. We spent countless happy hours walking those paths and looking out over the valley below."

He had climbed mountains. Artemis would never have guessed.

Arabella and Mariposa were called up next, with Arabella choosing to answer the question posed.

"The late earl had seven sons, but you were like a daughter to him," Mariposa said. "How did he feel about daughters?"

Arabella answered not in a general way but with her gaze firmly on Artemis and speaking directly to her. "He loved his daughters, though we were not with him in the way his boys were. His little girl, who died just after she was born. I, the honorary daughter who lived nearby. And his little Princess, who was far away but never out of his thoughts. He loved us all."

This was the first Artemis had heard that Mater and Papa had lost a daughter.

"When I was with him," Arabella continued, "he never treated me like I

was less important to him than his sons or less capable or less intelligent. I was made a part of the things he did with his sons and their chaotic games and playtime. My own doubts and pains made me wonder if he forgot me the moment I was out of sight. But he never did. He never forgot any of us."

Artemis leaned against Charlie. He set an arm around her shoulders.

"They're doing this for me," she whispered.

"They want you to know him," he said. "They want him to be more to you than vague moments and uncertainty."

On and on the game went. Papa's sons shared memories of their father. His daughters-in-law offered insights into the family, ranging from, "Keep headache powders on hand for use after spending an afternoon with them all," to, "Anyone in the family can be teased by any other member, but insults and unkindness from the outside will not be permitted."

Adam was called up to accept either a question or a command from Linus. The Dangerous Duke rose and joined his brother-in-law in the midst of the gathering. He stood stoic and stiff, as usual. Nothing in his expression gave the slightest indication he was happy to be participating, yet Artemis suspected he had agreed to this ahead of time.

"I have either a terribly personal question or a very embarrassing challenge," Linus warned.

Adam let out a breath that sounded almost like a growl. "I will choose the forfeit: sharing a memory of someone in the room."

Linus dipped his head and retook his seat. Adam looked over them all. "I prefer not to recount my memories of the *current* Lord Lampton."

"You wound me, Brother Adam," Philip called out.

"Careful," Stanley tossed back, "or he truly will wound you."

Artemis was absolutely certain she detected a bit of laughter behind Adam's indomitable expression. "I mean to break with the pattern," he said, "and share a memory of the dowager countess."

Of Mater?

"I was only just eight years old. My father was somewhat newly buried, and my mother was, as always, traveling who knew where. I was very much alone in this world when Lord and Lady Jonquil invited me to Brier Hill to spend a few weeks with them."

He turned and faced Mater, though she would already have known this story.

"It was, without question, the happiest interval I had passed since losing

my father. In their home, I was wanted and accepted. They rebuilt beneath me the foundation that had crumbled when my father died. Lady Jonquil, as she was termed then, was a mother to me when I desperately needed one, and she continued to be long after most anyone else would have washed their hands of any obligation toward a child not their own. I have not—*could* not—adequately express to her how significant her role in my life has been. I fear I have repaid her importance to me with inexcusable inattentiveness."

Mater rose and, a look of tender fondness on her face, moved directly to him.

He watched her with a look of mingled hope and heartbreak. "When my father died, the two of you saved me." Adam took an audible breath. "When Lucas died, I should have flown here without hesitation. I should have been with you."

A tear trickled slowly down Persephone's cheek.

"I failed you," Adam said. "I failed you, and he would have been disappointed in me, just as you must have been."

"Oh, my dear boy." Mater took one of Adam's hands. "Do you not think I know you well enough to understand the way you mourn? To know that you isolate yourself when you grieve? I knew why you didn't come. I understood. I missed you, but I understood."

Heavens, theirs was far more tender a connection than Artemis would have guessed, even having heard him recount their history.

"I told myself you didn't truly care for me, that you never had." Adam shook his head. "The lie eased some of the pain."

"Your heart always was tender," she said with a motherly smile.

A tender heart? Artemis had seen it when Adam interacted with his wife and children, and she had experienced it briefly during their stroll around the grounds. But to hear Mater talk of his softheartedness with such conviction was jarring.

"I felt so hopeless," Adam said. "I'd given up, resigned myself to misery. Without Lucas, I—I was lost."

"I worried when I heard you'd chosen an arranged marriage," Mater said. "I feared it meant you had decided to fully cut yourself off. But then you invited me to your wedding, and I knew you wouldn't have done that if, in your heart of hearts, you didn't have some whisper of hope that your marriage could be a happy one."

“I looked for you.” His voice dropped to an entirely unusual quiet, uncertain tone. “I knew logically you could not come while in deepest mourning. But then you didn’t come after that, and I worried you stayed away because . . . you were embarrassed at the idea of people knowing you’d helped raise someone you were ashamed of.”

Adam, the Dangerous Duke, the most infamous and feared man in the kingdom, was laying bare this very personal vulnerability in front of a room full of people.

Mater set a hand on either side of his face—and he didn’t snap at her. No one was permitted to touch his scars other than Persephone and his children. Artemis watched with wide eyes, her mouth a bit agape. This was a different Adam than she had ever seen.

“My brave Adam,” Mater said.

“You always used to call me that,” he whispered.

“And you used to call me Mother Julia.”

Artemis thought she saw the slightest hint of a tear in Adam’s eye.

“I have never and could never be ashamed of you,” Mater said. “I have watched you from afar and have seen my Lucas’s influence in your life. He would have worried to have seen you undertake an arranged marriage, as I did, knowing your parents’ unhappiness in theirs and our early struggles in ours. But you followed his example and loved and respected your wife and worked to build a life together that is happy and beautiful and hopeful. That is his influence.”

“And yours,” Adam said.

Mater turned and looked at Persephone. “You loved my darling Adam when he was very much alone. You saw the good in him when he struggled to see it in himself. For that, I will love you for the rest of my life.”

Persephone wiped a tear. Many in the room did. Artemis herself was not immune to the enormity of the moment.

Mater returned her tender and loving gaze to Adam. “We brought you to our home more than thirty years ago, my brave boy, because we loved you. And we were family because—”

“Because family is who you choose.” He finished the sentence in a voice that clearly indicated he was completing verbatim an established phrase between them.

“That lesson, offered so long ago, has created this beautiful family you have now. Your sisters-in-law and brother-in-law are family to you not

because they were required to be but because you chose them. In that, I see Lucas's influence in your life." Mater took his hands and held them tenderly but firmly. "His heart broke at not being able to save his Princess. But she found her way to you, and the foundation Lucas laid thirty years ago saved her. Through you, his beloved Adam, he saved her. *You* saved her. He would be beyond proud of you. Do not ever doubt that."

Tears pooled in Adam's eyes. Artemis was certain of it now. Never could she have imagined such a thing.

"It sometimes feels so cruel that he hasn't been here," Adam said. "Having him be part of these past thirteen years would have been . . . perfect."

"Miracles are not found in perfection, Adam. We too often miss the crucial connections we have because we think they exist only in the intersections of our lives and fail to see the importance of the parallels. Lucas might not have had a direct hand in the miracles that have brought us to this point, but he laid the foundation. He is the reason for all of this." She indicated the gathering. "And he did it by loving and caring and serving every day. Small things change the course of lives more readily than all the grandest coincidences ever could."

"I wish I could thank him for all he was for me, all he taught me," Adam said.

"I think he is with us in more ways and more often than we realize." Mater smiled softly. "If there is any means at all of influencing our lives from heaven, I have not the least doubt he is doing precisely that."

Adam smiled a little, something he seldom did. "He would insist upon it."

Mater stretched and placed a very maternal kiss on his unscarred cheek. "Yes, he would. And he would be so pleased to see that you have been for this family"—she motioned to the gathered Lancasters—"what he was honored to be for you: a brother and father, a source of support and love."

Artemis had butted heads with her brother-in-law so often and so entirely that she'd not allowed herself to think too deeply on the role he had played in the life of her family. In the time since his heartfelt confession to her, she had reflected on it again and again. Life in their family these past thirteen years had been just what Mater had described. Adam was their unlikely but unwavering father figure. Persephone was the glue that held them all together.

“I am sorry I kept my distance for so long,” Adam said.

“I knew you would come back to me when you were ready. I’d hoped at the house party, but the time was not yet right.” Mater took his hand once more. “Lucas left you a letter with the final portion of his will that we only just unsealed.”

“He did?” Emotion rendered the response quiet and uncertain.

“You were the first child to be part of our home, Adam. Of course he left you a letter. I was instructed to safeguard it until I thought the time was right to give it to you. I will do so before you leave, then you can read it when you are ready.”

“Thank you, Mother Julia.”

Apparently suddenly remembering their audience, Adam pulled his sternness around himself once more. Jaw set and expression unreadable, he crossed with Mater back to the chairs they had occupied.

Persephone linked her arm through his. Mater patted his hand precisely as a mother would do. How shocked Society would be to see the infamous Duke of Kielder unshaken by such personal gestures. Artemis would have been as well only a few days earlier. Everything between them was different since their walk on the grounds. He would likely never be openly affectionate. She certainly had no expectation of him becoming sentimental or publicly emotional. But she saw the subtle softness in him that was so easy to miss. She began to understand why Persephone insisted he was tenderhearted when that seemed so ridiculous a contradiction.

Stanley was called up next, and rather than accept a question or command from Catherine, he chose to share a memory of Charlie. “When Charlie was first born, we all called him Charles, that being his proper given name. But I never once heard Father call him anything but Charlie. He never wavered from that. Over time, we all adopted it as well.”

Which explained why Charlie was so adamant about the name she used for him. It, like so many other things, was tied to his father.

Sorrel and Philip were next. Philip requested he be permitted to accept the command *and* take the forfeit. Sorrel shook her head at his antics but obliged.

After accepting his forfeited kiss, Sorrel made her command. “Present our newest family member with the gift we’ve chosen for her.”

Philip dipped his head. “It would be my pleasure.” He turned to Artemis and pulled a wrapped parcel from his pocket. “We”—he motioned to all the

other Jonquils—“wish you to have this.”

She accepted it. The hand-decorated paper was beautiful, and the ribbon it was wrapped in matched perfectly. It seemed almost a shame to open it.

Careful not to tear the paper, she untied the ribbon and unrolled the wrapping. Inside was a miniature, a little larger than her hand. The painting was of a gentleman who looked a little like Charlie and a lot like Philip and bore a tremendous resemblance to all the Jonquil brothers.

She knew him on the instant. “Papa,” she whispered.

“He is younger in that portrait than he was when you knew him,” Philip said, “but the mischievous expression in his eyes is one we all remember well. It is the one he wore most of the time. We want you to have the miniature so you can remember what he looked like and how happy he always was.”

She looked from Philip to Charlie. “I don’t know that I can accept this. It should stay with his family.”

“You are his family,” Mater said. “You were long before now, and we are all in agreement that you should have it.”

Emotion cracking in her words, Artemis said, “I can’t. I really can’t.”

It wasn’t a Jonquil who crossed to her but Persephone. She knelt in front of Artemis and took her empty hand. “I have come to know your Papa through Adam and through your Papa’s sons. I can say with certainty he would want you to have this remembrance of him. He would want you to have whatever you need to remember him and remember that he loved you.”

“But I am not actually one of his children.” How she ached admitting out loud the truth of her role in her beloved Papa’s life.

“You are not actually one of *my* children, Artemis,” Persephone said, “but I raised you as my own. I love you as more than my sister. You have been in my care and keeping from the moment you were born, and I have loved you fully and entirely.”

“You *are* the best mama I ever had,” she said quietly.

Persephone pulled her into an embrace. “How well I remember you saying that at Falstone Castle.”

“My heart broke that day,” Artemis said. “I felt so alone.”

“You aren’t alone now, my little Artemis. You will always have your Lancaster family, and you now have your Jonquil family. And”—Persephone pulled back enough to look her in the eye—“you will always

have *him*." She nudged the hand holding Papa's portrait. "Keep this reminder of him. Keep it and him close to your heart."

Artemis dropped her gaze to the miniature. She looked into those beloved eyes. How long she had struggled to remember what her Papa looked like. Having studied the large portrait over the fireplace and now holding this small portrait of him, she could hardly believe she'd ever forgotten. His face had grown so familiar once more.

"He loved me," she whispered.

"He did." Persephone rose once more. "And you are loved now. Do not forget that."

Artemis offered a tremulous smile. "I will try."

Once Persephone had retaken her seat, the hat filled with slips of paper was taken up once more. Artemis's name was drawn. Then Charlie's.

She entrusted her precious miniature to Marjie, who sat nearby, then joined Charlie in front of them all.

She turned to face him, strained memories of this same situation rushing over her. He'd humiliated her, insisted the possibility of kissing her was so abhorrent to him that he would rather do anything else. But so much had changed between them since then. She felt entirely certain *this* night's undertaking would play out differently. He would know to allow her a moment to formulate an easily answered question, one they could laugh about before returning to their seats. And there would be no humiliating rejections.

Charlie slipped an arm around her. "What should I choose, Artie?" he whispered.

"What would you like to choose?" She traced the outline of one of his brass jacket buttons with her finger.

"Might be interesting to hear what question you'd ask." He bent his arm enough to pull her up flush with him. "And I'd very much enjoy discovering what odd task you might set me to."

"I *am* very creative." She set her palm on his chest.

His other arm wrapped around her, enveloping her in an embrace so close, so tight that the warmth of him seeped through every inch of her. "You are also very, *very* tempting." His voice had taken on a husky edge. His breathtaking blue eyes crackled with heat, lighting answering flames of anticipation in her.

He bent close. She tipped her head enough to all but close the minute

distance between his lips and hers.

“I choose the forfeit, Artie.”

He kissed her. Not the quick peck on the cheek or polite kiss on the hand she’d thought he might choose the last time they’d played this game. His warm, soft lips met hers, fervent and tender.

Artemis slid her hands up and over his shoulders, wrapping her arms around his neck. Her heart beat an ardent rhythm, a cadence filled with the promise of a lifetime of love.

Against her lips, he whispered, “I will always choose the forfeit.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

ARTEMIS PUSHED THE WHEELED CHAIR the Jonquil brothers had designed and Philip had requested the local blacksmith make as she entered the small sitting room at the front of the house. She'd been entrusted with the task of convincing Sorrel to use the contraption, and she didn't mean to fail in the undertaking. She loved this family too much to let any of them down.

Sorrel looked away from the window and over at Artemis as she approached. As her eyes fell on the chair, her mouth pulled into a hard line. Artemis had learned from years of living with Adam that when approaching a hard-nosed individual with something he or she didn't care for, it was best to cut off the objections before they began.

"Do you remember when we were in this room the day Mater's gentlemen friends arrived and I asked you if you would like to stroll about the grounds with me?" Artemis sat in the wheeled chair, fully confident its design would prevent her from spilling onto the floor. "You told me you would rather stay inside with everyone else. I didn't cry, something I'm still quite proud of, but the rejection was exceptionally painful."

Confusion gave way to understanding, which slipped aside as remorse took hold of Sorrel's expression.

Artemis pressed onward. "I came to realize, though, that there might be a different explanation for your refusal to spend a pleasant hour with me strolling about the grounds. There was a chance, slim though I had to acknowledge it to be, that you did not feel yourself equal to the physical demands of a stroll rather than repelled by the idea of spending that brief interlude with me in particular."

Artemis kept her own expression neutral and her gaze languidly on the focus of the monologue, just as she'd seen Adam do time and again. And, as she'd seen him do, she didn't allow an answer until she had fully laid the groundwork.

"But then, my dear sister-in-law, your husband and mine, with a bit of input from their brothers and the expert hand of the local blacksmith, designed this remarkable chair, which would overcome the hurdles that I assume prevented you from accepting the invitation I extended and the one you have yet to use." Artemis leaned an elbow on an arm of the chair and rested her temple against her upturned fingers. "So which is it, I have to wonder? Did you, in fact, turn me away because you did not yet have the

means of undertaking that stroll? Or did you toss aside my vulnerably extended hand of friendship because you despise me and wish I weren't a member of your family?"

The corner of Sorrel's mouth twitched. "You are quite good at this."

Artemis lifted a single shoulder. "I was raised by the Dangerous Duke. He taught me well."

"I do not care for wheeled chairs."

Artemis tapped at her chin with one finger, making quite a show of thinking deeply. "I do not believe that is the question I asked."

With a sigh, Sorrel said, "I do not *need* a wheeled chair."

"Then you did refuse because you despise me." She let her shoulders slump in an overly dramatic show of injured feelings. "I have feared that from the beginning. Oh merciful heavens! Horrid turn of events!" She turned the chair around and began pushing herself slowly from the room.

"You can move the chair on your own? No one needs to push it?"

Artemis continued her departure, keeping her pace snaillike. "What difference does it make? You don't need it or want it. You simply despise me and nothing else."

She could hear the rustle of skirts, then the tap and slight drag of a cane being used to propel a struggling body forward. Sorrel cut her off long before she reached the doorway; Artemis had never intended to actually leave.

"It can be propelled by the one using it?" Sorrel eyed the chair with unmistakable interest.

"Your husband insisted on that," Artemis said. "Your youngest brother-in-law spent many long hours sorting the 'how' of meeting that demand. They've managed it."

"It cannot navigate stairs."

She gave her sister-in-law a look of lighthearted scolding. "They are intelligent, these Jonquil men, but they aren't miracle workers."

Sorrel leaned very heavily on her cane, studying the contraption before her. Artemis could sense she was nearly ready to at least consider the possibility of this chair being a blessing rather than a burden. She needed only the right nudge.

"Your husband and children are on the back terrace." Artemis stepped out of the chair. "They would likely appreciate having you join them."

"I would feel . . . silly, for lack of a better word."

“A wise man once told me that no person ought ever to outgrow a love of being a little silly.”

Sorrel eyed her suspiciously. “My husband?”

Artemis shook her head. “His father. I suspect if he were here, he would give you a hug—he gave the very best hugs—and he would tell you it was perfectly acceptable to feel sad or to cry or be afraid. He would tell you he was proud of you and that he wanted you to be brave. Then he would say he loved you. And he would mean it.”

For the first time since learning of her Papa’s true identity, she found talking about him didn’t entirely break her heart. In time, she might even find joy in it.

“I wish he had found me the way he found you,” Sorrel said. “I needed a father like him.”

“Does it not seem rather extraordinary that so many of his daughters-in-law came from difficult homes and histories?”

Sorrel’s expression softened, turning almost tender. “It’s because he raised boys who were like him. We can come to this family in our brokenness, and they don’t flinch, they don’t hesitate, they simply love. And their mother raised them to value and respect the women in their lives, so they also don’t run roughshod over us or make us feel inferior.”

“Rather remarkable, really.” Artemis hadn’t realized just how remarkable until very recently.

Sorrel took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “I think I’d best learn how to work this contraption.”

“I have every faith in you.” Artemis offered a quick explanation of the rather ingenious device. “A chair with only a single axle would be unstable, but one with a second set of wheels jutting out in front would be as cumbersome as a Bath chair. Placing the wheels behind became their next idea, from what I understand.”

Sorrel eyed the chair but hadn’t yet sat in it. Her endurance for standing was small. Artemis hoped she would find her determination quickly.

“Charlie did a great deal of calculating and realized that a single wheel could be placed behind and nearly under the chair to prevent it from tipping backward.”

Sorrel looked to her, worry in her expression. “What about tipping *forward*?”

“That is what these little legs are for.” Artemis tapped the bits of wood

with her foot. The miniature chair legs didn't quite reach the ground but would stop the chair from falling entirely forward. "Charlie said a great many mathematical things that, in essence, meant the chair is weighted toward the back and these legs will likely almost never come into use but are more than sufficient to prevent disaster."

Sorrel took a deep breath, looking at the chair with more fear than reassurance. Hers was not, however, an expression indicating a lack of bravery. This was a lady facing a demon that had likely haunted her steps for years. "Is it terribly difficult to maneuver?"

"Not at all. My arms have grown a bit tired from practicing, but that endurance would grow over time."

Sorrel nodded, a heroic amount of determination now tugging at her features. She gave Artemis her cane and sat in the chair she hadn't wanted but would, if the fates were kind, find to be a source of freedom. There was no finesse in her maneuvering, but there was ample focus and persistence.

They reached the french doors leading out to the terrace. Artemis slipped in front of Sorrel's chair and opened both sides so she would have enough room to pass through with ease.

Philip and Charlie were there with little Kendrick and Julia. All four looked over at the latest arrival. The smile that spread over Philip's face nearly brought tears to Artemis's eyes. It was a look of unmistakable, unabashed love.

Artemis met Charlie's eye and saw he was as pleased as she.

"We've been waiting for you," Philip said to his wife.

"Well, here I am," was the reply.

Philip scooped up their little ones and set them on their mother's lap. He leaned forward and kissed her quickly, playfully. "I think it is time for an adventure."

"I think it is past time."

He slipped behind her chair. His eyes met Artemis's. He mouthed a "thank you" before taking hold of the back of his wife's chair. "Hold fast to the little ones, General Sorrel. We're going to see how fast this chair can go."

Philip pushed her chair along the terrace toward the decline at the far end. The giggles of their children joined his laughter. After a moment, Sorrel joined as well. The little family was soon on the flagstone path beyond and making their way around the side of the house.

“One ought never to outgrow a bit of silliness,” Artemis said quietly. Papa’s boys embodied that bit of wisdom. She loved Papa all the more for it.

“I don’t know how you managed it, Artie, but I feel as though I’ve just watched a miracle.” Charlie put his arms around her.

Artemis leaned into his embrace. “I didn’t do it entirely alone. Your father helped.”

“I am amazed at how often he still does,” Charlie said. “I’ve felt these past years as if he had abandoned us, but I’m realizing he’s with us more than we know.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

THE LEAVE-TAKING AT LAMPTON PARK had been more emotional than Artemis had expected. Mater had held her as closely and fiercely as she imagined her own mother would have. Sorrel had insisted she come visit soon. Philip, whose dandified absurdity had subsided a bit, had told her in tones of utter sincerity how pleased he was that his father's Princess had found her way home. She had cried at that; she couldn't help herself.

The journey home to Brier Hill would require a few days, just as the journey from there had. They stopped at the same inn their first night at which they'd taken supper in their room during their journey to Lampton Park. The proprietress recognized them and welcomed them back, offering a dinner tray without the request needing to be made.

They talked of both significant and unimportant things as they enjoyed the hardy repast. They were far more at ease with each other than they'd been on their previous stay in this very room.

After the tray had been fetched and the candles lit, Artemis settled beside Charlie on the bench, leaning into his embrace. It was a posture they assumed often, one of comfort and caring and tenderness.

"Do you think Papa would be pleased to know we've found each other?" Artemis's thoughts often turned to him.

"I think he would be ecstatic." Charlie pulled her in more closely, then popped his bare feet onto the ottoman placed there for that purpose. She had discovered he liked having his shoes off. It was an endearing oddity in him, one she found she didn't mind, no matter that it wasn't particularly fashionable. "Linus gave me the letters Mater entrusted to him, the ones that you weren't ready to read when he tried to give them to you. I think you should read them, Artie."

She curled against him. "Who wrote them?" Linus had offered his theory on the matter. She was ready to know for certain.

"Your Papa."

She had suspected as much. "To whom?"

"They are addressed to 'My Princess.' Mater never knew to whom they ought to be given, but she kept them safe on the off chance that someday she would discover the identity of the little girl he'd told her of."

"He wrote to me." The truth of it warmed her through.

"My father was a prolific letter writer. I don't think any of us were truly

surprised that he'd written and left us letters as his last gesture of love."

She remembered so well how much Charlie had struggled with his father's offering to him. "Have you read yours yet, Charlie?"

"I haven't." He didn't sound as heartbroken as he had the day the will had been read.

She sat upright. "I will read Papa's letters to me if you will read your father's letter to you."

He set his fingers beneath her chin and softly kissed her. "You are good for me, Artemis Jonquil."

"We are good for *each other*."

Charlie retrieved her letters from his traveling bag while she pulled from hers the letter and book his father had left him. They resumed their spots on the bench and exchanged their precious handfuls.

She held the small stack, brushing her fingers over the faded ink. Each was, indeed, addressed simply to "My Princess." She had wondered for years if he had forgotten her. Though her heart still grieved, there was comfort in knowing he had thought of her.

With a breath of determination, she untied the bundle and broke the seal on the first letter.

My Princess,

My heart is worried for you, and I don't know what to do other than write you a letter, one you may never read. Did your scraped knee heal? Have your sisters lost track of you again? Has your father shown you the attention and love you need?

I have spent the day playing games with my boys and have repeatedly imagined you here with them. We have a dear neighbor girl, Arabella, who is not much older than you are. She would be a wonderful playmate for you and count herself as another sister in your life. I would see to it you had all the sweets you wanted, though my beloved wife would scold me for it.

I know not how to learn your name or where you live without raising an alarm in your family and neighbors. Without knowing your name or address, I don't know how to help you.

When next I pass through Heathbrook, I will look for you again. If the heavens are kind, I will see you there, and you will call me Papa again, and I will feel comforted to see that my Princess is

well.

All my love,

Your Papa

This must have been written after their initial meeting. He'd been so kind and, as his words testified, had loved her already, just as she had him. She had been thought of and cherished from the very beginning.

She broke the next seal and found not merely another letter but also a length of dark-teal ribbon inside.

My Princess,

I found you again. I hope I adequately expressed to you my joy at seeing you and the way my heart burst to see your head of golden curls bouncing as you ran toward me. I wasn't at all certain you remembered me.

How tempted I was to ask you your name so I could find your home, but I feared your family would be alarmed and would not permit me to see you again. I am not known to them, and I hope they are protective enough of you to be concerned, no matter that they need not be.

You wore the same dress today as the last time I saw you. Though you were clean and your clothes in good repair, I could tell the dress was thread-worn and faded, likely worn by an older sister before you. I asked my friend Digby what color ribbon would give a splash of complimentary color to a dress of faded pink. He suggested this shade of bluish-green, and his opinion on such matters is to be trusted.

If you lived closer to me, I would invite you to have picnics near our river with my sons and my wife and me. You and my littlest, Charlie, are the same age, I would wager. He is often lonely. I wish I could introduce the two of you, as I suspect you are as lonely as he.

I continue to think of and pray for you. I hope someone is looking after you and helping you feel safe.

All my love,

Your Papa

She rested the ribbon across her lap as she read his next letter.

My Princess,

A few very careful inquiries have led me to discover that you do not live in Heathbrook but somewhere in the surrounding area. That will make finding you all the more difficult.

I saw you again when last I was there. How I wish I didn't live so far away. My friend Digby has agreed to watch for you as well whenever he passes through your area. I have assured him your profuse golden curls are unmistakable. I hope that should you make his acquaintance, you will know that you can trust him.

I have vowed to always have peppermints with me when I pass through Heathbrook now that I know you like them as much as I do. My Charlie enjoys them as well. I wish I could introduce the two of you.

I continue to think of and pray for you.

All my love,

Your Papa

Artemis swallowed against the thickness in her throat.

Charlie's arm slipped around her, pulling her attention to him.

"You're crying," he said.

She pressed the last remaining letter to her heart. "I am so grateful he wrote these. And he has mentioned you more than once."

"He has?"

She nodded. "He said he wished he could introduce us because he was certain we would be fond of each other."

Charlie kissed her forehead. "He was not wrong."

"Have you read his letter to you?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"You should," she said. "It is not as sad as I was afraid it would be."

He kept his arm around her, holding her tenderly. "You finish yours, and then I will read mine."

She leaned her head against him and read the final letter out loud.

"My Princess,

"I am not one for premonitions, but I do have a good memory. I recall clearly the ways in which my father was unwell at the end of his life and recognize in myself those same ailments. I fear I will not see you again."

She swallowed against the emotion in her throat but pressed on.

"I am writing you a final letter, as I cannot bear to leave you out of my efforts on that score. As I have wrestled with the worries I have for you, in recent days, I have felt an undeniable peace where you are concerned. It is my hope, my belief, that the heavens have seen fit to send into your life someone who will look after you and care about you and see to it you are not neglected or overlooked.

"If I am, indeed, not long for this world, and if the heavens permit the departed to influence the lives of those they have left behind, I intend to do what I can to see to it your path crosses with my family's. I wish for you to know them and for them to know you. I would love nothing more than to have my Princess be part of my family.

"I have told Julia, my wife, about you and my name for you. I have full faith that she will remember, and should the miracle I hope for occur, she will give you my letters.

"Know that I love you, my sweet girl, my darling Princess.

"Always and always.

"All my love,

"Your Papa"

Artemis let the letter rest on her lap. She closed her eyes, both fighting the sorrow of his loss and allowing the beauty of his words to wash over her.

Charlie held her ever more tightly. "He managed his miracle, didn't he?" he whispered.

"He did. He brought us together, though he had to practically knock our heads together to manage it."

"Almost literally." A hint of a laugh touched Charlie's words. "I find myself harboring a suspicion that he tripped us up at the ball in London, managing to force that spill of raspberry shrub."

"Perhaps I was wrong," she said. "It wasn't an accident after all."

"I rather like that possibility."

She tucked her feet up beside her and, opening her eyes, set her precious letters on the side table before curling cozily into Charlie's embrace. "It is your turn to read your letter. Though whether you do so aloud or not, I leave to you."

“My dear, if he went to so much trouble to bring the two of us together, I think I would be risking heavenly retribution if I didn’t include you in the reading of his letter to me.”

She set her arms around him, offering what support she could.

He took up his letter from his father and, with hands she felt certain were shaking, broke the seal.

“Dearest Charlie,

“I am struggling to imagine you as a gentleman grown, yet I know you will be precisely that by the time you read this. At the moment, you are all of seven years old, fond of any and every lark you can imagine, running about the Park with the exuberance of a carefree and delightful little boy. We have had some remarkable adventures together while your brothers were away at school. I’ve not had so ready and adventurous a playmate since the days I ran about this same estate with your uncle Stanley and your mother.

“Your brothers are old enough that should my evaluation of the current state of my health prove accurate, they will retain memories of me even years from now, but I suspect you will have few. I have spent many long hours pondering that, trying to ascertain a solution.

“I have settled upon this, Charlie.

“In the journal you have been given, you will find page after page of my memories, aspects of my character, things I am fond of, things I do not care for, adventures I have had. You will find reminiscences from when I was a child and my siblings and your mother’s were still living. You will also find recountings of adventures I have had in the years since I was married and as each of you boys was born. I have also included some of my favorite memories of time spent with you. I will continue writing in it even after I finish this letter. I mean to fill it with everything I can so that I will not be a stranger to you.

“But more important than that, I want to make certain you know that I love you. That I love you with all of my heart.

“I worry that you will doubt that. If you ever do, if you ever wonder, read these words until you are certain.

“I love you, Charlie.

“I love you.

“This family loves you and loves each other. Embrace them. Let them embrace you. You need never be lonely, my Charlie.

“Be good to your mother. Look after her happiness.

“Be happy yourself.

“All my love,

“Father”

Charlie set his letter atop the very book his father had referenced. Artemis offered to him the handkerchief her Papa, his father, had given her fifteen years earlier. He wiped at the tears trickling down his cheeks. He was sad, yes, but he also appeared touched and reassured.

“We should read the journal together,” she said. “A little at a time. I would like to know him better as well.”

“We could take turns,” he suggested.

She nodded.

He took up the book. The spine creaked a little when he opened it, testament to how long it had waited to be read.

“‘I grew up at Lampton Park,’” Charlie read aloud, “‘and my best friend, Stanley, grew up at Farland Meadows. We often met at the Trent to plan what we felt were grand adventures . . .’”

Artemis sat in Charlie’s arms, listening as he read stories of the remarkable gentleman who had loved them both. Life had offered so many disappointments, so many heartaches, yet she could not deny it had brought her miracles as well.

Just as her Papa had hoped, someone had come into her life very soon after he had been taken from her, someone he had helped to raise. Adam had married Persephone, and from that moment forward, she had been granted a fierce advocate, though she’d not always appreciated him. Adam’s connection to Papa and Mater had brought Artemis to the house party at which she’d first met Charlie. And though they had joked about it, she was unwilling to discount the possibility of fate intervening to force them together when their own stubbornness and pride had kept them apart.

I would love nothing more than to have my Princess be part of my family.

And now she was. After a lifetime of searching for what felt out of reach, she finally was.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“‘I RETURNED TO THAT SHOP in Paris again and again.’” Artemis sat leaning against Charlie as she read from Father’s journal, their traveling carriage winding its way in the direction of Brier Hill. He was particularly enjoying the arrangement. “‘I could not dismiss the growing conviction that the pendant would be perfect for Julia despite it seeming too mature a gift for a little girl. She, of course, was not a little girl any longer, but my mind had not yet accepted that fact.’”

Charlie slipped an arm around Artemis’s waist and closed the small gap between them. Her perfume, light and subtle, touched the air around him, teasing his senses.

“‘Kes grew rather annoyed with me, I fear,’” Artemis continued her reading. “‘His is a very logical mind and a focused disposition. My indecisiveness proved almost unendurable for my friend.’”

A bit of her neck was bare above the collar of her carriage dress. Charlie brushed a whisper of a kiss there.

“Charlie,” she said with a scolding laugh.

“Mmm-hmm?” He adjusted his position to allow a brief kiss on her jaw nearest her ear.

“You aren’t listening to your father.” She held up the journal she’d been reading.

Charlie took the teal ribbon they’d been using as a bookmark and set it in the book. “I think my father”—he closed the book—“would understand.” He set the journal on the seat opposite them, then turned back and pulled her into a proper embrace.

She assumed a theatrical expression of shock. “Why, Mr. Jonquil, how very impetuous you are being. I fear I shall faint dead away.”

“Nothing impetuous about it, my dear. I have been pondering this for *miles*.”

With a tone of utter mischief, she said, “If only I had a glass of raspberry shrub at my disposal. That puts a decided damper on certain people’s enthusiasm.”

He laughed full and loud. Of late, Charlie had discovered how truly funny Artemis was. They would likely spend the rest of their lives laughing, and he was looking forward to it.

She set her hands on either side of his face and pressed a light kiss to his

lips. “I do like the sound of your laugh, Charlie.”

“And I love the feel of you in my arms.” He brushed his fingers over a loose curl falling over her shoulder. “And the softness of your hair.” He slid his hand along her neck and tilted her head enough to allow him to press a kiss to the tender spot just beneath her ear. “And the incomparable pleasure of kissing you.”

She sighed and leaned into him. Charlie shifted his attention and kissed her lips, fully and deeply, filling the salute with the love that daily filled his heart to increasing degrees. Her arms wrapped around his neck. She whispered his name between kisses, and he was well and truly gone.

He’d been taken by surprise when his feelings for her had first been described as love; he knew now how very true it had been.

The carriage rolled to a stop. Charlie didn’t immediately pull back. He kept her in his arms, held close, his forehead pressed to hers.

“I believe we’re home, Charlie,” she said quietly.

He smiled. “Home.” He had every confidence it would finally feel that way; it certainly hadn’t when they’d left.

Mr. and Mrs. Giles were standing just outside the front door when Charlie and Artemis alighted from the carriage some minutes later. They were warmly welcomed home.

Mrs. Giles met Charlie’s eye. “A very heavy crate has arrived for you, sir.”

“Truly?” He wasn’t expecting anything.

He glanced at Artemis and saw a barely concealed grin.

“What have you done?” he asked.

“You’ve sorted me, Charlie. I’ve been plotting.”

Now he was decidedly intrigued. Of Mrs. Giles, he asked, “Where is this crate?”

“It was carried to the bookroom, Mr. Jonquil.”

Charlie tipped his eyes enough in Artemis’s direction to gage her response. She gave away nothing. He took her hand, and they walked together from the entryway, up the stairs, and to the bookroom.

There was, indeed, a crate awaiting him there. It was smaller than a traveling trunk. He paced around it while Artemis settled onto the sofa.

“I expected it to be larger,” he said.

“*I* didn’t.” A year earlier, her dramatic playacting would have bothered him. He knew her better now, enough that he enjoyed the absurdity she so

easily brought into their lives.

Mr. Giles had kindly left a crowbar for him. In a matter of minutes, he had the lid raised and the contents revealed.

He looked to Artemis. “Books?”

“And papers,” she said. “I wrote to Newton and asked him what a mathematics-obsessed young academic would need in his home library in order to fully pursue his interests, especially if that intellectual was soon to be presenting a lecture to the Royal Society.”

“And this is what he sent?”

“He wrote to Toss—an interesting name if ever I heard one—and someone he called Duke—not *the duke* or *the Duke of Something-or-Other*, simply Duke—and someone else named Poppy, who, apparently, is actually a gentleman.”

Charlie grinned. “Those are my closest mates.”

She looked intrigued. “Well, those ‘closest mates’ of yours gathered this collection of books, papers, and other such things. I was told these would make your home library a better stand-in for what you would have had if you’d been permitted to continue at Cambridge.”

A hint of guilt had entered her expression and voice. Charlie abandoned the crate despite his immense curiosity and moved to sit on the sofa beside her.

“I would give up Cambridge a hundred times over in favor of the life I am building with you.”

“You promise you won’t resent me?” she asked.

“Far from resenting you, Artie, I mean to cherish you.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

ARTEMIS GLANCED AT THE CLOCK on the wall of Rose's office for the tenth time in a quarter of an hour. They had been in London a fortnight, and their dress shop was nearly ready to begin accepting customers. Rose, they had decided, was far too gifted in matters of business, with far too keen an eye for fashion, to not be present at their establishment for consultations and for overseeing the efforts.

With Rose's new position, one that suited her perfectly, Artemis needed to secure another lady's maid, but that was not the matter weighing heaviest on her mind.

"Watching the clock won't make time pass any faster," Rose said, looking up from the papers on her desk.

"Charlie was so nervous when he left for his lecture. I am anxious to hear how his presentation was received."

"You've married a very intelligent gentleman, one who is quite articulate when discussing mathematics. I haven't the least doubt he proved a rousing success."

How she wished ladies were permitted membership in the Royal Society so she could have attended and heard him speak.

Two of the Huntresses, Daria and Gillian, arrived in the office a moment later. The Huntresses hadn't seen one another in months, and the Season was all but over.

"We have come on a rescue mission," Daria said.

"Rescue?" Artemis eyed them both.

Daria nodded. "We are rescuing Rose from your no-doubt ceaseless fretting."

"Please do," Rose said from her desk. Those who didn't know her would not recognize the teasing in her voice. Artemis had lived too long with Adam to not know dry and painfully subtle humor when she heard it.

"Let us go to Falstone House now," Daria said. "Even if your Charlie is not back yet, he will be soon enough."

"*My* Charlie?" She wasn't objecting. On the contrary, she rather liked hearing him referred to that way.

"It appears, this time, Artemis did not kill Actaeon after all," Gillian said, managing to keep her expression free of any hint of an "I told you so."

Artemis tipped her chin. "You have confused your myths. This time,

Artemis did not kill *Orion* after all."

Daria's eyes darted from Gillian to Artemis and back again, barely holding back a grin.

"I will see you in the morning," Artemis said to Rose.

She was offered a farewell in return. Their business venture was already proving a grand and glorious undertaking. The years to come in London would be nothing short of exciting. And she would have Charlie with her through it all. *Her* Charlie.

The O'Doyle sisters had only just arrived at Falstone House when Artemis, Gillian, and Daria alighted from their hackney. They all walked into the house together.

"Are you simply falling to bits without Charlie at your side?" Nia asked, not bothering to pretend she wasn't teasing her friend. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were a little besotted."

"If I didn't know better," Artemis tossed back imperiously, "I would think you don't want to be invited to my house party this autumn."

That turned the topic nicely. Artemis and Charlie had decided that a gathering of their friends later in the year would be vastly enjoyable. With income from the dress shop and, if all had gone well that day, from Charlie's lectures and published papers, the monetary burden was not so worrisome as before.

The Huntresses were at the top of their list of wished-for friends, including Lisette, who had been in France for months. Charlie wished to have a few friends from Cambridge stay with them as well—Newton and his wife, Sorrel's brother Fennel, the oddly-named Duke, and Toss, who was at Falstone House even then.

Brier Hill would never again be a lonely and empty place.

Falstone House was full to bursting, with both the Jonquil and Lancaster families in attendance, as well as various family friends. Sorrel was there, utilizing her wheeled chair, which she used more often than not now. And she wore a dress Artemis and Rose had designed especially for her, one that accommodated her hip bracing, accentuated her figure, and hung narrow enough in the skirts to not get caught in the wheels of her chair. Artemis was particularly proud of the work they'd done on that design.

Hestia sat on Mater's lap, held and adored. Adam's children—all the Lancasters' children, in fact—had gained a grandmother in her. And Artemis had gained a mother, just as Charlie had promised.

“Aunt Artemis.”

She turned at the sound of Oliver’s voice. The boy stood beside her, regal and confident and every inch his father’s child. “Yes, dear?”

“When will Uncle Charming be back?”

“‘Uncle Charming’?” Daria repeated, her eyes dancing.

“Miss Caroline Jonquil called him that for ages. Oliver learned of it and adopted it himself.”

Oliver stood in patient anticipation of an answer. She knew better than to disappoint him. He was not one to throw fits or grow petulant, but his heart broke more easily than he preferred to let on, and she didn’t wish to cause him any sorrow.

“He should return any moment.” She pulled the curtain back to show Oliver where to watch for the carriage only to discover that her husband was, even then, alighting in front of the house.

She slipped back from the window and weaved through the crowd gathered there. The entire Jonquil and Lancaster families were present, all wanting to support Charlie on his day of, she hoped, triumph.

They teased her as she passed. She didn’t care. Charlie was back, and she meant to be the first to welcome him home.

She reached the entryway as Charlie, Adam, and Mr. Barrington stepped inside. All her attention was on her husband. She, Rose, and Wilson had carefully selected his emerald-green waistcoat and perfectly cut jacket. Wilson had pushed aside Charlie’s own valet, recently hired, to undertake the tying of Charlie’s cravat himself. Charlie had left impressive and ready to prove his worth to his peers through the paper he’d worked tirelessly on. But had he returned triumphant?

“How was your lecture received?” She held her breath.

“Well, I think.”

She looked to Adam. “Please free my husband from the chains of his own modesty.”

“The lecture was excellent,” Adam said, no frills or exaggeration in his tone. “We will not need to disavow him after all.”

Having been divested of his outercoat, Adam made directly for the drawing room, no doubt guessing that was where Persephone would be. As he passed, though, he leaned closer to Artemis and said quietly, “He was brilliant.”

A footman had likewise taken Mr. Barrington’s coat. Artemis looked to

him, not because she doubted Adam's assessment but because she wanted Charlie to hear further praise of his abilities and efforts. He deserved to know that he was remarkable.

"Everyone in attendance was impressed," Mr. Barrington said. "I suspect he'll have ample opportunities to discuss his theories whenever he is in London."

Artemis looked to Charlie. "Have you been accepted for membership?"

He nodded. "I am decidedly the best thing that has ever happened to the Royal Society."

He had grown quite adept at theatrics over the past few months. His performances delighted her. He was quite funny and quick to tease her into laughter without ever being mocking or belittling.

"The whole family is here," she told him.

"Whose family?" He handed his folio of papers to the footman who had taken his coat.

"*Our* family," she said. "All of them. Including Newton and Toss, all the Huntresses, except Lisette, the Gents and those of their wives who are still with us, your mother, brothers, their families, my siblings, their families."

"All of them? At the same time?"

She nodded. "It is, as your father so eloquently put it in his last letter to all of you, 'a wonderful bit of chaos.' And they are all anxious to see you and hear about your lecture."

"I doubt most of them have the least interest in Euclidean geometry."

Artemis took his hand. "But they have a tremendous interest in *you*."

"Even the Huntresses?" he asked with a doubtful laugh.

"I have declared you my Orion. They will accept you as one of their own now."

He tucked her up to his side, still smiling, still clearly amused. "Didn't Artemis shoot Orion?"

"Not yet."

His laughter rang through the entryway, a joyful and hopeful sound. There'd been so much happiness and laughter between them in the weeks since they'd left Lampton Park.

As they stepped into the drawing room, her gaze glided over her siblings. Athena and Harry. Daphne and James. Linus and Arabella. Persephone and Adam. Life had been difficult for them in the early years. At times, it had been utterly bleak. But there they all were, gathered with their children,

surrounded by friends. Happy. Joyous. Hopeful.

* * *

Charlie entered the drawing room of Falstone House with his arm around his wife, feeling content and optimistic. The last weeks had been idyllic. They'd settled in at Brier Hill, making it their own. Artemis and Rose were soon to open their modiste shop. Charlie's lecture to the Royal Society had been received with even more enthusiasm than he'd dared hope.

The house was full to bursting, overflowing with laughter and pleasantries. Looking over the enormous gathering of Jonquils and Lancasters, Gents and Huntresses and Cambridge comrades, he struggled to even remember what it had been like to feel lonely for so long.

"Uncle Charming!" He knew the sound of Oliver's voice as well as he knew those of his Jonquil nieces and nephews. The boy rushed to him, and Charlie picked him up, tossing him in the air before holding him in his arms. "Have you missed me, Tadpole?"

"I'm Oliver. Not Tadpole."

"My brothers used to call me Tadpole when I was your age," he said.

"We are going to play catch us, catch us," Oliver said. "But Mama says we have to play in the back gardens. Will you come?"

"Of course." Charlie gave him a squeeze. "But first, I need to give *my* mama a hug and a good afternoon."

Oliver nodded somberly. "One mustn't neglect one's mother."

"Did your father tell you that?"

"Yes. And he knows everything."

Charlie set him on his feet and nudged him toward Persephone. "Go give your mama a hug. I suspect she would appreciate it."

With his armful skipping across the room, Charlie reached for Artemis's hand once more but was waylaid by the arrival of Caroline.

"How was your mathematics talk?" she asked.

Charlie hunched down in front of her. "Would you believe me if I said I was utter rubbish?"

"No, I wouldn't." She plopped her fists on her hips. "Aunt Artemis says you're the smartest person in the world. And Uncle Flip says you understand everything about mathematics, and he didn't say it with his silly face on, so he was being truthful. And Grammy says that mathematics is . . . " She thought for a moment. "Is not for the faint of heart. I think that means

if you understand it, you are likely very smart."

"Your grammy is very, very smart," Charlie said.

"Mr. Layton said so too. And he said I am pretty as a penny." Caroline blushed a bit. "I like him."

"So do I," Artemis said.

Charlie stood once more as Caroline spun around, making her way back amongst the family.

Artemis threaded her arm through Charlie's. "They are quite a collection, aren't they?"

"It is an enormous, chaotic family gathering, so easily mixed together." His heart swelled as he watched them all. "Even Adam is enduring Philip, who, no doubt, still insists on calling him Brother Adam."

"He enjoys it more than he lets on."

Charlie shot her a look of doubt. "Enjoys it?"

"Perhaps not Philip's teasing, but he likes having family. As lonely as you and I were as children, our isolation was nothing compared to his."

"He is likely never to enjoy a moment's *isolation* again."

Artemis pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Papa would have loved having him here. Having all of us here."

"He would have, indeed. All of his children, including those he adopted"—he squeezed her shoulders—"are here together."

"And he would be especially pleased that Mater is surrounded by people who love her." She gave him a little shove. "Go give her a hug and a good afternoon, as you told Oliver you would."

"You'll be here when I get back?" He'd taken to asking her that when they were going to be apart.

"I always am," she said.

Charlie made his way to Mater. A rare break in the attentions of the Gents and their wives gave him the opportunity to sit with her, something he missed doing now that his home was not the same as hers.

"Are you simply in heaven, Mater?" He knew at a glance she was.

"Crispin has a peaceful home life. Adam is here and surrounded by family. Arabella is among us. Your father's Princess has found her way to us. All you boys are happy, loved, and together." She sighed a contented and pleased sort of sigh. "I have long dreamed of a day like this."

Stanley happened to look over in that moment. Charlie motioned him to join them. The summons was taken up by all the brothers, none of whom, it

seemed, had been entirely unaware that Mater's friends weren't currently surrounding her.

In an instant, she was surrounded by her sons. They kissed her cheek in turn and hugged her fiercely, Philip last of all.

"Our rock in the storms of life," he said. "We'd have been lost if not for you."

She pulled them in close, managing somehow to embrace all seven of them at once. "My boys. The lights of my life. I couldn't be prouder of the gentlemen you've become. And I love you more every day."

Mater's daughters-in-law and Crispin soon joined the circle. Adam and Persephone were among them in the next moment, then Linus and Arabella. And as Mater had more or less adopted Athena and Harry as well as Daphne and James, her gathered "children" grew to include nearly everyone present.

Charlie set his arm around Artemis. She held him in return, her expression one of genuine contentment and an open, unfettered happiness. Charlie kissed the top of her head, holding her fast.

This family loves you and loves each other, Father had written, his last and most personal bit of advice to the very young son he'd left behind. *Embrace them. Let them embrace you. You need never be alone.*

And he wasn't. No one in this family would ever walk the paths of life on their own. They had each other. They had the legacy of their father's unwavering support. The surety of their mother's fierce devotion. And the promise of each other's loyalty.

They had the sure, steadfast love that ties families together.

Forever.

About the Author



Sarah M. Eden is a *USA Today* best-selling author of witty and charming historical romances, including 2020's *Foreward Reviews* INDIE Awards Gold winner for romance, *Forget Me Not*, 2019's *Foreword Reviews* INDIE Awards Gold winner for romance, *The Lady and the Highwayman*, and 2020 Holt Medallion finalist, *Healing Hearts*. She is a two-time Best of State Gold Medal winner for fiction and a three-time Whitney Award winner. Combining her obsession with history and her affinity for tender love stories, Sarah loves crafting deep characters and heartfelt romances set against rich historical backdrops. She holds a bachelor's degree in research and happily spends hours perusing the reference shelves of her local library.
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