

Christmas at FALSTONE CASTLE

A Lancaster Family Romance

FROM *USA TODAY* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

SARAH M. EDEN

Christmas at FALSTONE CASTLE

A Lancaster Family Romance

FROM *USA TODAY* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

SARAH M. EDEN

Covenant Communications, Inc.

Cover image: *Castle icon silhouette* © Tania Bondar, courtesty istockphot.com
Cover design copyright © 2021 by Covenant Communications, Inc.
Published by Covenant Communications, Inc.
American Fork, Utah
Copyright © 2021 by Sarah M. Eden
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any format or in any medium without the written permission of the publisher, Covenant Communications, Inc., P.O. Box 416, American Fork, UT 84003. The views

expressed within this work are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Covenant Communications, Inc., or any other entity.
This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, incidents, places, and dialogue are either products of the author’s imagination, and are not to be construed as real, or are used fictitiously.
First Printing: October 2021
ISBN 978-1-52442-060-4

Chapter One

Falstone Castle, Northumberland
1785

FALSTONE CASTLE HAD BEEN ADAM Boyce's haven for all his seven years of life, the place where he and his father had lived and been happy. But Father was gone now, snatched away without the tiniest warning. Everything that had been safe and warm was empty and cold without him.

The servants moved Adam's things from the nursery, lugging them by the armful. He swallowed back a lump of emotion. Everything about this was wrong.

His nursemaid, Nurse Robbie, stood beside him, watching the efforts.

"I don't want to leave the nursery," he told her. "I like being here."

"The master's rooms are yours now by rights," she said.

"But I'm only seven," he said.

"Aye, but you're a wee duke now. Your father taught you to be a duke; I know he did."

He most certainly had. One of Father's many lessons was that dukes don't cry. Adam took a shaky breath. *Dukes don't cry.* Even when every crack in his heart ached. *Dukes don't cry.*

"Is Mama—is my mother staying?"

"Only until you leave for school, love." Nurse Robbie put an arm around his slight shoulders. "Then she's for Town."

Of course she was. Mother hadn't lived at Falstone Castle for years. Even before she'd moved away for good, Adam had few memories of her being present for more than a day or two at a time, always running off on an adventure. She'd written to Father, but never to say that she was coming home.

After a time, Father had stopped reading the letters and Adam had stopped hoping she would return. She'd come back for the funeral but was leaving again.

"I'm going to be all alone." Adam tried to hold back his tears like a good duke.

"You'll not be alone. I'll be here 'til you're grown. Jeb'll stay. We're not family to you, but we care about you, sweet bairn."

"Dukes aren't supposed to be sweet."

She chucked him under his chin. "Dukes also aren't supposed to be seven

years old. But I suspect you'll manage."

"I don't want to be the duke." He couldn't entirely hold back his emotions. "I want Father to be the duke again."

Nurse Robbie pulled him into a full-armed embrace. "We'd all like that. He was a good man, your father. Took good care of the castle and all who live here. A good man and a good duke."

"And a good father," Adam added, breathing through the pain searing his chest.

"The best of fathers," she answered.

"And he never called me 'My poor boy' like Mother does just because my face is scarred and ugly."

"Scarred, aye, but not ugly."

He tossed her a dry look of disbelief. "I know what I am."

With a smile she asked, "And what are you, my wee Adam?"

He pushed out a breath. "I'm a duke."

A footman placed a traveling trunk in the corridor.

"That isn't mine," Adam said.

"It's Her Grace's," the man answered, sketching a bow.

Mother was already packing, already preparing to leave, just as she had done again and again all his life. She was never there when he wanted her to be. When she did come, she didn't stay. Now he didn't even have Father to care about him and help fill that Mother-shaped void.

His eyes filled with tears as he stared at that trunk, willing it to unpack, to be put away for good.

Don't go, Mother, he silently pleaded. *Don't leave me here alone.*

Another trunk was placed beside the first, and he had his answer. His next breath shuddered. He sniffled and hiccupped. *I am a duke now,* he reminded himself.

Father had taught him to be a duke.

Adam fortified his seven-year-old heart. If Mother didn't love him, he wouldn't allow himself to love her or long for her or need her. The pain in his heart was so enormous he knew he wouldn't be able to bear it if he couldn't relieve it somehow.

He simply wouldn't care. About her. About anyone. Not ever again.

I am a duke now. Dukes don't cry. And dukes don't need people.

Chapter Two

Newcastle, 1816

WITH INARGUABLY MORE THAN HALF her life already lived, Harriet Boyce, the dowager Duchess of Kielder, looked back to find her regrets far outweighed her comforts.

She sat in the sitting room of a dear friend, one of many she'd spent a great deal of time with over the last thirty years, as the gathered group chatted about their plans for the Christmas season. They were all being welcomed to the homes of their children, anticipating a Holy Season spent in the warm embrace of their families. In years past, at least some of her friends had spent Christmas with each other.

Harriet alone had no anticipation of a warm familial welcome.

Her marriage had been contracted at a time when no one of birth considered anything beyond monetary and social benefit when arranging a match. Joseph, the late Duke of Kielder, had been a good man; she had never said or believed otherwise. But they had been horribly ill-suited to one another. And she had been so very young, completely unprepared for the confusion and frustration of their seemingly hopeless situation. She'd made a mull of the entire thing, as had he.

Joseph had been gone for more than thirty years now. In those three decades, she had seldom returned to the home they had once shared. Falstone Castle housed too many difficult memories and heavy emotions. More difficult even than that, it housed Adam, their son.

Her estrangement from him was, without question, the greatest regret of her entire life.

"What of you, Harriet?" Belinda asked. "Where do you plan to spend Christmas?"

"To be perfectly honest, I haven't the first idea."

Two of her friends looked at each other before Juliet spoke. "We cannot like the idea of you being alone. I am certain you could join either of us. Our children would make room."

That was lowering. Harriet was to be an uninvited and, likely, unwanted guest in someone's home. She could be that with her own family.

She and Adam were on better terms now than they had been before his marriage eleven years earlier. She saw him every Season in London. His wife had softened him and eased his frustration with his too-often-absent

mother. They'd rebuilt some of their connection. They got on well enough, but only in London.

She'd been invited to the weddings of Adam's sisters-in-law as well as the christening of his little boy, Oliver, a short three years ago. Attending those events, however, had required she travel to her one-time home. All the tension, the resentments, the regrets that stood between them returned with overwhelming force when they were at Falstone Castle.

In the walls of that imposing structure she could no longer deceive herself. She had been a poor excuse for a mother, and she didn't know if that could ever be made right.

"I may be taking a trip to Northumberland near Christmastime," she said. "I am to be a grandmother again, you know."

"So soon?" Belinda asked.

Harriet nodded. "One difficulty for long-torsoed ladies is that estimating when to expect a baby to arrive is made more difficult. Persephone is nearer her time than we realized."

That launched the group into a discussion of confinements that had begun before or after they were anticipated and the difficulties of being very small-scaled versus larger-scaled when carrying a child. Harriet had introduced the topic of Adam and Persephone's expected arrival as a means of turning the conversation away from pity-inspired offerings of lodging, but she found her efforts had only added weight to her own mind.

She hadn't been at Falstone when little Oliver was born. It was more than her pathetic helplessness when faced with physical ailments or pain and suffering. It was Falstone Castle itself. Everything was more difficult there. Happiness. Peace. Any degree of closeness with her son.

But she wanted to be at the castle to welcome this newest arrival. She'd been a failure as a mother, but she would like to be a decent grandmother and mother-in-law. And part of her still hoped there was a way to salvage something of a relationship with Adam, one that could survive the weight of the castle and all the regrets it held.

"So you intend to be there for the birth of your grandchild?" Juliet asked.

The idea grew stronger in Harriet's mind and heart. Adam loved his sweet little family. They meant all the world to him. Showing them her love and devotion would go a long way toward convincing him that she cherished him as well.

And oh, how she longed to have a place in her family. It was her own

fault she didn’t, and she wanted to make that right.

Adam, she knew, would allow her to visit whenever she wished, but he would not necessarily truly welcome her. Not there. Not to that home where she had abandoned him so long ago.

But nothing was ever mended without effort. She was more than willing to work to claim a deeper connection with him. She loved him; she truly did. But she knew he didn’t believe that.

“I think I will travel north,” she said in answer to her friend’s question. “It has been a very long time since I spent Christmas at Falstone Castle.”

* * *

Falstone Forest, Northumberland

Roswell Duncan had been the vicar of Falstone parish for six years now. It was a quiet living, a small parish, isolated and relatively uncomplicated. Anyone hearing him describe a living that required he endure the unpredictable temper of the infamous Duke of Kielder as “uncomplicated” would likely assume he was either jesting or a bit mentally unstable. Yet Roswell found the situation very much to his liking.

The position had come available not long after his late wife had passed away. He’d been looking for a new start, a place where he could begin again and relieve some of the weight on his heart and spirit. He was too old now for a bustling village where his presence and efforts would be in constant demand. This parish had proven perfect.

And lonely.

He drove his humble pony cart along the road that cut through Falstone Forest. Though Christmas remained a number of weeks away, a whisper of it hung in the air. The forest sat quiet, the birds having made their annual migration to warmer climes. Cold nipped at Roswell’s face, filling his heart with cherished memories of winters gone by. He particularly enjoyed his sermons as the Holy Day approached, focused as they were on brotherly kindness, love, forgiveness, hope. Christmas was a time of miracles, and he felt in his heart of hearts that one awaited him this year.

Roswell passed through the outer wall of Falstone Castle. He had come to call on the resident family. Though the duke was gruff and often impersonable, the duchess was a favorite. She was kind and thoughtful, welcoming and friendly. He was made to feel like part of her family when he called, a mixture of uncle to her and her sister, who lived at the castle as

well, and grandfather to her son, the little Lord Falstone. She was soon to be delivered of another child, and he was anxious to offer what support he could.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," he greeted as he crossed the sitting room to where the duchess stood, smiling at his arrival. "How are you faring today?"

"Quite well, thank you." She motioned for him to sit.

"How was your trip to Shropshire?" he asked.

"Quick," she said. The family had only just returned from the duchess's family home for the second time in as many months. "But attending my brother's wedding was worth the whirlwind journey. He is so very happy, and I absolutely adore his new wife. It was such a joy to see them begin their life together."

"Are you here to stay for a time?" he asked.

She nodded. "Until well after this little one makes an appearance." She tenderly patted her belly, now rounded enough to reveal the impending arrival expected near Christmas.

Miss Lancaster, the duchess's youngest sister, stormed into the room. She never did make an entrance without some degree of drama. Roswell was rather fond of her, truth be told. If he'd had a daughter of his own, he would very much have enjoyed a theatrically entertaining girl.

"Is Mr. Jonquil coming for Christmas?" she demanded of her sister without preamble.

"No, dearest," the duchess replied. "He will be with his own family."

"Good." She jutted her chin. "One houseguest will be plenty enough, considering we have done nothing but travel from one house to another without so much as a fortnight in our own home, with some degree of peace and quiet."

Peace and quiet? That didn't sound like Miss Lancaster at all.

"I hope Linus doesn't intend to invite him *here* in the future. I might have to run away from home." On that threat, she spun about and left again. Miss Lancaster was something of a cyclone.

The duchess sighed. "I think she is going to be the death of Adam and me."

"But what a merry death it will be." Roswell laughed.

She poured him a cup of tea, offering it with all the grace of a seasoned hostess.

“Your sister indicated you were to have a houseguest,” he said between sips.

“Yes,” she said. “Adam’s mother is coming.”

Roswell nearly choked on his tea. The dowager was visiting? Merciful heavens, he hadn’t been prepared for that revelation.

She’d intrigued him from the very first. The brief interactions they’d had over the years had only added to that. She was a bit uncomfortable around her son, but she clearly loved him. The lady, who was within a few years of his age, was a beauty, graceful and refined. She was cheerful and friendly, showed concern for the parishioners, no matter that she ranked so far above them all. He liked her very much indeed. And she was coming to Falstone for the Holy Season.

“I look forward to seeing Her Grace again.” He was proud of the steadiness of his voice. No one, he was determined, would ever be given sufficient clues to piece together his pointless partiality. “How does His Grace feel about his mother’s visit?”

“That is the source of my worries,” she said. “Theirs is a difficult relationship.”

Roswell nodded. He was aware of their strained connection, though he did not know the reason for it. “What can I do to ease your concerns?”

“I am hopeful you would be willing to visit us often and at length,” she said. “Though he hides it well, my husband finds your company to his liking.”

Roswell suspected as much but knew better than to say as much to the man all of Society referred to as the Dangerous Duke.

“And you are a calming influence here, on him, on my sister, on my too-often-worried mind. Having you here might prevent disaster.”

“I will of course come by as often as you would like,” he said.

“I am tempted to suggest you simply stay here for the weeks she will be in residence,” Her Grace said. “It would simplify things.”

“And it would be far less lonely.” He made the admission before he’d realized the words were coming.

True to character, Her Grace responded with immediate concern and kindness. “Then, you simply must stay. No one should be lonely at Christmas, certainly not someone as beloved as you are by us.”

“It would not be too much?” he pressed. “You have a houseguest and an expected tiny arrival. I do not wish to be a burden.”

She smiled. “Your presence will give my mother-in-law someone to talk with, my husband a reason to keep his annoyance in check, and me the reassurance that I will still be able to enjoy a chat with you over tea. That is the very opposite of a burden.”

He accepted the invitation, mind spinning and heart warming with glad relief. It was the first Christmas in six years that he wouldn’t be spending by himself. The prospect of being granted the company of the very intriguing dowager duchess only added to the appeal.

This might very well be the best Christmas he’d had in a long, long time.

Chapter Three

ENTERING THE DRAWING ROOM AT Falstone Castle to find Adam standing with his hand on little Oliver's shoulder was like stepping back in time. Whenever Harriet had returned to Falstone while Joseph was alive, this was the scene that greeted her, but with Joseph in the role of father and Adam, the tiny boy, watching her with such obvious uncertainty.

There had been no one there on those long-ago days to bridge the gap between them. Thank the heavens for Persephone. The dear lady crossed the room with arms extended and welcomed Harriet warmly.

In a low voice Harriet asked, "Is Adam terribly upset about my visit?"

"No," Persephone answered with every indication of sincerity. "He is nervous, and you know all too well his tendency to hide that behind grumpiness."

Her own son was nervous about having her visit. That was not reassuring.

She offered a smile to Oliver. He watched her with curiosity but not a great deal of warmth.

Adam nudged him forward. "Offer a greeting."

Oliver took a long step toward her. "Welcome to Falstone Castle." He crossed one arm around his front and the other around his back, then bent at the waist, bowing deeply.

Adorable.

As he straightened, his eyes darted to his mother. "Did I do good?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"Just perfect," she answered.

With a grin wide as the sky itself, he spun and rushed back to Adam, throwing his arms around his father's leg. "I did good, Father."

Adam ruffled his hair. "Well done." His gaze shifted to Harriet. "Welcome, Mother."

Once upon a time, he had rushed to her when she arrived at the castle, telling her in great detail about his interests and plans, begging her to tell him of her most recent adventures. How she'd missed that when she'd been away. How she missed it now.

"Thank you for having me," she said. "It has been a long time since I spent Christmas with family."

"Yes, it has." He scooped Oliver up into his arms.

The little boy poked at and played with the vast web of scars on his

father’s face. Adam had always been sensitive about them. Not so very long ago, anyone, even his own child, drawing attention to the disfigurement would have deeply disconcerted him. It did Harriet’s heart good to see he was doing better in that respect. It eased a little of the guilt she felt every time she was confronted with the reality of what the surgeons had done to him.

Still pushing at the widest of his father’s scars, Oliver asked, “When is Mama’s baby going to be here? I’ve been waiting for a long time.”

“Not until after Christmas.” Adam spoke with gentle patience, something most of Society would likely think impossible. He was feared by nearly everyone; he preferred it that way.

Oliver turned a full-featured pout on his mother. “Can’t you get it sooner?”

“No, darling,” she said with a smile. “Babies come when they are ready.”

Harriet had spent time with this sweet little family in London without feeling like such an outsider. But here, in her one-time home, she never seemed to belong. This had always been Joseph’s domain. She had no place at Falstone Castle.

“Aunt Artemis.” Oliver wriggled from his father’s arms and rushed past Harriet. The duchess’s youngest sister had only just stepped inside the room. “Can you get Mama’s baby here?”

Artemis’s eyes pulled wide with barely withheld laughter. “No, I can’t.”

Oliver’s brow and lips pulled down. He thrust his arms downward with a huff of frustration. That fearsome look mimicked his father so perfectly. It was rather amazing his mother and aunt—and grandmother, for that matter—managed to not laugh out loud.

Persephone crossed to Adam, who set his arm around her without hesitation or embarrassment. How very much he had changed in the years those two had been married. Little Oliver slipped his hand in Artemis’s, as comfortable with her as he was with his parents.

Harriet, alone, remained without a companion in the family vignette.

“It is good to see you again, Mother Harriet,” Artemis said. “I have a new book of fashion plates I would love to peruse with you. Your taste is impeccable.”

“Thank you.” The compliment meant more than the young lady likely knew. Harriet felt so utterly unneeded in that moment. To have a role, even as fashion arbitrator, was a godsend.

“I am also in desperate need of your opinion on the coiffure I have adopted in honor of the approaching Holy Season.” Artemis turned her head enough to reveal a lovely twist of braids with sprigs of holly tucked tastefully throughout. “Adam says it is a ridiculous affectation I have chosen specifically to annoy him. I say it is gorgeous.” Artemis looked at her once more. “What is your verdict?”

“I say it is both.”

Absolute, undeniable mischief entered the young lady’s eyes as her gaze darted to Adam.

“Let’s go to the nursery, Aunt Artemis,” Oliver said, tugging her toward the door. “Nurse Mary can get Mama’s baby here.”

Artemis grinned. “I would love to ask her if she’ll try.” She allowed her nephew to pull her into the corridor and, no doubt, all the way to the nursery wing.

“We won’t keep you, Mother Harriet,” Persephone said, still standing in Adam’s one-armed embrace. “I am certain you wish to settle in after your journey.”

What she had wished for was the warm welcome her friends were anticipating amongst their families, though she knew better than to have set her heart on it. She had time though. This visit was to be longer than usual.

Before she could answer her daughter-in-law, yet another person came inside. For a home famous for its isolation, Falstone Castle was rather bustling.

She turned and came face-to-face with Mr. Duncan. Warmth filled her at the sight of the kind and amiable vicar. She had always liked him. Indeed, visiting with him was an undeniable highlight of her visits to Northumberland.

“Your Grace,” he said, a bit of surprise in his voice, but not an unpleasant degree. He offered a bow. “It is always a pleasure to see you here.”

“If only everyone in this house felt that way,” she whispered.

Mr. Duncan’s expression turned concerned.

She smiled, attempting to undermine the confession she hadn’t intended to make. “It is good to see you as well,” she said.

“I hope you still feel that way by Christmas,” he said. “I will be here, in the castle, until then. Beyond, even.”

“Two house guests at one time?” She looked back at her son. “Are you certain you can endure that?” She knew all too well his preference for

solitude.

“Apparently I didn’t suffer enough having to attend a weeks-long house party,” he grumbled.

Persephone laughed almost silently. “Pay him no heed. He is not so unhappy about this as he insists on appearing.”

“Are you certain?” Harriet pressed. “I fear I am putting you out. I don’t usually disrupt your Christmas.”

“Having you here is a joy, not a disruption,” Persephone said. “Our Christmas will be all the lovelier for having you in it.”

Harriet watched Adam, hoping against hope that he shared his wife’s assessment. He was as inscrutable as ever.

“Adam,” Persephone said with quiet firmness. “Can you not offer your mother a warm welcome? It is nearly Christmas, after all.”

“When have you known me to make overwrought emotional speeches?” He tossed Persephone a dry look before turning his attention to Harriet. “Despite apparent current impressions, I am pleased you are here.” His eyes darted to Mr. Duncan. “And you as well.” With that, he looked back to his wife. “Am I out of your black books now?”

“We’ll work on the ‘gracious’ part of ‘gracious host’ over the next little while.” She tenderly patted his cheek. “But that will do for now.”

He pushed out an audible breath. “I had best go make certain our son isn’t haranguing the entire staff about assisting in the delivery of his future brother or sister. We will have a mass resignation on our hands.”

As he stepped toward the door, Persephone said, “They won’t quit. They adore him too much.”

Adam looked back at her. “Of course they do. He takes after me.” He spoke with utter seriousness.

Persephone laughed and shooed him away. Their relationship was vastly different from the one Harriet had had with Joseph. It did her heart a world of good. After years of sadness and mourning and resentment, her boy was happy.

But was there any place in his happiness for her?

Chapter Four

As a vicar, Roswell didn't often declare himself "in heaven," as doing so felt a touch too close to blasphemy. But he could think of no other way to describe the two days he'd spent at Falstone Castle. Yes, the duke was often unapproachable, but Roswell had come to know him well enough over the past six years to see the defensiveness beneath it. His Grace, Roswell suspected, was actually a little shy, something he hid behind his fearsomeness. That realization made being at the castle a much more comfortable experience.

Her Grace was kind and congenial as always. Miss Lancaster was a delight, entertaining them all with her excessively dramatic poetry recitations each evening after dinner. The duke made quite a show of being annoyed, but Roswell suspected he secretly enjoyed his whimsical sister-in-law. Through it all, the dowager watched her family with an aching sort of longing.

On his third day of the potentially month-long sojourn in the fortified castle, Roswell sat near the low-burning fire in the sitting room with little Oliver on his lap. The boy had been born after Roswell's arrival in the parish, and he was like a grandson to Roswell, a bright spot in his life these past three years.

"Uncle Linus folds it different," Oliver said, pointing at the boat Roswell was folding from a page of the *Times*.

"Your uncle is a sailor. I believe he has the advantage in all things seafaring." He unfolded the boat, more than happy to begin again. Oliver enjoyed watching the undertaking. "I believe your uncle Linus is married now."

"He married my aunt." Oliver took hold of the corner of the paper right next to where Roswell held it and folded the paper with him. The boy liked to help. "She didn't used to be my aunt. I have lots now. And uncles. And cousins. Papa says the family is a horde. I don't know what that means."

Roswell kept his laugh tucked away. He was certain His Grace had said precisely that, and likely in a grumble. "It means there are a very large number of people in your family."

Oliver looked away from their latest attempt at a paper boat and up at Roswell. "Mama is going to get a baby for the castle, and it'll be our baby. Papa says we can keep it."

“I have heard that,” Roswell said. “And I am excited for you to be a brother.”

Ladies’ voices floated into the room in the moment before Miss Lancaster and the dowager duchess entered. They spotted him and Oliver on the instant.

“Forgive me for not rising,” Roswell said. “Doing so would overturn our very precarious shipyard.”

“Are you folding boats again, Oliver?” Miss Lancaster asked. “Your uncle would be very proud.”

“Grandfather Duncan doesn’t fold it right.” Oliver made the pronouncement very matter-of-factly.

Miss Lancaster smiled and held her hand out to her nephew. “Let’s give your Grandfather Duncan a moment’s respite. The next time Linus visits, he can offer some instruction.”

Oliver climbed down off his lap and moved happily to his aunt, taking the hand she offered. Miss Lancaster led her nephew from the room. Roswell set the newspapers on the floor once more. To his nervous delight, the dowager sat in the chair nearest his.

“Does Oliver often call you Grandfather Duncan?” She didn’t sound upset at the possibility, merely curious.

“He does. My late wife and I did not have children of our own and, therefore, I don’t have grandchildren. That Oliver thinks of me that way is a gift, really. I am grateful for it.”

She pressed her palms together and brushed the sides of her forefingers along her lower lip, brow pulled in thought. “How do I convince him to think of *me* as his grandparent?”

An unexpected question, to be sure. “You are his grandparent.”

She lowered her voice. “He doesn’t even acknowledge me. I cannot imagine him sitting on my lap as he was doing with you.”

“Do you know how to fold a paper boat? That will win his loyalty in an instant.”

Her smile was charming and captivating. This was hardly the first time he’d seen it, but its impact seemed to grow every time. “Perhaps I should ask Linus to give me instructions on the proper technique.”

“We can receive his tutoring together,” Roswell suggested.

Far from put-off that a gentleman so far beneath her in social standing would speak so informally, she smiled ever more brightly. It did his heart

good.

"You know the secret to securing Oliver's devotion," she said. "What do you know of Persephone? How does one go about earning *her* loyalty?"

"Hers is easy to obtain. She wholeheartedly embraces those who live in kindness and generosity of spirit." He appreciated that about the duchess. From the moment he had arrived in Northumberland, she had made him feel welcome. "I have found, though, her approval and loyalty can be easily lost as well. She will not abide unkindness toward her family, or people using their positions of influence or power to harm the vulnerable."

The dowager pressed her hand to her heart. "She is rather remarkable, our Persephone."

"She is."

Her gaze wandered to the low-burning embers. "I wish I had a more motherly connection to her. But I never managed a truly motherly connection to my own son. I haven't the first idea how to go about—" She cut herself off, shoulders drooping a little. "Forgive me. I hadn't intended to spill all of my troubles in your ears."

"If hearing peoples' cares bothered me, then I chose the wrong profession."

The light comment seemed to ease a bit of her burdens. "In London this family and I have plenty enough to talk about as well as a great many distractions. The distance between us isn't as obvious. Here, however, it cannot be missed. I feel it acutely."

The pain in her words caused an echoing ache in him. "You do have weeks here in which to make progress."

"I will confess"—she looked at him—"that was my motivation in coming. I haven't been part of my own family for so long. I want to change that, but I don't know how."

"I could help." His offer surprised even him. He hadn't thought it before he said it, but he didn't regret making the suggestion. "I know the family well, and I would love to see them whole. Without you, I don't believe they will be."

She pressed her fingertips to her lips once more, a bit of emotion apparent in her eyes. "That is such a kind offer. I happily accept. Thank you."

"I will ponder, and you do the same. We'll formulate a plan." He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. He knew her family wished her to be more a part of their lives; that bit he was entirely sure of. It was his own

ability to be a guiding force and a partner of any sort to a lady as independent and genteel as she that he couldn't be entirely certain about. His family barely clung to the outer edges of the gentry. Her family occupied the highest rung of the aristocracy.

"If we can manage in a matter of weeks what I have been unable to do in decades," she said, "I will never again doubt that Christmas is a time of miracles."

Chapter Five

HARRIET RAN MR. DUNCAN TO ground two mornings later in the small sitting room. “I have the perfect idea.” She sat near him, eager to share her thoughts. “I wish to do something for Persephone, and nothing matters more to her than her family.” She was so excited she could hardly sit still. “Once the baby arrives, she isn’t likely to travel for some time. What if her brother and sisters came here for Christmas?”

Mr. Duncan’s enthusiasm grew as well. “She would be ecstatic.”

“There isn’t a great deal of time for making arrangements, and she has enough to be getting on with at the moment,” Harriet said, “but I have planned any number of house parties in my time, some with even less warning than this. I feel certain that, especially with your help, I could manage it, as a Christmas gift to her.”

“A stroke of genius.” He had a way of looking at her, his eyes twinkling and expression filled with approval, that made her feel almost giddy. She couldn’t remember the last time someone had had that effect on her. “You do have one very significant difficulty, however.”

“What is that?”

“Your son.”

That *was* a complication. Adam didn’t like guests and visitors. He was very much like his father had been in that respect. “Would he be more amenable if we pointed out that the guests are his family?”

“I suspect his cooperation will be more easily secured if we point out that the guests are *Her Grace’s* family.”

“He does love his wife. They would do anything for each other.”

Mr. Duncan’s silver brow tugged in thought. “There’s another difficulty. Your daughter-in-law is keenly aware of her husband’s preference for peace and solitude. She will likely dismiss the idea of more visitors simply to save him from any perceived misery.” He shook his head in mock regret. “We may be forced to lie to them. For their own good, of course.”

His was a very subtle sense of humor. She rather liked it. “What if we made the family’s visit a surprise?”

That brought more than a hint of uncertainty to his face. “A surprise for whom?”

She laughed lightly. “Not for Adam, I assure you.”

He made a show of being very relieved. “I thought for a moment I would

be officiating at my own funeral."

"You do think this is a good idea though?" she asked. "Not the funeral, of course—the surprise holiday house party."

"You wished to endear yourself to the duchess," he said. "This will accomplish that in spades."

"And it is something I am good at. I haven't a way with children as I suspect you do. And my relationship with Adam does not lend itself to being helpful on a regular basis. But I am good at planning gatherings." And she enjoyed it. "It will be nice to put that to use here rather than for the benefit of other people's families."

Mr. Duncan rose, the movement slowed a little by age. "Shall we find His Grace and make certain your Christmas gift will not result in a siege or a beheading?"

She laughed again. How good that felt. "He is not as fearsome as he seems."

"Let us hope you are proven correct."

He offered his arm, and she took it. No one could fault Mr. Duncan's manners. Harriet doubted anyone could find fault with his companionship either.

"I suspect Adam is in the library," Harriet said. "If not, he will be in his bookroom, but he does not care to be bothered when he is there. It is his sanctuary."

"Do you have a sanctuary?" Mr. Duncan asked.

She'd never really given it much thought. "I can't say that I do. My little house in London is lovely and cozy, but I wouldn't really consider it a refuge."

He set his hand on hers where it rested on his arm. "Is there nowhere that feels that way to you?"

A weight settled on her heart. "I suppose there isn't. I have longed for a true haven from life's storms but have yet to find one." It was a confession she'd not ever made to herself, let alone anyone else.

"I am sorry to hear that." He kept his hand on hers. It was a comforting and reassuring gesture. "Perhaps in addition to connecting with your son and his family during your visit, you could also see if you can come to feel at home here."

She shook her head. "This was always Joseph's realm. Though I tried, as did he in his own way, I never could gain a foothold here. I'm even more of

an interloper now than I was then.”

“I firmly believe there is more room for you here than you realize,” he said.

“Not once we invite all the Lancasters,” she said. “Half of them will likely have to sleep in the gardens.”

He smiled at her. “Which half?”

“If Adam has his say, the louder half. Especially Harry.”

They laughed as they stepped into the library. Adam was inside and looked up as they entered.

“Good morning,” Mr. Duncan greeted.

“That depends on what the two of you are concocting.” Adam already sounded vexed, and they hadn’t even spoken to him yet.

“What makes you think we are conspiring?” Mr. Duncan asked.

Adam steepled his fingers. “I have an entire flock of sisters-in-law who are perpetually plotting something. I am well-acquainted with a conspiratorial posture.”

Harriet slipped her arm from Mr. Duncan’s and pulled a chair over to Adam’s desk, placing it not across from her son but very nearly beside him. Her choice appeared to surprise him, but he didn’t vocally object. “We have been planning something, and we wish for your help.”

His eyes darted from her to Mr. Duncan and back. “What are you planning?” The question held more than a hint of misgiving.

“I want to do something for Persephone,” Harriet said. “Something to bring her a little joy and happiness.”

Adam’s expression froze. “Does she seem unhappy?”

“No, not at all.”

He looked to Mr. Duncan, clearly still concerned at the possibility of his wife being downcast. “Her Grace is the very picture of happiness.”

Palpable relief filled Adam’s eyes. He had been such a sweet and gentlehearted little boy in the years before the wedge between Harriet and Joseph had fractured their family. He’d grown cold and distant in the years since his father’s death. It did her heart good to see his tenderness once more.

“I know how much Persephone loves to be surrounded by her family,” Harriet said. “We”—she motioned to herself and Mr. Duncan—“thought she would be particularly pleased to have her family here for Christmas, especially since, once the baby has arrived, she will likely not be traveling

to see any of them for some time."

"You invited a gaggle of my relatives to the castle?" Adam's jaw tightened with each word, adding a bit of a panicked edge to his voice.

"No," Mr. Duncan quickly answered. "We wanted to make certain the idea met with your approval before moving forward. We further thought Her Grace might take even greater delight in the gathering if it were a surprise to her, but we could not manage that without your assistance."

Adam folded his arms across his chest. His mouth set in a sharp line of pondering. Even with his extensive scars, he looked so very much like his father.

Harriet and Joseph hadn't loved each other in the soul-deep way Adam and Persephone did. Indeed, they had spent far too much of their brief time together arguing. But they had been happy at times, as well, and had come to love each other in their own way. Joseph had died before they'd been able to sort out all that had been wrong between them. She missed those tender moments with him and the glimpses of hope she'd once felt for their future.

"Persephone would enjoy having her family here." Adam growled low in his throat and pushed out a tense breath. "Why could I not have married an only child?"

Mr. Duncan smiled. Harriet found she could as well.

For years Adam's grumpiness had weighed on her, serving as proof that he was mired in misery, something she felt certain was her fault. That Adam's best friend, Harry—now his brother-in-law—Persephone, and Mr. Duncan all seemed unconcerned by his gruff and grumbly responses, even going so far as to smile or laugh, set her mind at ease. Perhaps he wasn't as angry as he seemed. Perhaps she wasn't as guilty as she feared she was.

"Will you be including Harry in your invitations?" Adam asked, eying her sidelong.

"Of course."

"That's my Christmas ruined, then." The most fleeting of smiles tugged at the unscarred corner of his mouth.

"You like Harry; admit it," she said.

"I tolerate him because Persephone likes her sister and Oliver enjoys the company of his cousins." Adam rubbed at his temples with his thumb and finger. "The children will be coming as well, won't they?"

"How many do the Windovers have now?" Mr. Duncan wondered aloud.

“Twenty-five? Twenty-six?”

“At least,” Adam drawled. “But Persephone would be overjoyed to have them all here. I suppose it must be endured.”

“We have your approval, then?” Harriet pressed. “Not merely to extend invitations. I have something of a knack for planning gatherings and wish to make this impromptu one as easy on the participants as can be. Mr. Duncan and I would see to everything. We simply need you to help us make it a surprise.”

“My advice would be that you not tell Oliver. That boy cannot keep a secret.”

“He is so busy trying to force the early arrival of his brother or sister that I doubt he will even notice his grandmother and I are plotting anything.”

“For the sake of your plan,” Adam said, “I hope he is oblivious.”

“Thank you.” Harriet reached over and squeezed Adam’s hand. It stiffened in her grasp. She pulled back once more.

How was she ever to get through to him if they were still so uncomfortable with one another that a simple touch rendered him so defensive?

Chapter Six

THE THREE MORNINGS FOLLOWING THEIR discussion with Adam, Roswell met the dowager duchess in the breakfast room to discuss their plans before the rest of the family rose for the day. Breakfast had quickly become his favorite meal of the day.

She was witty and earnest, eager to contribute to the happiness of her family but overwhelmed by what she seemed to view as her shortcomings. Though their paths would likely never have crossed in London Society, she didn't act as though she considered him beneath her. And in her company, he felt less alone than he had in more than half a decade.

That third morning, she entered the breakfast room with less enthusiasm than usual.

"Is something the matter?" he asked. "You could not have received responses to your letters yet."

She shook her head. "Not enough time has passed for me to worry about that yet."

"Then, what are you worrying about?" She clearly was.

"Oliver," she said.

"Is he ill?" Roswell hadn't heard as much.

"No."

Roswell briefly touched her arm, drawing her gaze to him. "What is it?"

"Oliver never really looks at me or speaks to me. He hardly notes my presence. I'm not certain what to make of it." Though she had no explanation for her grandson's indifference, it obviously pained her. "I came here to forge a bond with my son and his family, and my grandson is entirely disinterested in me. I don't know how to reach him, but without Oliver's acceptance, I cannot hope to secure Adam's. Sometimes this all feels so impossible."

"You convinced the Dangerous Duke to agree to an impromptu house party. That, I assure you, is far more impossible than securing the regard of that sweet little boy." Roswell finished his last sip of tea. "You eat your breakfast, and I will go let the nursemaid know that Oliver will be spending his day with his Grandfather Duncan and his Grandmother—" He didn't know how to finish that.

She, to his regret, looked evermore discouraged. "The boy doesn't even have a name for me."

“Never fear. We will make that one of our goals for the day.”

His reassurance didn’t clear the doubt from her expression. “What if he decides he would rather have no grandmother than have me?”

“He won’t.”

She took a slow breath, precisely the sort one employed when grasping at a fleeting feeling of hope. “Do you still believe this is a season for miracles?”

“I most certainly do.”

She nodded, some certainty returning to her posture. “Then, I will eat quickly, and we will see just how grand a miracle we can manage today.”

When Roswell arrived in the nursery, Oliver was decidedly happy to see him, as always. Sometimes the little boy was the perfect mimic of his father: a bit shy, a bit standoffish, sporting an adorable version of his father’s fearsome mien. But more often, he reflected his mother’s welcoming and congenial nature.

“How would you like to go on an adventure today?” Roswell asked.

Oliver nodded eagerly. “In the forest? With the wolves?”

Winter was not the safest time to be out among the pack of feral dogs that roamed the nearby woods. They gave the castle a wide birth; still, Roswell would not risk it. “I thought, perhaps, an adventure within the castle walls.”

Oliver’s pout didn’t last long. He skipped to his nursemaid and tugged on her apron. “I want to go for an a’venture.”

She nodded. “You enjoy adventures, don’t you?”

“I want to go for an a’venture with Grandfather Duncan.”

Roswell dipped his head when she looked at him. “With your blessing, of course.” Nursemaids were the undisputed monarchs of this domain, after all. One did well to treat them kindly and with respect.

“That’d be a fine thing for the both of you,” she said.

“The three of us,” Roswell said. “The dowager duchess intends to take part as well. In fact, I am hopeful word could be sent to her in the breakfast room to join Lord Falstone and me here when she has finished her morning meal.”

“Of course, Mr. Duncan.”

Oliver brought him a book, one he’d read to him many times before. Roswell sat in a spindle-back rocking chair, Oliver on his lap, and read while they waited for the dowager to join them.

When she did arrive, the poor lady looked nervous. Still, she smiled at

Oliver. “I have not been in here very often since your father was a little boy.”

“Papa was a little boy?” That both captured Oliver’s attention and, it seemed, surprised him.

“Yes. And this nursery was his nursery.”

“Oh.” He looked around, as if expecting to see a three-year-old Duke of Kielder wandering around. In a whisper he asked, “How does she know Papa was a little boy?”

“She is your papa’s mother,” Roswell said.

“Oh.”

Roswell kept Oliver in his arms as he stood. “Shall we ask her what sort of little boy your papa was?”

He nodded and looked back at the dowager. This, Roswell knew, was the surest way to build a bridge between Oliver and his grandmother. The boy idolized his father. The duke, therefore, was the link.

“Your papa was a very good boy,” the dowager said. “He was strong and brave.”

“I’m brave,” Oliver said.

Roswell squeezed him and said, “Yes, you are,” earning him a proud grin.

The dowager continued. “He loved his papa very much.”

“Papa had a papa?” Just how little did Oliver know of his father’s family?

“He did,” the dowager said. “A mama”—she pressed her open palm to her heart—“and a papa. And a nursery.” She motioned around them. “And a castle.”

“And a boy.” Oliver pointed at himself.

“Yes. He has a wonderful boy.”

Oliver looked at Roswell once more. “Can Papa’s mama go for an a’venture with us?”

“I would like that very much.” He looked from one of them to the other. “This is the adventure I had in mind: Oliver can take the two of us to his favorite places around the castle and the grounds and tell us why they are his favorite.”

That would not only help grandmother and grandson develop a more personal bond but would also grant the dowager more of a connection to this home. Her declaration that she had no place that felt homelike still sat heavily on Roswell’s heart and mind.

“Ooh. I have favorite places,” Oliver said, bouncing in Roswell’s arms.

He set the boy down, unsure he could hold him if his enthusiasm grew too pointed. “Does—does Papa’s mama have favorite places?”

“Your papa’s mama is your grandmother,” Roswell explained.

Oliver’s mouth turned in a pout as he pondered that. “She is Grandmother Duncan?”

The dowager laughed a little, eyes twinkling. “No, dearest.”

“Grandmother *what*?” He clearly expected to have a name to attach to the title.

“Harriet,” the dowager supplied. “I can be Grandmother Harriet.”

Oliver nodded; the gesture looked almost grown-up for a child only three years old. It was the reflection of his father in him.

“Shall we be off on our adventure, Lord Falstone? Your Grace?”

Oliver shook his head firmly. “She is Grandmother Harriet. You have to call her that.”

“Ah,” Roswell said with a shake of his head, “but she is not *my* grandmother.”

The boy pressed his lips together, his brow scrunched. “Then you say *Harriet*,” he decided with a firm nod.

Call a dowager duchess by her Christian name? That was very presumptuous. He looked to her, unsure what her reaction would be. The laughter in her eyes set his mind at ease.

“My friends do call me Harriet,” she said in a low voice.

“Does that make us friends?” It was a bold question to ask of a duchess, but his hope for a positive answer outweighed his caution.

“We are more than friends,” she answered. “We are coconspirators. And”—she wiggled her eyebrows at Oliver—“we are about to be fellow adventurers.”

Oliver bounced a bit, taking both their hands in his. “I know my first favorite place.”

“Onward,” Roswell told the boy.

As they were led out of the nursery, Harriet inched a bit closer to Roswell and, voice lowered, asked, “What am I to call you? If I am Harriet, you cannot be Mr. Duncan.”

“My given name is Roswell.”

“Roswell,” she repeated. “That is lovely.”

“Thank you.” He was as surprised by her compliment as he was by her invitation to be on more personal terms. “Oliver, however, knows me as

Grandfather Duncan. Roswell might confuse him."

"Then, when we are with him, I had best call you Duncan. Otherwise, if you have no objections, I think Roswell will do."

He had a great many questions, but no objections whatsoever.

Their "adventure" took them first to the courtyard that contained the gibbet and stocks. Oliver declared it his most favorite place at the castle because he and his papa spent a lot of time there. If Roswell had been any less acquainted with the duke and his adoration of his son, he might have been alarmed by the explanation.

They were then directed to a side garden, one with winding paths and benches tucked amongst the shrubs and plants. This was, according to their guide, also his most favorite place at the castle, this time because it was his mother's garden and he spent time with her there.

"Aunt Artemis found her leaves for her hair here," Oliver said. "She says every lady should have a Christmas coffer."

The little one clearly meant *coiffeur*. Not an easy word to reproduce.

"Why does Grandmother Harriet not have a Christmas coffer?" Oliver looked legitimately concerned about the oversight. "Christmas is soon."

Roswell helped the little boy choose a few leaves from the garden, none of which were actually Christmas-specific plants, and held him high while he tucked the greenery into his grandmother's hair. The result was every bit as unsophisticated as one would predict, yet the effect was heartwarming.

"When you were my papa's mama," Oliver asked, "where did you go with him?"

She didn't answer immediately. Her experiences as a mother were quite different from what Oliver had described of his parents.

"When your papa was little, he needed to be seen by a great many doctors, so a lot of my time with him was spent while he was in his bed in the nursery either waiting for a doctor to arrive or recovering afterward."

These doctors were, no doubt, connected to the extensive scarring on the duke's face.

"We should go back to the nursery," Oliver said. "It's Grandmother Harriet's most favorite."

"Yes, we should," she said eagerly.

The boy took their hands once more and pulled them toward the garden gate. As they moved along the path, Roswell glanced up, catching sight of the duke watching them from a window above. He was too far away for

Roswell to see his expression. Roswell hoped he was pleased that his son and mother were spending time together, and he hoped His Grace wasn't upset to see Roswell playing a role in facilitating the longed-for attachment.

He was growing increasingly fond of this family and evermore enamored of Harriet.

Chapter Seven

"I AM ABSOLUTELY DETERMINED TO have a gown made in this style"—Artemis pointed to a particularly fashionable design in her collection of new fashion plates—"but I cannot decide on a color."

"An emerald or a sapphire would be gorgeous on you." Harriet could easily picture it. "Adam will be forced to stand with sword perpetually drawn should you attend a ball dressed in that gown in either of those colors. You would be absolutely stunning."

"He would find that torturous." Artemis smiled mischievously. "I will request the dress be made immediately. It can be Adam's Christmas gift to me."

She had such an odd relationship with her guardian and brother-in-law. One could never be sure if they liked one another or nursed a mutual frustration or both.

"Styles are growing more complicated." The young lady turned her attention to the fashion plates once more. "With so many ruffles and overdresses and layers, it will be remarkable if any lady is able to dance at all next Season."

"We managed to dance in far more complicated gowns when I was your age, even with our wide panniers. I suspect your generation can manage it in these comparatively accommodating fashions."

"Your dances were so lumbering. One could dance a minuet wearing a barrel if need be." Artemis made the observation loudly enough for Roswell to overhear.

"A barrel?" He laughed. "At a ball? Are you hearing this, Your Grace?"

Adam flipped a page of the book he was reading. "I am hearing it, but I am not listening."

Artemis bit back a smile. Harriet suspected she went to great lengths to prevent Adam from knowing she enjoyed him. But why?

"You must admit," Artemis said, "the dances of your day were rather plodding."

"I will admit no such thing." Harriet wasn't actually offended. The young lady's tone was too teasing for her declaration to be taken seriously. "There are few things as graceful as a well-executed allemande." She turned to Roswell, sitting in a chair near the sofa she was sharing with Artemis. "You remember the allemande, I am certain. It has fallen a bit out of favor in

recent years, but it was once the most elegant of dances."

"I remember it well," he said. "And I was not terrible at it, though I say so myself."

"How long has it been since you danced it?" Harriet asked him.

"Ages," he answered.

"For me as well," she said on a sigh.

She had so loved to dance. Her late husband had not at all. For the first few years of their marriage, she had simply danced with others who asked her at balls—such a thing was not the least unheard of, neither was it inappropriate—but after Joseph's death, she'd found she struggled to enjoy dancing. Perhaps it had been too stark a reminder of the many things that had never been sorted out between them.

"Persephone could play an allemande," Artemis said.

"I am no musician," Persephone said.

Artemis huffed in dramatic frustration. "You needn't tender a performance worthy of a concert hall. All that is needed is a slow bit of drudgery in honor of very, very old—"

"Best not finish that sentence," Roswell said.

Adam coughed, the sound suspiciously similar to that of someone covering up a laugh. He didn't often allow shows of amusement. Harriet was pleased to be witness to something so rare and personal.

Persephone rose from her chair, her movements a bit more belabored than they had been when Harriet had first arrived in Northumberland. Oliver might be getting his wish for the baby to arrive sooner rather than later. She selected a sheet of music from the small cabinet beside the pianoforte.

Harriet looked to Roswell.

He offered a very regal bow. "I would be honored if you would join me in this allemande."

She curtsied and accepted the invitation. The space near the piano was barely sufficient for the dance they meant to undertake, but it would do. They were the only ones dancing, after all.

"Are you ready?" Persephone asked from the pianoforte.

"Can't be," Adam grumbled. "The vicar's not wearing a barrel."

Artemis laughed out loud. Adam didn't even acknowledge his own quip.

Harriet took her place beside Roswell, the necessary position to begin. "I have not danced in a long time," she warned her partner. "I cannot guarantee I will remember all the steps."

“I find myself in similar circumstances,” he said. “We may very well make fools of ourselves. But”—his gaze turned a bit impish—“I doubt Miss Lancaster knows all the steps of the allemande. If we pretend we are performing them correctly, she will never know.”

“Our confidence is to be our plaster?” she asked, amused.

“Precisely.”

Persephone struck the opening chord. Harriet set her hands in Roswell’s, and the dance began. The first few measures were a bit ill-executed as they both attempted to recall the complicated spins and hops and arm positions involved in the intricate dance. But then something remarkable happened. She no longer had to think about what to do; her body simply remembered.

They locked hands around each other’s middle, turning in one direction and then the other. They moved forward and backward, up and down. The dance was so specifically choreographed that it even dictated when they looked at each other. Roswell smiled every time they did. At first she simply smiled back. But as the dance progressed and they eased into the long-ago familiarity of the steps, her relief at his silent reassurance allowed her to truly enjoy dancing with him.

She so seldom danced, and when she did, it was always out of obligation to a hostess or in kindness to a gentleman who seemed nervous or overwhelmed. This was the first time in memory she had danced with someone out of sheer pleasure. And it was decidedly a pleasure.

Every time he took her hand anew, a tingle fluttered from her fingers up her arm and she felt her color deepen. If she did not rein in her reaction, it would be humiliatingly obvious.

Persephone trilled the final chord. Harriet dipped the ending curtsy, Roswell the expected bow. The warmth she felt in his gaze caused an answering flutter in her chest.

No one in the room said a word. She wasn’t certain anyone was even breathing.

She hazarded a glance at Adam. He watched them with brows drawn, his book apparently forgotten beside him. Artemis was no less intent on the picture they apparently made. She, however, smiled broadly, eyes twinkling.

Persephone, true to character, salvaged the situation. “That was lovely—what I saw of it over my music, at least. I hope Artemis will stop speaking ill of out-of-fashion dances.”

“Oh, I think that was my favorite dance I have ever watched,” Artemis said. “Don’t you think so, Adam?”

His expression still hadn’t softened. Indeed, it resembled a scowl even more than it had a moment before. “I have never cared for dancing.”

Roswell took a step back, caution entering his posture. He made a quick half-bow to the room and excused himself.

Flustered, confused, and inexplicably disappointed, Harriet returned to her seat, attempting to focus enough to listen as Artemis rattled off her thoughts on other fashions she came across. She had enjoyed the dance far more than she’d expected. Yet, she found herself wishing she hadn’t.

Everything was in confusion, and the ache she felt inside, she suspected, originated in her heart.

Chapter Eight

ADAM DIDN'T OFTEN HAVE TROUBLE sleeping, but he sat on the edge of his bed that night long after the castle had gone silent, his mind spinning. Having Mother at Falstone was always a little uncomfortable, but this time it felt . . . different.

He adjusted his position. If he was going to be awake, he might as well be comfortable. Why was he so bothered by Mother's visit? Bothered wasn't the right word. Confused wasn't it either.

He didn't like uncertainty. He shifted again.

"I love you, Adam," Persephone said from beneath the blankets, "but if I don't get some sleep tonight, I will have to add you to my list of enemies."

He turned enough to look directly at her, grinning despite his heavy mind. "You have an enemies list?"

The blankets shook from her quiet laughter. "Most husbands would be horrified at that possibility. You, however, find it romantic."

"Of course I do." He moved from the edge of the bed to sit beside her. "Who is on your list? Harry?"

She turned so she was lying on her back, looking up at him. "You like Harry, admit it."

Harry was his best friend. But one could not maintain a reputation as the most feared man in the kingdom and admit to something as convivial as having a friend.

Persephone pulled one arm out from under the blanket and rested her hand on her rounded middle. Her condition had grown evermore obvious the last few weeks.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I am well. I'm far more worried about you." She reached out and took his hand. He bent and kissed her fingers, threaded through his. "What is keeping you awake, Adam? So few things ever do."

"Why do you think my mother is here?" he asked.

"She wished to visit her family. Many people do at Christmastime."

That didn't ring true. "She hasn't come to Falstone for Christmas since I was a boy. She has seldom come to Falstone outside of Christmas. Her friends always had more claim on her time and attention than I ever did."

"And you are upset at the possibility of that changing?" Persephone had a way of posing questions that told him he was being ridiculous without the

necessity of actually saying as much.

"I wanted her here when I was little, but it's always uncomfortable when she is." He kept hold of her hand. Even after eleven years of marriage, her touch was comforting and reassuring. "I never know what she wants."

"Perhaps she doesn't 'want' anything."

He shook his head. "Why else would she come?"

"Because she loves you, Adam. It is easier to see that when the two of you are in London—as you've said, she's more comfortable there. She has come here to spend Christmas with her son and his family. That certainly shouldn't keep you awake at night."

But it did. It did more this time than usual. He leaned against the headboard. "I never saw her dance with my father. Not even once. They must have; he held balls for her here."

"Are you upset that she danced with the vicar?"

"No." But that didn't ring true. "A little, perhaps. But I shouldn't be. There was nothing untoward about it. And she clearly enjoyed herself. Clearly." She had, in fact, blushed like a young lady at her very first ball.

"I suspect she is growing fond of Mr. Duncan," Persephone spoke hesitantly.

He pushed down the frustration that bubbled at that. It didn't make sense to be upset. Mr. Duncan was an exemplary gentleman. He and Mother were near in age. They had enough in common for a fast friendship to grow between them. He ought to have been happy for her, and yet . . .

A weight settled in his stomach. "My father waited here for her, but she seldom returned and she never stayed. She broke his heart."

"And welcoming her back and celebrating her happiness feels like betraying him?" Persephone always had been shockingly perceptive.

"This still feels like *his* home."

She sat up. The adjustment required effort. He assisted her, adjusting her pillows. Settled at last, she took his hand again and smiled tenderly. "Do you think, perhaps, it still feels like his home to her as well? That may be why she stays away and why her being here is always so uncomfortable for both of you."

"Father was remarkable. I don't understand how she couldn't see it."

Persephone leaned against him. He wrapped his arms around her. "Do you realize, my dear, that your mother was younger than Artemis when you were born? You have told me theirs was an arranged marriage and that they

were horribly ill-suited. Their personalities and interests and preferences could not possibly have been more different."

That was, indeed, true. "But *he* didn't abandon *her*."

"He also didn't go after her." She snuggled in closer. "They both made mistakes. I didn't know your father, so I cannot offer any assessment of his position. But your mother has a good heart. She was so young. I suspect she did the best she could for one who had almost no life experience. She was wrong, yes, but she has tried these past years to make things right."

"She should have tried when I needed her. I was here all alone."

"Adam." Persephone set her hand on the side of his face, gently turning his gaze down to her. "You were a child, and you were hurt. But that little boy you were, the one who ached for his parents, who mourned his father and silently pleaded for his mother to return, that little boy doesn't need you to keep protecting him."

Adam closed his eyes. How easy it was to feel seven years old again, alone in this enormous castle, fearing he would never be happy again. It had been so much easier to decide he didn't care, that people weren't necessary, that being alone was what he preferred.

"Dukes don't need people," he whispered.

"Nonsense. I know for a fact you need me."

He held ever tighter to her. "You have no idea how much."

"And you have a future duke in this home who needs you. And another little one who will soon join us who will need you. And both of them have the opportunity to claim what you longed for all those years ago." He rested his head against the top of hers. "They have both of their parents and are loved by them. That was what I wanted more than anything."

Persephone twisted as much as she could manage and pressed a kiss to his jaw. "We have a beautiful family, Adam."

"Yes we do."

She settled once more into the crook of his arm. "And your children have the opportunity for their grandmother to be part of their family. You longed for her to be here with you; allow her to be here with them. Give yourself permission to forgive the flawed and absent woman she was, for the pain she caused the boy you once were. He is ready to rest, my dear. He is ready to stop hurting, but he can't if you don't lay down your weapons."

Adam wasn't a crier; he refused to be. But he could feel a lump expanding in his throat. "It is difficult to simply let her back in."

“I know.” She tucked herself more closely into his embrace.

“And no matter how hard I try to tell myself I don’t care, I will be disappointed when she leaves again.”

“I know.”

There, in the sanctuary of their room, he could admit to heartaches he would not have dared acknowledge in front of anyone but his beloved Persephone. “I suppose that pain is acute here because of the memory of my father’s disappointment.”

“He would want you to be happy, Adam. And, I suspect, he would want her to be happy as well.”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t call out Mr. Duncan for flirting with her the entire time they were dancing?”

“Call him out?” Persephone scoffed. “I plan to send him a note of gratitude, along with a few very detailed pieces of advice.”

He could very nearly laugh at that. “You mean to encourage him?”

“I do. And if there is happiness to be found for them, then I applaud it.”

“And if he breaks her heart?” Adam pressed.

“Then, I will add him to my enemies list.”

He laughed a deep, rumbling, soul-lightening laugh. “I do love you, Persephone.”

“And I love you, my darling, ferocious duke. And I will love you even more if you let me go to sleep.”

He helped her lie down once more, seeing her settled comfortably, the blanket tucked around her once more. He kissed her lightly as she closed her eyes, weariness apparent in her face.

“Do I need to have a talk with our child, Persephone? It seems to me this new little one is being inexcusably demanding of you.”

She smiled but didn’t open her eyes. “If this child is half as perfect as Oliver, the sleepless nights and discomfort and pain will be well worth it.”

“You are in pain?” He didn’t like that in the least.

“A little. I was with Oliver as well, toward the end.”

“The end?” His alarm grew on the instant. “Do I need to send for the midwife?”

She looked up at him. “Not that sort of pain, dear. We have plenty of time yet.”

He hooked his finger around a strand of hair stuck to her cheek and moved it back in place. “I worry about you, you know.”

A bit of laughter touched her expression. “I said that to you not long after we were married. Do you remember what your response was?”

“I would wager it was something grumbled and irritable.”

She reached up and ran her thumb along the thickest of his scars. “I like you grumbly and irritable.”

Only she and Oliver were ever permitted to touch those scars. It had taken a long time for him to grow comfortable with her doing so.

“What was my answer when you told me you worried about me?” he asked.

“You said, ‘Don’t.’ And I told you I couldn’t help myself.”

“You cared about me even then. That still amazes me.”

She pulled in a sharp breath. Before he could ask what was the matter, she took his hand and placed it on her curved middle. Beneath the light pressure of his hand, the baby moved.

Persephone took a slow breath, her eyes drifting closed. Adam lay down beside her, keeping his hand on her middle, feeling the tiny miracle flutter. He closed his eyes as well.

Dukes don’t need people.

He loved his father, admired him, strove to live up to his legacy, but in this he knew his father had been wrong. Adam had a growing number of people he needed in his life, and he wouldn’t change that. Not for all the world.

Chapter Nine

Breakfast had become Harriet's favorite meal of the day. Morning after morning, while the castle slept, she sat beside Roswell, finalizing their plans to help her carve out a place for herself among her family, reminiscing about their younger years and discovering people they both knew and events they both remembered, talking about things they enjoyed or hoped to do in the years to come. She found in him a friend and companion, but of a different variety than the group of friends she had spent so much of the last decades with. Her heart was growing partial to him.

"Her Grace mentioned during whist last night that she wished her family could spend Christmas at Falstone Castle." Roswell smiled over his teacup. "Won't she be surprised when they all arrive this evening?"

Harriet sighed, utterly pleased with the outcome of their efforts. "I am still amazed we managed to arrange for families from three different counties to arrive here on the same day. What a wonderful Christmas gift it will be."

"Our duchess will be ecstatic," Roswell said.

"She has brought Adam such joy. Before she came into his life, he was unhappy and angry at the world." The pain she'd felt at watching him so lost in his own enmity still echoed in her heart when she thought on those days before Persephone. "If she wants to have her family with her at Christmas, she should get precisely that."

"May I ask you something? I will understand if you decide I am being unforgivably intrusive."

"I have come to know you well enough to not be worried about what you might ask."

He brushed the toast crumbs from his fingertips, then pushed his teacup aside. "How did your son's face become so scarred?"

That was a question she had been asked on a number of occasions, though she had seldom answered it. But she knew without a doubt Roswell would not say anything to cause Adam pain or to indicate they had discussed so personal a topic. She could broach it with him.

"Adam was born without his outer ear. Instead of the cuplike shape that is usually there, his was only a small stub of flesh."

Roswell watched her intently as she spoke. She liked knowing he was genuinely interested in what she had to say.

“His father and I worried his hearing would be diminished by it. And, of course, there was concern he might be mistreated for the oddity of his appearance. We consulted a number of surgeons, all of whom insisted the missing ear was likely just under the skin, that it had, for reasons unknown, become caught there, not emerging as it was meant to.”

Roswell nodded, brow pulled in concern.

“One surgeon after another attempted to ‘liberate’ his ear. By the time we realized there was nothing to be found, his tiny, beloved little face was badly scarred. As he grew, the scars stretched and widened. We should never have let the surgeons operate.” Her heart dropped at the memory of all that suffering. “He endured so much pain, and I missed so much of his childhood.”

Roswell set his hand on hers, kindly and gently. “Why did his surgeries lead to you missing his childhood?”

“I am not good in the sickroom. Indeed, I am something of a hindrance. I grow so very anxious and fretful. The surgeons asked me to leave so I wouldn’t make the situation worse.” She had learned to accept this particular flaw of hers, but she still regretted it. “Adam required so many operations, that, during his first three years I was gone more often than I was here. It is little wonder, really, that he was far more devoted to his father than to me.”

He squeezed her hand. “Have you spoken with him about all of this?”

She nodded. “Not long after he married, in fact. Our relationship has been better since then, but still far from ideal.”

“Which explains why you came here so determined to forge a deeper connection.”

She smiled at him. “I want to be his mother in a way I never have been before. But that will only happen if he lets me. I know a large part of that difficulty lies in his uncertainty over my devotion to him.”

“Anyone who has watched you here the past fortnight can see you care deeply for him.”

What a wonderful thing to say. He warmed her heart so often, so easily. “Perhaps you might offer a few extra pleas to heaven. Adam and I have enough years of difficulty between us that we might need divine intervention to fully overcome it.”

“I will petition with every ounce of faith I have.” He raised her hand to his lips and lightly kissed her fingers. “But I am not worried.”

She felt heat stain her cheeks. How was she within only a couple of short years of sixty and blushing as though she were sixteen?

Roswell spent the rest of the morning with her. They walked in the gardens, despite the cold temperatures. They sat in the library, talking amiably about the past and the future, sometimes sitting in comfortable silence. No matter that this was not home to either of them, with him she felt more at ease at the castle than she ever had before.

Lord and Lady Techney, Persephone's sister and her husband, arrived that afternoon. Daphne—the countess—was a favorite of Adam's. Harriet understood why. They were both quiet; both tended to keep to themselves. And Daphne adored him, something few people could imagine, let alone experience. Harriet was grateful to the sweet girl for loving her dear boy and softening him. The Lancaster family had worked miracles for Adam.

No sooner had the earl and countess and their two tiny children been shown to the nursery than Adam arrived. He shook Lord Techney's hand, not an unfriendly gesture. But Daphne received an embrace so warm and so affectionate no one in the *ton* would have recognized the Dangerous Duke as the one offering it.

"We missed seeing you at Linus's wedding," Adam said.

"I was bringing a life into the world, Adam. That is a difficult thing to do whilst traversing several counties."

Adam stepped back and let out a breath. "Where is this life that kept you away? I fully intend to undertake an argument with that boy."

Most anyone else would have been intimidated by Adam's fierce grumbling. Daphne only patted his face—the side without the scars—then turned to the nursemaid and took the baby from her arms. She placed the tiny little boy, not yet two months old, in his uncle's arms.

He eyed the baby, tenderness well hidden beneath his grouchy exterior. "I understand you didn't name him Adam."

Daphne smiled. "We did not."

"You didn't name the first one Adam either."

"The first one was a girl." She brushed her finger along the baby's cheek. "Ogden Evander is a fine name for this little bean sprout."

He bounced the baby a bit and walked a few steps away. "I believe I will just call him Lord Tilburn."

Roswell moved to Harriet's side. "The fearsome, infamous Duke of Kielder makes a tender picture of domesticity, doesn't he?"

“The late duke was a good father as well. Adam gets that from him.”

He slipped her arm through his. “Do you not think you are a good mother?”

That was a question she tried very hard not to ask herself. “I did not show myself to be, though I am attempting to do so now.”

“Look at how happy he is,” Roswell said, indicating Adam with a nod of his head. “And you facilitated this.”

“You are telling me I should give myself a little credit?”

His eyes crinkled. “You should give yourself a great deal of credit, Harriet.”

The Lancaster brother arrived in the small set of rooms where the family was. He held the hand of his bride of only a couple of months. How very happy they were. Once upon a time, Harriet had imagined herself being that enamored of the man she was to have spent her life with.

“Linus.” Daphne rushed to her brother and hugged him. “I was so sorry to have missed your wedding, but I am so happy for you.”

He kept an arm around her and turned her to face his wife. “Arabella, this is my sister Daphne.”

Harriet leaned closer to Roswell. “I didn’t realize they hadn’t yet met. We are offering Christmas cheer to more people than I anticipated.”

Artemis rushed in, exuding her usual dose of drama. “Harry has arrived early! They are on their way up here now. *All* of them.”

Adam, still holding tiny Lord Tilburn, shook his head in annoyance. “Harry is forever ruining everything.”

“That is a fine thing to say about your one and only friend.” Harry stood in the doorway, ushering in a little girl, nine years old, and then a boy, a little younger than his sister. They both kept their hands over their mouths, eyes dancing with excitement. Behind them came a girl, about four years old, striking the same pose. Lastly was Harry’s wife, Athena, the second Lancaster sister, holding the hand of a gorgeous little six-year-old girl, her spitting image.

“That child is named for me,” Harriet told Roswell. “And she is a darling.”

He looked over the growing crowd. “This is a fine thing to have arranged, Harriet. For all of them. For Her Grace. For your son.” He looked at her once more. “For yourself.”

Adam set his bundle in Daphne’s arms, then turned to the rest of the

room. “We’d meant to surprise Persephone after dinner tonight, but true to form, Harry has created chaos.”

Far from offended, Harry chuckled. “Iris and Richard have managed to stay quiet.” He motioned to his oldest children, still holding their hands over their mouths. “But they won’t last much longer.”

“She’s in the drawing room,” Harriet said. “We could surprise her now.”

A quick discussion saw the matter settled. Harriet and Roswell wandered to the drawing room first, settling in casually. Adam followed a few minutes later.

Persephone looked up at him. “You look troubled.”

“We are to have guests for dinner,” he grumbled. “Unless you’d like me to send them away.” He managed to make the sentence sound hopeful. How much of his characteristic gruffness was an act?

“You can be a good host for a single evening, dear.” She smiled and rose to her feet.

“Very well.” He set an arm around her as he turned back to face the door. “Come in.”

Her brother stepped in first.

Persephone took a sharp breath. “Linus! Arabella!” She rushed to them as quickly as her heavily pregnant body would allow and threw her arms around them. “I cannot believe you’re here.”

“Then you are never going to believe this,” Linus said, slipping from her embrace and waving someone else into the room.

Daphne, her husband, and their two little children came into the room. Persephone’s hand flew to her heart. “Oh, Daphne. James.” Her gaze dropped to the two-year-old clinging to her father’s leg. “Cassandra. Oh, you’ve grown. And—” She took a shaky breath. “Oh, this must be Ogden. I have been anxious to meet him.”

“He is Lord Tilburn,” Adam said. “They wouldn’t name him for me, so I will only ever call him by his title.”

“Oh, hush.” Persephone playfully swatted at him before embracing her younger sister’s family. “I cannot believe you are all here. If only Harry and Athena—” She turned wide eyes to Adam. “Have Harry and Athena come as well?”

He nodded silently.

Persephone turned back to the door. The sister nearest her age entered with her brood to a welcome as enthusiastic as the others received. The

youngest of Athena's children was in Artemis's arms, clearly enamored of her youngest aunt.

Iris, the Windovers' oldest, rushed not to Persephone but to Adam, tugging at his jacket as she jumped up and down. "Can we be loud now? I have so"—she stretched the word out long—"many words I need to say and I simply can't say them quietly."

Adam's mouth pulled in a straight slash, and his annoyed gaze settled on the girl's father. Harry only laughed. Even Persephone smiled. Adam was in for a difficult and trying Christmas, but Harriet suspected they all felt as she did: he would endure any level of exasperation if doing so brought his wife joy.

All the Lancasters stood near each other, hugs and greetings exchanged, love emanating from them all. It was a beautiful scene. Persephone had not stopped smiling, even wiping away a happy tear or two.

Adam watched his wife. A tiny, almost imperceptible smile touched his lips, despite Iris making good on her declaration of needing to be loud. He looked at Harriet and mouthed the words, "Thank you."

It was, quite possibly, the very best moment she had experienced at Falstone Castle, the first, she hoped, of many.

Chapter Ten

THE CASTLE WAS BRIMMING WITH activity. With seven children under the age of nine running wild down the corridors, the place was decidedly lively. Roswell enjoyed every giggle, every scream of delight, every pounding of tiny feet on the floor, every evening spent watching the children slowly drift off from a day of exhausting play. He was delighted. And watching Harriet interact with the little ones, he suspected she was as well. Yes, she was not as at-ease with her grandchild and honorary grandchildren as some might be, but she clearly loved them, and they quite obviously adored her.

She worried so much about being a good mother to her son, about making right the things she regretted. She gave herself very little credit for the good-hearted and kind person she was. How he wished she could see that for herself.

"Grandfather Duncan." Oliver frantically motioned him over to where he stood, his cold-weather layers a bit askew. "My mittens are stuck."

The little boy's mittens were buttoned to his sweater—an ingenious means of preventing him from losing them—but they'd become entangled in the coat he was attempting to pull on.

"Your nursemaid would have helped you don your outdoor clothes." Roswell tugged the coat sleeves free once more.

"I can do it." Oliver spoke firmly and defiantly.

Roswell chose not to point out that their current predicament indicated otherwise. He adjusted the sweater sleeves enough to slip the boy's hands into his mittens. "Are you excited to gather the Christmas greenery?"

Oliver nodded. "Papa told Mama he will stay here because—because it'll be quiet."

That sounded like their hermitic duke.

"Mama said, 'Adam. Be agreeable.' Then she kissed him."

"And was he agreeable after that?" Roswell asked, trying to keep his laughter firmly tucked away.

"He said he'll go now."

And that sounded like their very astute duchess.

"Will you be joining your parents' team tonight?" Roswell asked.

Oliver shrugged, his aloof expression an exact duplicate of his father's. "Cousin Iris says I should be with her."

"Do you want to be?" He pulled the boy's coat on once more.

“Would—is Grandmother Harriet getting branches?” Oliver asked with a bit of hesitancy.

“I believe she is.” He buttoned Oliver’s coat. “And I am hoping to convince her to gather greenery *with me*.”

The little boy’s eyes pulled wide. “I want to too.”

“To gather greenery with me?”

Oliver shook his head. “With her.”

“We should ask her.” He stood and offered Oliver his hand. “I think the three of us would make an excellent team.”

Oliver skipped at his side as they made their way to where the others stood, bundling up for the traditional Christmas Eve outing. Harriet looked as lovely as ever. His heart always flipped a bit the first time he saw her after being apart for a while, even a very short while.

“Grandmother! Grandmother!” Oliver tugged at Harriet’s coat sleeve. “We’re a team.”

She smiled down at him. “We’re a team?”

“Grandfather Duncan said so.”

That brought Harriet’s beautiful blue eyes to him, wrinkling at the corners with a smile. “We’re a team?”

“Oliver wishes to join us—you and I—for the greenery gathering.”

“Oh.” Harriet clasped her hands together. “How utterly perfect. Let us ask your parents though. They might wish you to be on their team.”

“Papa will be on Mama’s team. That’s his favorite part.”

In the end, they decided to form a five-person team. They rode out into the forest in one of the four sleighs being employed for the task, each equipped with an armed outrider. Though the wolves hadn’t come near the castle in years, the Falstone gamekeeper being quite good at providing ample incentive for the pack to keep to the far side of the forest, His Grace was unwilling to take any chances with the safety of his family.

“I mean to help the girls make a kissing bough,” Harriet said, “so we need to make certain we find plenty of holly and a bit of mistletoe.”

“No kissing boughs,” His Grace said with firm finality.

“The girls wish for one,” Harriet said. “We mustn’t disappoint them.”

“I suspect you’d disappoint a few of the gentlemen as well,” Roswell said, a bit cheekily.

Harriet held back a smile. Her Grace didn’t bother hiding her amusement.

“Any gentleman who needs a parasitic plant to convince a lady to kiss

him doesn't deserve to be kissed," the duke said. "And I will have no unearned affection in my castle."

"Deny your nieces and sisters-in-law this bit of revelry, Adam," Persephone said, "and you will be the one receiving no affection."

He raised an ebony eyebrow, the tiniest twitch to his lips. "Are you threatening me?"

"Rather effectively, in fact," she said.

His Grace didn't smile often, but he did just then. His wife was so remarkably good for him.

Though it was presumptuous of Roswell to do so, he felt the same about Harriet and himself. He was happier and more hopeful with her. She made him smile, made him laugh. Plotting with her had brought him such enjoyment. If only she were staying longer or he could go with her. He could not imagine leaving behind his clerical duties entirely, but he would enjoy traveling a bit, seeing London again, perhaps Newcastle. Going *with her* . . . but he didn't dare dream of such things when he didn't truly know the state of Harriet's affections.

"Stop the sleigh, Adam," Harriet said.

He complied.

"Up in that tree." She pointed. "Mistletoe."

"Fabulous," he said dryly.

Persephone swatted at him. "You have been so agreeable these past few days. Where is *that* Adam?"

"The Well of Amiability has run dry."

She set her arms around him. "Would your well refill faster if we sat here in the sleigh, blanket tucked around us, while our three partners in crime fetch the greenery?"

"It might fill instantaneously."

Her Grace looked to Roswell and Harriet and shooed them out of the sleigh. She had a smile for Oliver. "Will you help them, dear?"

"I'll help, Mama. I'm a big help."

"You always are."

Roswell stepped from the sleigh, then handed Harriet down. Oliver wrapped his arms around Roswell's neck. He held him in one arm and offered Harriet his other hand. She took it. He was absolutely certain in that moment that he would never grow tired of holding her hand. He felt twenty years old again, though, he hoped, not half so inept as he was in his youth.

He'd learned to appreciate people more, to value friendships, to view life as a gift not to be wasted.

"This has been a very good Christmas," he said, squeezing her hand. "Oliver is correct: we make a good team, you and I."

He stopped directly beneath the tree, looking up at the obliging branch. "This may be my favorite of our accomplishments so far."

Oliver looked up as well. "What is it?"

"That plant right there"—Harriet pulled her hand free to point at the clump. "Is mistletoe."

He pulled in a tiny, sharp breath. "I know about mistletoe. It's for kissing."

Harriet tapped his little chin. "Yes, it is."

Oliver leaned toward her, holding fast to Roswell's collar, and placed a kiss on his grandmother's cheek.

"Oh, you sweet boy."

Oliver nodded his acceptance of the compliment. He didn't want for confidence. He turned back and placed a kiss on Roswell's cheek as well.

"Why, thank you, Lord Falstone," Roswell said.

Oliver laughed. "People call me that. It's silly." Eventually he would understand titles and courtesy titles, and it would make more sense. "How do we get the mistletoe down?"

"We need a handsaw." Roswell set Oliver down. "Go ask your father if there is one in the sleigh."

As Oliver skipped away, Harriet called after him. "But we will retrieve the saw. Don't you bring it." She looked back at Roswell, shaking her head and smiling. "Can't you just picture him skipping back here with a saw in his hand? He would hurt himself, and then his father would kill the both of us."

"And what a waste of mistletoe that would be." Roswell closed the distance between them, holding her gaze with his. "It is tradition, you know."

She slipped her hand into his once more, not looking away. "I think it may be my favorite tradition so far."

He gave it not another thought but kissed her there under the mistletoe. It was a moment he'd imagined often, though he'd never let himself believe it would happen. The reality exceeded his hopes. She was warm and soft in his arms, and she returned the kiss with a level of enthusiasm that did him

good.

And then it ended. Abruptly.

A heavy hand dropped onto his shoulder with more force than was at all necessary. Large fingers dug into his shoulder. “We’re here for greenery, vicar. I suggest you focus on the task at hand.”

“Adam, really.” Harriet crossed her arms, eying her son.

“Go sit with Persephone and Oliver in the sleigh,” His Grace said. “I’ll see to it the vicar gets the greenery.”

She stepped up beside the duke, glaring him down despite being noticeably smaller. “You may think you inherited your fire entirely from your father, but I would suggest you not attempt to browbeat me.”

If Roswell weren’t already in His Grace’s black books, he might have applauded.

“Vicars don’t kiss ladies that way,” the duke said to her.

Roswell cocked his head to the side. “Actually we do.”

He was shot a look that had likely felled many a less-stalwart man.

“Adam.” Her Grace’s voice reached them from the nearby sleigh.

“I am settling something, Persephone.”

“Later, please, dear.”

The duke looked to the sleigh but pointed a finger at Roswell. “He was kissing my mother.”

“And your child is going to be born in this sleigh if you don’t drive me home.”

His Grace paled. “Truly?”

She didn’t answer. After a moment, Oliver whimpered. “Papa.”

They were all quickly in the sleigh, His Grace at the reins, setting the horses at a run back to the castle.

Chapter Eleven

PERSEPHONE'S TWO MARRIED SISTERS WERE assisting with the delivery, her labor having progressed too quickly for the midwife. Though most husbands spent the hours in which their children were born pacing the corridors or waiting in a nearby room, Adam had refused to leave his wife's side. As Harriet understood it, he had been present for Oliver's birth as well. She had no doubt he was a rock in such situations. She, however, was anything but.

"He must be so disappointed in me," she whispered. "Again."

Roswell, sitting beside her, set his arm around her shoulders and held her close. "I don't think he is, Harriet. His devotion to his little family is boundless." He gently patted Oliver's back as the boy slept against Harriet's shoulder. "You are watching over his precious boy. His Grace will be grateful for that, I promise you."

"Oliver does like me." She leaned a bit against Roswell, turning his arm of support into more of an embrace. She needed that.

"Oliver *loves* you," Roswell said. "He beams whenever he is with his grandmother Harriet."

She turned her head enough to look up at him. "And his grandfather Duncan."

"Well, we *are* a good team, you and I."

This man could make her blush like no one else. She enjoyed it. "I am sorry Adam was so difficult about things out in the forest. It made me almost miss the days when he was entirely indifferent to me."

"The look on his face when he shouted I had kissed his mother was not one of a son who had *ever* been apathetic toward his mother." He held her close to him, quite as if it were an old, established habit between them, a position so familiar there was no need to search for a comfortable arrangement. "But, the Dangerous Duke being the Dangerous Duke, I suspect he has difficulty expressing it. Vulnerability does not come easily to the terrifying."

"Do *you* find him terrifying?" she asked.

His laugh rumbled beside her. "I am too old to be terrified."

"You and I are very nearly the same age," she reminded him.

She was almost certain he kissed the top of her head. "Then, I guess I am not old after all."

“Excellent answer.”

He bent his head a little and spoke quietly near her ear. “You sounded like His Grace just then. Formidable, certain, and with just enough fire to warn a person not to disagree with you.”

She smiled. “I don’t know whether to feel flattered or concerned.”

“I hope what you feel is cherished.”

She did. She truly did. “I am so glad you have been here at the castle the past few weeks. I’ve come to know you better than I have in the last six years.”

“A dowager duchess can hardly be blamed for taking little notice of the vicar.”

She sat up, careful not to dislodge Oliver, and looked him directly in the eye. “What makes you so certain I took little notice of you?”

“My station in life pales compared to yours.” He spoke without self-pity, without mortification. He thought it simply a statement of fact.

“Roswell.” She did enjoy saying his name. “My grandfather was a vicar. Three of my uncles were vicars. Another uncle was a drunkard who amounted to absolutely nothing, and that was on my father’s side, the branch of the family with claims to status and standing. My father saw to it I was married to a duke, but he did so without any regard for my happiness or the well-being of his grandchildren. That is what claim on an elevated station does to too many people. I may be a dowager duchess, but I value far more important things than that.”

“Such as?” The tiniest hint of uncertainty touched the question. How worried had he been about this? And for how long?

“I value kindness, compassion, a caring heart.” Some little bit of devilment seized her. “And a skilled kisser.”

The doubt in his expression disappeared. “If you need further proof of my abilities, I will happily provide it.”

“Adam would murder you.”

Something like a smirk pulled at his lips. “But I would die a happy man.”

Harriet tucked herself into his embrace once more, enjoying the warmth of him and the peaceful, safe . . . cherished feeling he inspired in her. She rested her head against him and closed her eyes, reveling in the moment.

“Where do you travel to when you aren’t here?” he asked, his hand gently rubbing her arm.

“London during the Season,” she said. “I also spend a good deal of time

in Newcastle.”

“I haven’t been to Newcastle in years,” he said. “I enjoyed the time I spent there.”

“And London? Did you enjoy London?”

“Oh yes. My late wife’s health was poor for the last few years of her life. We weren’t able to travel.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She meant it. Heartache and grief were not something she would wish on anyone, but especially not on someone as dear to her as Roswell.

“I always enjoyed London,” he said. “I would very much like to go back. And Newcastle as well.”

Then, he was not opposed to traveling and seeing some of the kingdom. Her late husband had been utterly opposed to that. It had been an endless source of difficulty between them.

“And are you one who is not inclined to break up travel with extended return trips home?” Roswell asked.

“Not at all. I simply haven’t had a warm welcome or a true home to return to.”

She felt him go very still, perhaps even holding his breath. Quite suddenly, she couldn’t breathe either. Had she said too much? Revealed too much?

“And if that home wasn’t a grand castle?” he asked.

“As long as it’s a home, the grandness doesn’t matter.”

He took a deep breath. “Even if it was an extremely humble house?”

The vicarage was humble. Was that what he was worried about? Was that what he hoping for?

She held Oliver more firmly in one arm and, with her other, brushed her fingers along Roswell’s jaw. “In this extremely humble house, would I be wanted and welcomed?”

He wrapped his fingers around hers and pressed them to his lips, offering a soft and lingering kiss. “You would be loved.”

A rush of heat infused her cheeks even as a sting of emotion filled her eyes and throat. “I would like that very much.”

Athena, the sister closest in age to Persephone, stepped into the room, eyes filled with delight. “The baby has come.”

“And all is well? Is mother or baby in need of anything?” Roswell asked, a vicar through and through in that moment.

“They are as well as can be,” Athena said. “And you—all three of you—are being asked for.”

Harriet roused Oliver. His sleep-heavy eyes fluttered a few times before opening enough to look at her. “We’re going to go visit your mama.”

“Mama?” he asked, his words slurred by the lingering effects of slumber.

“Yes, dear. Her baby has come, and you are to meet your new brother or sister.”

He sat up straighter, quickly awakening. “Mama’s baby?”

“Yes, dear.”

Roswell stood and offered her his hand. She accepted and was soon on her feet, Oliver walking at her side, with his hand in hers. His pace sped up as they made their way down the corridor.

“I think little Lord Falstone is excited,” Roswell said.

“He is not the only one.”

When they entered Persephone’s bedchamber, Adam stood beside his wife’s bed with an infant in his arms. Harriet released Oliver’s hand, letting him cross to his father.

He looked up at Adam. “Is that Mama’s baby?”

“Yes.” Adam knelt down in front of his son, affording him a closer look at the newest addition to the family. “Oliver, meet your new little sister.”

A girl. And Adam looked at his daughter with absolute adoration.

Oliver bent over his sister, studying her more closely. “Where is her ear, Papa?”

“That *is* her ear. It is simply shaped differently than most.”

This little one had inherited Adam’s misshapen ear. Harriet’s heart sank, thinking of this precious girl going through even a drop of the pain Adam had.

“And”—Adam’s eyes met Harriet’s—“I will abide no talk of surgeons.”

She opened her mouth to insist she hadn’t any intention of suggesting such a thing.

“Adam,” Persephone protested.

He stood once more, holding his little girl to him like a bear protecting its cub. “No butcher will be allowed anywhere near this child. If anyone lays so much as a finger on my daughter, or even suggests it, I will take her into the forest, and we will live with the wolves.”

Persephone shook her head. “Darling—”

“She is perfect, Persephone. Exactly as she is. No one will ever be

permitted to say otherwise." A crack of emotion in his voice was quickly swallowed. "And no one will be allowed to hurt her. Not anyone."

"Come sit with Mama, Oliver." Persephone made room for her little boy. "Adam, introduce your mother to her granddaughter."

Adam stood, silently watching Persephone, defiantly and pleadingly.

"Trust me, darling," she said.

His fight did not entirely dissipate. He gave a quick nod and, tucking his daughter closer to him, crossed to where Harriet and Roswell stood. He allowed her only the tiniest glimpse of one rosy baby cheek.

"My dear, sweet boy," Harriet said.

"At least you didn't say 'my poor boy,'" he muttered.

"Your very wise wife told me years ago how you feel about that. I haven't said it since."

His brow pulled in thought. "You haven't."

She slipped from Roswell's side to Adam's and set her arm around him, looking down at his precious little girl. "She is perfect, just as you said. And I would never suggest otherwise. We should not have allowed the surgeons to do to you what they did. We were wrong." She had waited far too long to tell him that. "If I had known then what I know now, *I* would have taken you to the forest, and we would have lived with the wolves."

"Father would likely have stopped you," Adam said.

She raised her chin. "I would have liked to have seen him try."

Adam didn't quite keep his approval hidden. From him it was tantamount to a long and eloquent speech of praise.

"Does this little bundle have a name?" Roswell asked, peering at the little girl.

Adam nodded. "The Lancasters have a tradition of naming their children for figures from Greek mythology."

"A tradition you find 'ridiculous,' if I am remembering correctly your early commentary on the matter," Harriet said.

"Persephone's mother was fond of the custom," Adam said, "and, therefore, so is she."

"What name have you decided on?" Roswell asked.

"Hestia Ardelle."

Harriet pressed a hand to her heart.

"Hestia, of Greek myth, in honor of Persephone's mother. Ardelle, in honor of yours."

“Oh, Adam,” she said.

“Perfect,” Roswell whispered, looking at her now rather than at the baby.

“Would you like to hold her?” Adam offered.

“I would love to.”

Hestia was placed in Harriet’s arms with utmost care, the perfect little bundle of light. She had Adam’s dark hair and Persephone’s milky complexion. One glance at her besotted father told a tale of years of protectiveness to come. Hestia would be treasured and safeguarded.

“What a beautiful family you have, Adam. And what a wonderful father you are. I could not be prouder.”

“Oliver has enjoyed spending time with you,” he said. “Thank you for being here.”

The brush of a feather might have knocked her over in that moment. She’d fully expected his subtle glance of approval to be the extent of praise she would receive from her reticent son. But it wasn’t. He’d offered actual words of appreciation.

“Then, it would not be such a terrible thing,” she said, “if I were here more often?”

“Not terrible,” Adam said.

Roswell met her eyes once more. “Not terrible at all.”

Harriet hugged her granddaughter closer, breathing in the fresh baby smell. This had truly been a miraculous Christmas season. Which reminded her. “Happy Christmas, everyone.”

Adam looked to Persephone. “Our daughter was born on Christmas Day.”

She held Oliver close, rocking him back and forth. “Truly a day of miracles.”

Roswell moved to stand beside Harriet and set his arm around her, tucking her and the baby close. “Does this feel like home?”

She leaned into his embrace. “It does now.”

Chapter Twelve

"Ask him from at least ten feet away," Harry Windover said to Roswell.

"His Grace has firearms, you realize," Lord Techney jumped in. "Ten feet might not be sufficient."

Roswell smiled. He'd come to the duke's brothers-in-law looking for reassurance and a little advice before undertaking the questionably necessary but decidedly important task of telling His Grace of his intentions where Harriet was concerned. Knowing both of these gentlemen had, at some point, told the Dangerous Duke they wished to marry a member of his family, they'd seemed the obvious source for insight. He hadn't counted on the jesting.

"Suppose *I* arrived armed," Roswell suggested. "Even things up between us."

"Your first lesson as a—we hope—future member of the family," Harry said, "in a fight with Adam, the odds are never even, and never in your favor."

"Your second lesson," Lord Techney said, "is that you can be intimidated by the duke, but if you're actually afraid of him—"

"I'm not," Roswell said with a laugh.

"That will help tremendously." The earl spoke with the surety that can only come from experience.

"More important still," Harry said, "don't ever make his mother unhappy. Adam grumbles and pushes people away and insists he doesn't care for anyone, but he loves his family, and he protects them fiercely."

"I would never do anything to cause her the least pain," Roswell said. "I never could."

"We know," Lord Techney said. "Just make sure *he* knows."

"And if he shoots me anyway?"

Harry slapped a commiserating hand on Roswell's shoulder. "Then, we will make certain you are flatteringly eulogized and that the ladies weep a great deal."

The two gentlemen laughed but not unkindly. Roswell was nudged toward the library, where His Grace had been all morning. This was the moment of reckoning. Roswell didn't mean to abandon his hopes for Harriet if her son proved unamenable, but he wanted her connection to His Grace to continue improving and strengthening. He had no desire to

become a wedge between them.

He stepped through the ajar door but glanced back at the other gentlemen. They motioned him on with gestures and expressions of enthusiasm. He would thoroughly enjoy being part of this loving, entertaining, supportive family.

His Grace stood at the far window, looking out over his domain. How easily one could picture his several-greats grandfather doing the same in the days when lords of the manor were more feudal and their "kingdoms" more literal.

"The layer of snow makes the view even more beautiful," Roswell said.

The duke looked the tiniest bit in his direction. "Falstone shines in any season." He didn't sound upset or as if he were correcting Roswell's observation—simply adding to it. That seemed a good sign.

"I consider myself fortunate to live in so beautiful an area of the kingdom." Roswell moved to stand beside him. "I am, however, hoping to add to that good fortune."

His Grace turned enough to lean one shoulder against the stone window frame, arms crossed over his chest. "Why do I suspect this is going to cost *me* a fortune?"

Roswell shook his head. "No money involved, Your Grace. I speak of personal good fortune."

The duke's gaze narrowed on him. He had, over the six years Roswell had known him, shown himself to be as astute as he was menacing. There would be no backing out now.

"Before she leaves at the end of Christmastide, I intend to ask the dowager duchess if she would do me the honor of marrying me."

A dark ducal eyebrow shot upward. His mouth pulled in a fierce line, and his posture stiffened. "You *what*?"

Roswell had expected anger and rejection, so seeing it didn't truly quell him. He simply stood and waited to see how harshly that gale would blow.

His Grace crossed to the bell pull and gave it a firm tug. The two of them stood without speaking as the minutes passed. The duke's instructions to the footman who looked into the library, "Fetch the dowager duchess," was all that broke the heavy silence of the room.

The duke was much younger than he was, far stronger, and decidedly more inclined toward violence, but so help him, Roswell would not abide any harassment His Grace might inflict on Harriet.

She arrived long moments later. Her gaze jumped from one of them to the other, curiosity filling her eyes.

Roswell kept still, voice and vicarly soft fists at the ready.

“This man”—Adam pointed at Roswell, though he watched his mother —“says he wants to marry you.”

Oh, mercy.

Harriet’s wide eyes turned on him immediately.

Roswell pushed out a deep breath. “This is not the romantic way I had planned for you to discover my hopes on this matter.”

A smile tugged at her lips, though she didn’t say anything. She didn’t look unpleasantly surprised. Thank the heavens for that.

“Harriet, I—”

His Grace held up a hand, a surprisingly threatening means of shushing him. Of his mother he asked, “Does Mr. Duncan treat you well?”

She nodded. “He does.”

Still not satisfied, the duke pressed, “Does he make you happy?” His question was posed tensely, just as the previous one had been.

“He does.”

Roswell felt a smile form. He made her happy. It was a relief to hear. Then the duke turned to face him.

“Do you resent that she likes to travel and spend time with her friends?”

“Not at all,” Roswell said. “I have enjoyed traveling myself. And a group of friends my own age would not be an unwelcome thing.”

“You won’t make her feel guilt-ridden or unwelcome because she isn’t one for remaining constantly at home?” The answer was clearly important to him.

“I know the person she is, Your Grace. And that is the woman I love, not a fictitious version of her.”

The duke looked to his mother again. “Do you love him?”

She clasped her hands together, pressing the edges of her finger to her lips. “I most certainly do.”

Roswell stepped closer to her. “I have wanted to hear you say that for so long.”

“I feel the same about hearing it from you.”

“Hold a moment on the miserably cloying aspects of all this,” the duke grumbled. “I have another question for our vicar.”

Roswell set an arm around Harriet’s back and faced the man he hoped

would soon be his son by marriage. “What is your question?”

“Are you reconciled to being murdered slowly and painfully if you cause her even an iota of pain or sadness?”

He tucked her in even closer. “I would deserve it.”

His Grace nodded firmly. “Then, make your proposal, but do it with an eye to efficiency. I will not endure the drawn-out nausea I experienced with Harry and Athena.”

The duke made to step from the room, but Harriet stopped him with a hand on his arm. “You truly don’t object to this? I don’t wish to cause you any distress.”

The tender expression that touched the duke’s scarred and usually fearsome visage was shocking. Further still, he took Harriet’s hands in his. “Life has required you to walk one difficult path after another. It is time you had someone to walk with you.”

“And your father . . . ?”

“Would want us both to be happy.” He shrugged. “Persephone said so.”

Harriet slipped her arms around her son and embraced him. “I love you, Adam. I wish I’d told you that more often.”

Discomfort, emotion, uncertainty all flitted across the duke’s face before his expression finally settled on determination. “I love you, Mother. And apparently so does Mr. Duncan.” He stepped back, motioning to Roswell with a nod of his head. “Put the man out of his misery, as well as the dozens of Lancasters I suspect are waiting in the corridor for word of all this.”

She turned to Roswell, the sweetest, gentlest smile on her face.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips, pressing a kiss to her fingers. “Will you marry me, Harriet?”

“In a heartbeat.”

Roswell pulled her into his arms and kissed her properly. In the next instant, a rush of voices and footsteps broke into the library, congratulations being called out and declarations of how very perfect it all was. He kept Harriet in his arms and kissed her again, but quickly so she could receive the well-wishes of her family. Soon to be his family.

Their family.

Chapter Thirteen

WITH A CHRISTENING AND WEDDING on the same day, Adam had long since reached his limit of interacting with people. But Persephone had told him again and again to be agreeable and had quite specifically forbidden him to toss anyone into the gibbet. He'd made no promises about the stocks.

Persephone sat a bit to the side, holding Hestia in her arms. Oliver leaned against her, watching his sister with the same confused curiosity he had in the weeks since she was born. Mother was right; he had a beautiful family.

He was seized in that moment by a memory, decades old, of standing alone in this castle, his father only recently dead and Mother gone again, absolutely certain he would be alone his entire life. He never could have imagined then how his life would play out. He had Persephone who, by some miracle, loved him. They had two perfect children, who didn't despise him as he'd always feared his hypothetical children would.

He had a family, and it was whole and perfect.

The new Mr. and Mrs. Duncan—Adam doubted he would grow accustomed to that being Mother's name—approached, looking entirely pleased with the day's efforts.

"Oh, Adam," Mother said. "What a perfect day this has been. Thank you for enduring so many people for my sake."

"It was Persephone's idea," he grumbled.

"I will make certain to thank her as well." She threaded her arm through Mr. Duncan's. "We are going to be neighbors now, you know."

Adam nodded. "The wolves should prevent too-frequent visits."

She shook her head. "Do not be grumpy with me, Adam Richard Boyce. I know you too well."

More and more people were of that opinion. He had a reputation to uphold. Still, this was his mother. "I am glad you will be close by more often."

"Oh, Adam." She hugged him. "You sweet, lovely boy." She held tight, not stepping back, not letting him go.

He shot a look of frustration to the first person he spotted. Harry, however, was not the most dependable in such situations.

Rather than rescue Adam from the uncharacteristically personal interaction, he cried out, "Mother Harriet," and threw his arms around them both.

An instant later Harry’s entire brood of raucous children, his wife, her brother and sisters, and brother- and sister-in-law had joined the enthusiastic embrace, trapping Adam in the middle of it.

He looked over the top of them, directly at Persephone. She didn’t do a thing to hide her amusement.

Through his tense jaw he said, “This is what happens when I’m agreeable.”

She rocked their children and smiled at him. “I love you, Adam.”

He eyed the hug horde. Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous. Yet, he felt himself beginning to smile. He shook his head, but the shimmer of amusement didn’t dissipate. Persephone had brought all this chaos into his life.

The lonely little boy was not alone anymore.

He locked eyes with his beloved again. “I love you too.”

“Of course you do,” she tossed back.

Of course he did. How could he not? She had breathed life back into more than just these thick stone walls. She’d brought *him* to life as well, had given him back his mother. And now Mother had found her own happiness.

Years of pain had begun to heal at last during that brief, miraculous Christmas at Falstone Castle.

Bonus Material

I KNEW I WANTED TO write this story years ago when I was planning *Seeking Persephone.* Though Adam's parents were not the focus of that story, their marriage and their history played a crucial role in it. Adam's childhood traumas, sorrows, and griefs colored the person he had become and his relationships with others despite the passage of nearly two decades.

The only version of the late duke and dowager duchess's marriage we saw in *Seeking Persephone* was the one that existed in Adam's memory. He was very young when his father died. He had very little interaction with his mother before or after that loss. Though his recollections were skewed by years of loneliness, his pain remained piercingly acute.

I knew that to understand Adam's mother enough to include her in that story, *I* needed to know the true state and history of her marriage even if readers did not. As I worked out those details—her young age at the time of her wedding, how ill-suited the couple was, that they were both equally stubborn and unbending despite Adam's misconception that *his mother* was the cause of his parents' distant relationship—I began to see Harriet Boyce in a new light.

She was hurting long before *Seeking Persephone*. She was lonely and struggling. And though she bore the blame for her terribly unhappy marriage, she was not entirely at fault.

So as I wrote, allowing her to be colored by her son's pain, I knew I wanted to give her her own story, one in which we could see her as the flawed, struggling, striving human being she truly was. Knowing how much Adam's ongoing anguish was connected to his mother, writing a story for her was actually crucial to *his* growth and healing.

As I continued working on the Lancaster Family series, I kept her in my mind, adding details to the story I wanted to tell and the future I wanted to give her. I knew their story would not be a novel-length one. I also knew it would take place at Christmastime. When the opportunity to contribute a story to a Christmas anthology was presented, with the publication date allowing it to be released after *Loving Lieutenant Lancaster* but before *Charming Artemis*, I knew Harriet would finally get her chance at forgiveness and love.

Christmas at Falstone Castle is not one of the core stories in the Lancaster Family series but is best described as a companion novella, a

story deeply connected to the series, involving many of the same characters. It adds complexity and insight, while shifting the tale from the Lancasters to the Boyces, ever-deepening their connections and broadening the universe enveloping this series.

Aspects of Christmas at Falstone Castle *I decided on long before writing it . . .*

Roswell Duncan would be a widower and the local vicar.

- This required mentioning in *Seeking Persephone* that the vicar at that time was aging so it would make sense that after the passage of more than a decade, a new vicar had arrived.

The story would begin and end with scenes told in Adam's perspective, with a third scene from him in the middle.

- Because this story was part of Adam's healing and growth, I realized we needed his insights, his worries, his internal journey.
- The opening scene would include his beloved Nurse Robbie, who was first mentioned in *Seeking Persephone*.
- The middle scene played out in my mind over and over for years as I waited to write this story. He is not a character who bares his soul often, but I knew he needed to in that moment. The groundwork for this was laid in *Romancing Daphne* when we were allowed to see more of his softness and tenderness.
- The final scene I always envisioned was Adam and Harriet finally having the family they had individually and silently dreamed of.

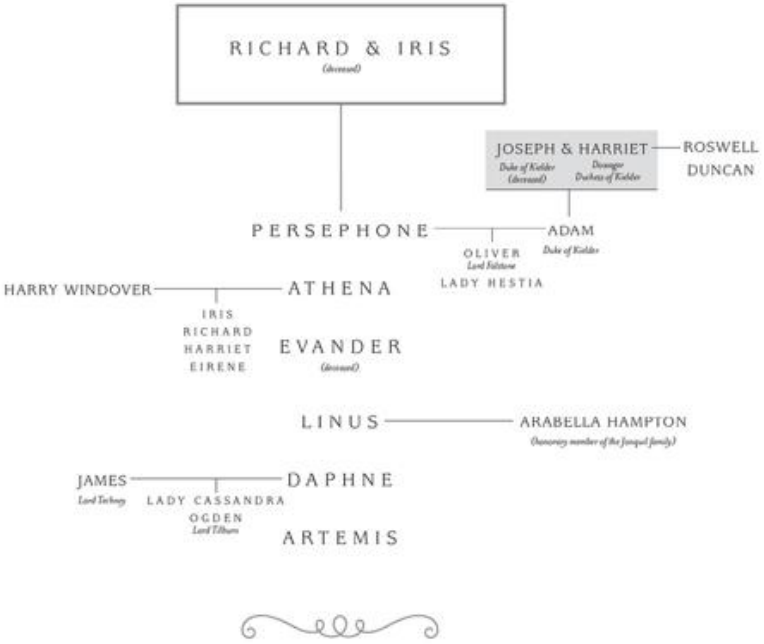
Hestia

- I knew this story would involve the birth of Adam and Persephone's second child, that she would be a daughter, and that she would be given a name from Greek mythology in homage to Persephone's family.
- I have always loved Hestia from Greek mythology. She was the goddess of hearth and home. She is most often portrayed as kind, forgiving, and content yet was self-assured enough to refuse to live a life she did not wish to live, choosing her future for herself

despite countless efforts to convince her otherwise. Gentle but firm, kind yet forceful. The perfect combination of Persephone and Adam.

- And I always knew Hestia would be born with the same stub-like outer ear that Adam had. He spent his younger years protecting himself, longing for the acceptance he didn’t receive from his mother, struggling to overcome the internal scars that far outweighed his outer ones. I knew he would make it very clear in this story that Hestia would have every drop of love, acceptance, protection, and kindness he had needed for so long.

Lancaster


RICHARD & IRIS
(deceased)
JOSEPH & HARRIET
Duke of Kielder (deceased)
Dowager Duchess of Kielder
ROSWELL
DUNCAN
PERSEPHONE
ADAM
Duke of Kielder
OLIVER
Lord Fellstone
LADY HESTIA
HARRY WINDOVER
ATHENA
IRIS
RICHARD
HARRIET
EIRENE
EVANDER
(deceased)
LINUS
ARABELLA HAMPTON
(honorary member of the Junquil family)
JAMES
Lord Torbay
DAPHNE
LADY CASSANDRA
OGDEN
Lord Tilburn
ARTEMIS

About the Author



Sarah M. Eden is a *USA Today* best-selling author of witty and charming historical romances, including 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.

www.SarahMEden.com

Other Books by Sarah M. Eden

The Lancaster Family
Seeking Persephone
Courting Miss Lancaster
Romancing Daphne
Loving Lieutenant Lancaster
Christmas at Falstone Castle*
in All Hearts Come Home for Christmas anthology
Charming Artemis

The Gents
Forget Me Not
The Holly and the Ivy*
in The Holly and the Ivy anthology
Lily of the Valley
Fleur-de-Lis

The Huntresses
The Best-Laid Plans*
The Best Intentions

The Jonquil Brothers
The Kiss of a Stranger
Friends and Foes
Drops of Gold
As You Are
A Fine Gentleman
For Love or Honor
The Heart of a Vicar
Charming Artemis

Stand-Alones
Glimmer of Hope
An Unlikely Match

For Elise
The Fiction KitchenTrio Cookbook

*Novella

Chronological Order of All Related
Sarah M. Eden GEORGIAN- & Regency-Era Books

Forget Me Not
The Holly and the Ivy*
Lily of the Valley
Fleur-de-Lis
Seeking Persephone
Courting Miss Lancaster
Glimmer of Hope
Romancing Daphne
The Kiss of a Stranger
Friends and Foes
Drops of Gold
For Elise
As You Are
A Fine Gentleman
For Love or Honor
Loving Lieutenant Lancaster
Christmas at Falstone Castle
The Heart of a Vicar
The Best-Laid Plans
Charming Artemis
The Best Intentions