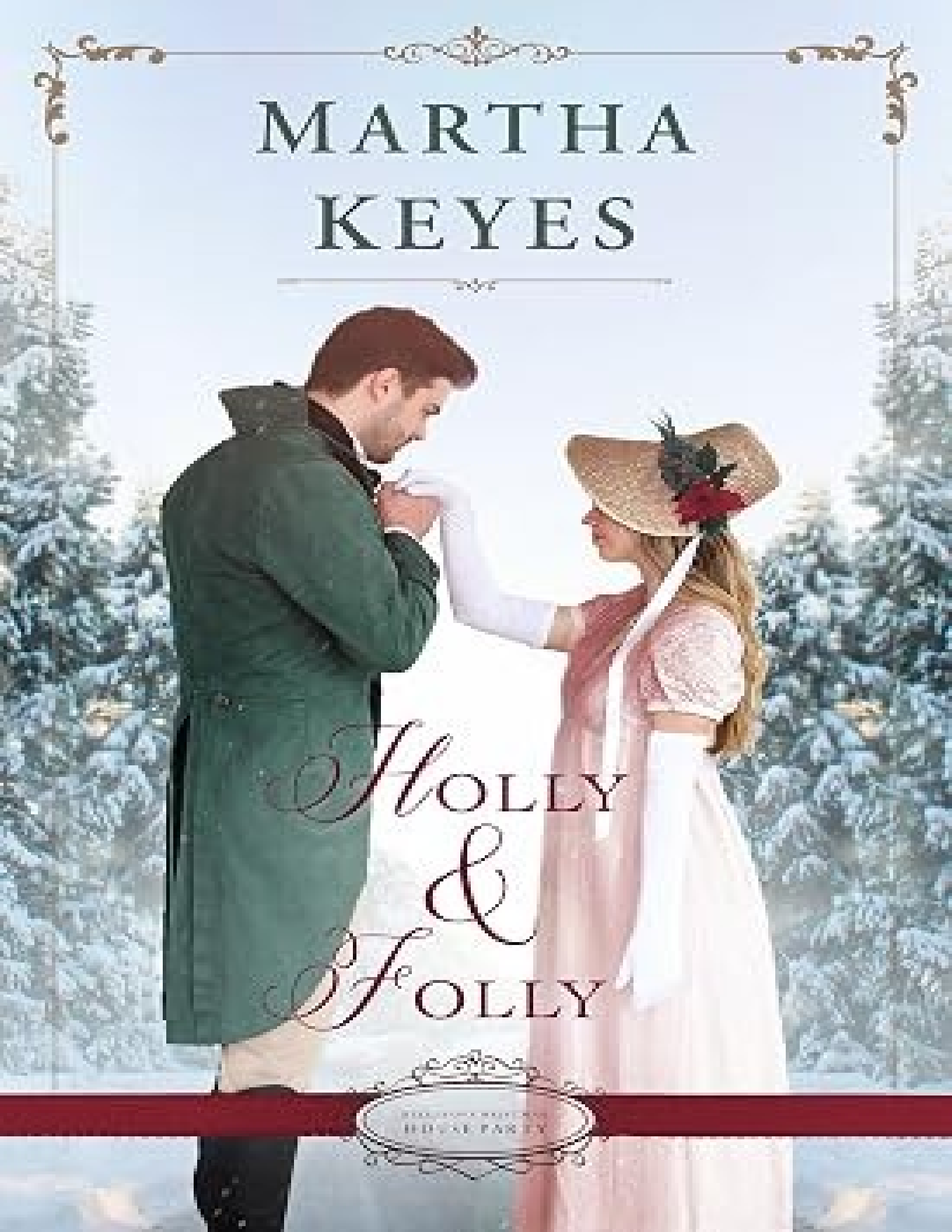




MARTHA KEYES

HOLLY & FOLLY

RECEIVING PARTY
EDUCATION PARTY

Contents

[Welcome to Bellthorne Hall](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Next in Belles of Christmas: House Party.](#)

[Belles of Christmas: House Party.](#)

[Other titles by Martha Keyes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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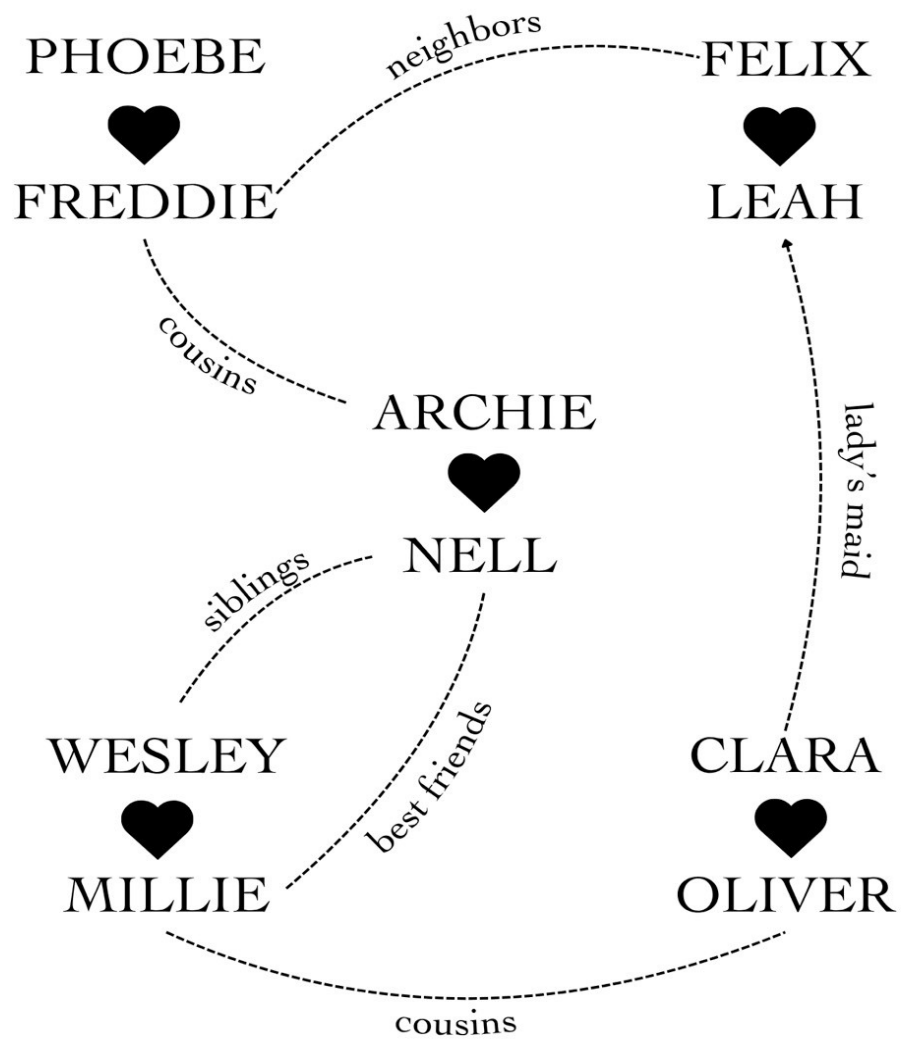
Welcome to Bellthorne Hall

Welcome to Lady Dalmeer's Yuletide house party!

Throughout this series, you'll follow five couples as they find love, cross paths with familiar characters, and, of course, share in the warmth and joy of the Christmas season. Each book features its own complete love story, while together they weave a larger tale of romance, friendship, and Christmas magic. Now sit back and relax, make yourself at home, and enjoy a most romantic Christmas at Bellthorne Hall!

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BELLES OF CHRISTMAS: HOUSE PARTY



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One

NELL

To those who loved her, Elinor Prescott was known as Nell. To the rest of the world—most of whom held her in neither affection nor esteem—she was more likely to be referred to as *that shocking Prescott girl*.

The carriage in which she and her brother sat lurched over frozen ruts as it approached the magnificent and sprawling Bellthorne Hall, which would be brimming with people who would *not* be calling her Nell.

Nell looked away from the chaise window and smoothed the skirts of her blue traveling dress, trying not to think how many of the estate's scores of rooms would house guests who would ogle her when they were told who she was and what she had done.

She felt her older brother's eyes on her and met them.

Wesley looked very fine in his traveling coat, his brown hair curled softly in the front. "You look as if you were approaching Newgate rather than a Christmas party."

Nell laughed, hoping it would quell her nerves. "Will it not be a bit of both? I *shall* be on trial in a way."

Wesley did not respond immediately. He merely regarded her in his thoughtful, considering way, a hint of sympathy in his eyes. Or perhaps it was pity.

Nell smiled. "You must own that if Wesley Prescott was not so eligible and handsome, I would not have been invited at all."

"What I own," he countered, "is that the invitation lies entirely at the feet of Mama and Papa."

Nell could not refute this. Mama and Papa had become recently acquainted with Lady Dalmeer, and it was to that budding friendship that Nell and Wesley owed their impending arrival at what promised to be one of the grandest—and most crowded—house parties of the decade.

“Whatever the case,” Wesley said, looking out the window as the road widened into the courtyard, “there will be plenty of guests to disappear amongst.”

“True enough.”

Plenty of guests to disapprove of her too.

She craned her neck as the facade of Bellthorne Hall loomed over the chaise, the honey-colored stone a mass of warmth in a cool winter landscape. It was cold enough that patches of snow dotted the scene from the last time it had fallen.

Wesley helped Nell down from the chaise as footmen in yellow livery bustled around to care for their trunks, stable hands took charge of the chaise, and Nell and Wesley’s servants were taken in hand by those of Bellthorne Hall.

One of the two tall, white doors that led inside opened, and a butler stood in the doorway, waiting to receive Nell and Wesley.

Receive was perhaps a generous description.

The man’s posture was as rigid and imposing as the weathered stone of Bellthorne’s facade, his brushed gray hair almost too neat to be credited.

“Welcome to Bellthorne Hall,” he said in a colorless voice. “May I tell Lady Dalmeer whom we have the pleasure of welcoming?”

“Mr. Wesley Prescott and Miss Elinor Prescott,” Wesley said.

The butler inclined his head and led them into the entry.

Nell stifled a breath of surprise as she stepped onto the black and white marble floors. Columns of pale stone rose forty feet above, giving way to a domed ceiling, painted in pastel and punctuated by arched windows that bathed the room in a wintry gray light. A fire flickered in the ornate grate, bound on either side by marble busts.

Footsteps echoed, and Nell pulled her eyes back in time to see a stout but finely attired middle-aged woman approaching, flanked by two maids. The Countess of Dalmeer wore a wide smile, her eyes crinkling at the sides. A few strands of gray tried to conceal themselves amongst her elegantly coiffed blonde hair.

“Mr. Prescott!” She made a sweeping, magnanimous gesture with both hands that was slightly dampened by her nasal voice.

“Lady Dalmeer.” Wesley moved to bow just as she put out her gloved hand. He finished his bow quickly and took the hand, hesitating before brushing his lips over the back of the glove.

Nell suppressed a smile.

“What a pleasure it is to welcome you here, Mr. Prescott,” Lady Dalmeer said. “You were handsome when we met, but I must say, you show to even greater advantage here at Bellthorne.”

Nell’s brows rose.

Wesley cleared his throat. “Thank you, my lady.” He turned to Nell, who was having difficulty controlling her amusement. “This is my sister, Miss Elinor Prescott.”

Lady Dalmeer’s gaze moved to Nell.

Heart thumping, Nell executed her best curtsy.

“Miss Prescott,” Lady Dalmeer said in a higher voice, “what a... pleasant surprise to meet you, as well.”

Nell’s heart dropped into her half-boots. Surprise? She glanced at Wesley, who looked just as puzzled.

“You must be exhausted from your journey,” Lady Dalmeer said. “No doubt you wish for repose. I will show you to your bedchamber, Mr. Prescott, as I have a matter to attend to in the east wing.” She made a gesture over her shoulder, and one of the maids stepped forward. The countess leaned in to speak with her in an under-voice.

The maid’s gaze flicked to Nell, then she nodded and curtsied. “Of course, my lady.” She stepped toward Nell. “Would you follow me, Miss Prescott?”

Nell glanced at Wesley, feeling a hint of panic at the thought of being separated from her one true advocate in this grand house.

He smiled at her reassuringly as she followed the maid from the entry hall. She glanced over her shoulder just in time to see Lady Dalmeer lead Wesley up the stairs.

The maid led her around a corner and into a corridor, long, echoing, and paved with the same black and white geometric marble as the entry hall.

Compared to the warm but weathered wood and rugs of Nell’s own home, Bellthorne was grand and cool, reminding her that these walls demanded a measure of decorum and demureness that did not come naturally to her.

One corridor turned into another, the second lined with arched windows and marble busts on one side and even more busts on the other, each one looking down on her—both literally and metaphorically, she

imagined—questioning her presumption in daring to walk such hallowed halls.

She straightened her shoulders as they entered yet another corridor, this one narrower and considerably less imposing. She had every intention of proving she could be a proper guest.

“Just here, Miss Prescott,” the maid said, stopping abruptly in front of a door on the right.

Nell blinked. She had been waiting to be led to a staircase.

The maid opened the door. “I will tell the footmen where to bring your trunk and your maid.” She stood aside for Nell to enter.

Recovering from her surprise, Nell thanked her and stepped into the room.

“Her ladyship wishes her guests to know that dinner shall begin at five. Everyone will assemble in the drawing room just prior.”

“Thank you.”

The maid gave a small curtsy and left, closing the door behind her.

Nell turned and looked around her bedchamber. It was...small. A modest bed with faded hangings took up the bulk of space. The door in one corner made her suspect that this had been a dressing room at some point in its history.

If the countess had not expected Nell, perhaps this was the only room available. No doubt the short conversation between her and the maid had been to determine where to put her.

Her cheeks warmed. It had been difficult enough to agree to come to Bellthorne when she believed she had been invited; arriving to realize the case was otherwise was humbling indeed.

She gave a little shiver, hoping the chill was due to the lack of fire in the small grate. She would not be surprised to find that the chimney smoked. It did not look as though it had been cleaned recently, nor had the room been dusted.

She walked over to the window, hoping the views it afforded would make up for the spare furnishings and coolness of her room. Pushing the curtains aside, she looked through the sole, small window toward...a crumbling outbuilding.

A laugh escaped her, half amusement, half humiliation.

Perhaps she should be grateful she had not been housed with the servants in the attic.

There was a knock on the door, and the next few minutes were taken up with her trunk and portmanteaus being brought in. Her lady's maid, Shaw, arrived after the footmen and raised her brows at the sight of the room.

She was highly unimpressed—offended, even, on her mistress's behalf. "Scores of bedchambers, and they offer you this one!"

Nell brushed off her maid's indignation. Embarrassing as it was, she could not blame Lady Dalmeer too much. With the reputation she had made for herself, it was no wonder she wished to keep Nell away from more welcome guests.

Had Mother and Father simply misunderstood the invitation? Or had they sent her despite knowing it had been meant for Wesley alone?

"Do you happen to know if the Hollises have arrived?" Nell asked as they worked to unpack the trunk.

"No, miss," Shaw said. "There is too much chaos with all the arrivals to know anything for certain. Fifty guests, they say! And the majority of them young and unmarried. I spoke with a very finely spoken housemaid named Clara a few minutes since. She said the countess planned the party largely in hopes of matching her son—who has no intention of even attending. Can you imagine?"

Nell could not. She could not fathom any of it. The expense to house, entertain, and feed fifty people for nearly three weeks. Having enough eligible acquaintances to fill an estate like Bellthorne. The lack of filial obedience—or affection, for that matter—that would lead Lady Dalmeer's son to simply not attend a house party planned with him in mind.

"The countess fancies herself a great matchmaker, they say." Shaw set a neatly folded chemise on a shelf in the small armoire. "Perhaps *you* shall make a match, miss."

A bark of laughter Nell's governess had always abhorred escaped her. "I think *you* are more likely to make a match, Shaw."

Nell would not allow herself to form any real attachments. This house party was about painting a fresh coat over her sad reputation. She had proven beyond a doubt that she could not be trusted with love.

Shaw sent her a severe look. "You are too hard on yourself."

"Lady Dalmeer would disagree, I think."

"If that is true, it is only because she does not know you." She set her hands on her hips and looked at Nell. "Well, she shall soon enough. I mean

to make certain you look your very best.”

Nell smiled gratefully at her maid, but Nell’s appearance was a small, albeit important, matter in comparison to her comportment. “I shall endeavor not to undermine your efforts.”

“Mark my words, miss,” Shaw said, “her ladyship will change her opinion of you by the end of the party.” She shut the door of the armoire. “I shall have water brought for you to bathe before we begin your toilette.”

With all the guests arriving, it was little wonder it took a full three-quarters of an hour for the water to appear. She washed the travel grime from her body, then Shaw helped her into her clothing.

She took her time coiffing Nell’s honey locks, and with each passing minute, Nell’s chest closed more tightly around her lungs. It had been over a year since she had attended a gathering more public than a small dinner party hosted by her parents.

After what had happened, she had kept to her room from hurt and humiliation. As that had subsided, it had been affection for her family that had prompted her to avoid the public. She had hoped time would insulate her family from the harm her indiscretion had caused.

But all the while, she had known that she could not stay hidden forever. At some point, she would have to face the rumors and her reputation. That was when Lady Dalmeer’s invitation had arrived. Her mother, who had watched her self-imposed seclusion with sympathy, had persuaded her that it was time.

Nell should not have allowed herself to be persuaded. How would she face fifty guests who did not wish her there?

“There, miss,” Shaw said when she had finished. “I would wager you will outshine most of the guests. All that remains is a bit of confidence and a smile.” She winked at Nell, then left her to herself.

Perhaps it was due to how long it had been since Nell had well and truly dressed for a fine dinner, but she could not help looking in the mirror with a bit of awe. Her golden hair had been twisted and plaited, then pinned at the crown. The pale blue taffeta she wore glinted in the candlelight with its beaded hems and a white satin ribbon at the waist. If there was any chance of distracting guests from her past foolishness, Nell would owe it to Shaw’s skill.

She smiled at the ridiculous notion, then stood, took in a slow breath through her nose, and opened the door.

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Two

NELL

Nell had not been offered a tour of the house, but she trusted she could find her way to the drawing room. When she reached the end of the narrow corridor, she turned left into the echoing one lined with busts. She kept her gaze forward, refusing to meet the stern but hollow eyes of the Roman and Greek figures who stood as disapproving sentinels.

Under their unyielding gazes, however, she put a hand to her coiffure, suddenly doubting Shaw's skill. Perhaps her choice had been too newfangled and bold. A dowdy, powdered wig might have served her purposes better, giving the impression of a staid and steady character.

Staid and steady Nell was not.

At least, not in the past, but she had every intention of being so at Bellthorne.

As a corridor opened up to her left, she took it, only to find herself faced with more of the same figures. She had not appreciated before just how many there were or how long the corridor had been.

She stopped short, her brow furrowing as a short corridor came up on her right—one she did not recognize. Where was the marble corridor the maid had first led her through? The one with the black and white floors and no Caesars or Neros.

She turned around, looking at the path she had trodden. She had been nearly certain the journey from the entry hall had been through the black and white corridor, then the one with the heads of the Roman Legion, then the short one that had led to her bedchamber.

If only she had paid better attention—and left herself more time to arrive at the drawing room before dinner.

She took in a frustrated breath and retraced her steps past the emperors and consorts, her quick footsteps echoing. When she reached the end of the

corridor, she stopped. To the right was the second passage of busts and vases. Now that she considered it, she had no memory of traversing two of them on the journey to her bedchamber.

Drat these grand houses!

A maid appeared down the corridor, and Nell sighed with relief.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Might you point me in the direction of the drawing room?”

“Of course.” The maid pointed down the way from which she had come and ticked off a list of lefts and rights, speaking so quickly and correcting her errors so often that Nell could not make heads or tails of where she was to go. But the maid looked to be in a hurry, her pretty blonde hair slightly frazzled under her cap.

“Thank you...” Nell waited for her to give her name.

She curtsied. “Clara, miss.”

This was the maid Shaw had mentioned. “Thank you, Clara.”

The maid offered another smile, then continued on her way.

Nell looked one way, then the other, hardly more sure of her path than before Clara’s attempt to help. Her pulse gathered pace, for each second of delay made it more likely that her entrance would cause a stir—the very last thing she wished for. She was paralyzed, though, for returning to her bedchamber to begin again might well delay her even more than simply continuing on the path she had taken.

The bust to her right caught her eye, and she met its stony gaze.

She read the chiseled letters below the bust, and a small laugh escaped her.

Mercury, the god of travel—and a known trickster.

“I would ask you the way, but I suspect you would not tell me,” she said.

“Quite likely.”

Nell whirled around at the sound of the deep voice and found a man emerging from the corridor ahead. His brown hair was cropped just long enough to be windswept, a traveling cloak hung over his arm, and his eyes held an amused glint.

Of course they did. She had been talking to a statue. She was fortunate they did not hold genuine concern, or fear, even.

The gentleman walked at a leisurely pace toward Nell and Mercury, a thoughtful tilt to his head as he looked at the bust. “He seems quite

taciturn.”

“Unlike the others,” Nell quipped.

The man’s head turned toward her, his smile growing. “Naturally.”

Nell could not stop her own smile. “Perhaps *you* could direct me to the drawing room—or the dining room.” At this point, it was likely the party had gone in without her.

“Perhaps I could.”

Nell raised an expectant brow.

“Or,” he continued, “I could lead you there myself.”

Nell opened her mouth to accept this kind offer, only to stop herself. “Thank you, sir, but I shan’t trouble you.” Arriving late to dinner in the company of a lone gentleman might well be the nail in the coffin of her reputation—and Wesley’s, for that matter.

The man’s smile lifted at one edge. “What, then, do you intend to do? Interrogate Mercury until he cracks—as it were? He is made of marble, so I doubt you would make much progress. Or shall you wander about until you stumble upon the dining room?”

“Or you could simply tell me the way.”

“That seems unnecessarily disobliging when I am on my way there myself. Come.” He began walking.

Nell hesitated, and the man stopped mid-stride, giving her an enigmatic look.

“What is it?” he asked.

How could she explain her reluctance? One simply did not regale a stranger with one’s history of imprudence.

“I will go with you,” she said, “but we should not enter together.”

His amusement increased, and he gave a little bow, then put his hand out to invite her to join him. “As you wish.”

After one more beat of equivocation, Nell joined him as he led the way through the corridor.

“Do you wish to go into dinner first or second?” he asked.

“First, if it is all the same to you.”

“I prefer it, in fact.”

She looked at him curiously. “Do you?”

“Decidedly,” he said, though he did not elaborate.

They reached the place where Nell had begun to doubt her path, but he continued walking until the corridor opened up to the entry hall. He turned

into it.

Hopeful that the party might still be in the drawing room, Nell found herself walking ahead of him, the sound of their mismatched footsteps filling the enormous room as they traversed it.

They reached another crossroads. To the right lay the black-and-white marbled floor Nell had been seeking, but the man led her to the left.

“So,” he asked conversationally, “how long shall I wait after you have gone in?”

Something about the way he asked the question gave Nell to think he found the situation humorous.

“Two or three minutes will suffice, I imagine. Do you not agree?”

“Oh, I would not think two minutes sufficient. Three is the bare minimum.”

She glanced at him, and he smiled at her in a way that assured her his amusement was not at her expense. The unexpected camaraderie of it sent a flicker of something through her.

They reached a door on their right, and the man glanced inside. “It appears they have already gone in to dinner.”

Nell suppressed her disappointment and followed him farther down the corridor. They slowed a dozen feet shy of the next door.

“Three minutes, then,” the man said.

Nell hesitated. Now that she was here, her nerves were flaring. Perhaps it would be better for her to return to her bedchamber, after all. Plead the headache.

She met the man’s curious gaze and tried for a self-deprecating smile. “Forgive me. I do not particularly care for making scenes.”

His brows drew together. “Why ever not?”

She had no response to this for several seconds. “Do you mean that you *do* care for it?”

“On occasion, certainly.”

Nell regarded him. There was something so relaxed and unconcerned in the way he held himself that she tended to believe him. “And tonight is one of those occasions?”

His smile grew. “Tonight is most certainly one of those occasions.”

Envy pinched her. She wished she could look forward to the disturbance she would cause. “You and I are quite different, I think.”

His brown eyes took her in. “No doubt.”

She took in a breath, grasped the handle, then stopped. "Perhaps four minutes would be better."

He smiled. "Four and a half, let us say."

She laughed softly. "Thank you, sir."

He inclined his head.

She would have liked to spend a few more minutes preparing, but she forced herself to open the door.

The hum of conversation spilled out of the room, but the first thing that struck her was the length of the dining table. It was the longest she had ever seen, with two dozen chairs on either side, most of them occupied.

Enough people were talking that only a few took note of her entrance. She closed the door softly behind her and noted her brother Wesley watching.

His shoulders lowered in relief, and he smiled.

Nell's heart leapt at the sight of her friend Millie Hollis, seated opposite him. Two people, at least, who were familiar to her in a sea of strangers.

There were empty seats not far from them, and Nell took quick steps, hoping to avoid further notice. Lady Dalmeer's gaze flicked to her, but she was engaged in conversation with the man to her left, so it did not linger.

"Where were you?" Wesley whispered as he helped her into an empty seat a few chairs away from his.

"Lost," she replied through a smile at Millie.

Millie was a brown-haired, brown-eyed beauty, who looked her best in the cream dress she wore. It was the knowledge that she would be at Bellthorne which had convinced Nell to relent to Mama's suggestion that she attend the party. They had been friends since childhood, and Millie had *remained* a friend despite Nell's scandal. Such constant and loyal friends were not easily come by.

Wesley introduced Nell to the men on either side of her—a Mr. Hawthorne and a Mr. Fowell. Both were handsome, but upon hearing her name, Mr. Fowell's eyes lit in a way that made Nell quite certain that, for him at least, her reputation preceded her.

Her cheeks burned as she exchanged civil pleasantries with him, determined to keep her chin high. Confidence and a smile, as Shaw had said.

She glanced up as the door opened and her gentleman guide entered, and only now did it occur to Nell that he was still in his traveling clothes. He did not bother to close the door softly as she had, and the click of the latch made a number of people turn to look.

An exclamation of surprise from Lady Dalmeer drew the attention of anyone who had not yet taken note of his entrance.

Heads swiveled and chatter ceased.

Nell felt nervous on the man's behalf—wasted worry, no doubt, for he smiled serenely, taking no note of the number of eyes on him.

The countess rose from her chair, her eyes wide with surprise. Joyful surprise.

“Good evening, Mother,” the man replied calmly.

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Three

ARCHIE

Archie did not particularly wish to be in his own dining room, surrounded by a table full of people staring at him.

He had informed Mother he would not be attending this party she had planned—whatever she claimed to these guests—for his benefit. He had no intention of being pushed into marriage, no matter how eligible the women might be.

Mother had cried.

A great deal.

Her crocodile tears had left him unmoved—until last night when his conscience had gotten the better of him, prompting him to return to Bellthorne.

Just now, though, he suspected he ought to have ignored his conscience.

Mother looked to be in her element.

Of course she was. She was sitting at the head of a table of willing matchmaking victims.

She came over to him, her hands out in that dramatic way she had when there was company to be performed for.

Archie took them and placed a detached kiss upon one.

Mother smiled regally, then looked expectantly at the butler, Hurst.

He was whispering something to one of the footmen, however, and did not notice.

“Hurst,” she hissed through her smile.

The butler came over.

“His lordship has arrived,” she said significantly, still beaming at her guests.

Hurst cleared his throat.

Archie tried to intervene. "Hurst, it is not necessar—"

"His lordship," Hurst's booming voice filled the hall, "the Earl of Dalmeer."

Archie suppressed a sigh and smiled at the table of guests, taking quick note of familiar faces. His cousin, Freddie, sat near the opposite end of the table, where Freddie's father, Lord Kentwood, had taken Archie's usual place at the head. Freddie had all but begged Archie to come to the party when they had met in London recently.

"Perhaps you would like to change your clothing," Mother suggested in an undervoice.

"Not at all," Archie said amiably. "We do not stand upon ceremony here, do we, friends?" He grinned at the guests, his gaze pausing momentarily on the woman he had met in the corridor.

There was a murmur of agreement from the table, but Archie's uncle, sitting at the head opposite Mother, stood.

"No, Uncle," Archie said. "Do not trouble yourself. I am quite happy to take one of the empty seats." He strode toward one near the middle of the table, much to Mother's chagrin.

She wanted to flaunt him like a new gown, but Archie would not be flaunted.

There was a vacant seat to his left, while a pretty young woman called Miss Sterling sat on his right. She and Archie passed a good deal of time discussing the horses housed at Bellthorne.

Archie's gaze, however, roved again and again across the table to the woman from the corridor. She was being engaged in conversation by a man Archie did not recognize—who continued to monopolize her for the duration of the meal. Once or twice, Archie noted a blush in her cheeks.

Archie made conversation with Miss Sterling whenever she was not in conversation with Mr. Hawthorne, but he was already regretting that he had come at all. Mother regarded him with far too much satisfaction anytime she saw him speaking with Miss Sterling.

If he was to be here, however, he may as well amuse himself.

Mother was accustomed to getting her way, and while his affection for her had been partially responsible for bringing him to Bellthorne, it would not stop him from ensuring she understood that his presence did not mean he meant to submit to her machinations—something she had yet to accept even after all these years.

When the women withdrew after dinner, Archie took the opportunity to sit next to Freddie.

“You came,” Freddie said.

“To save you. Devoted cousin, am I not?”

Freddie gave a little snort. “Your mother gave us your bedchamber, but I suppose we can vacate as a token of thanks.”

“Gave *us*? Have you taken to referring to yourself in *the royal we*?” Archie tipped his glass and threw back a gulp of brandy.

“Ha. No. I...am...uh...recently married.”

Archie nearly choked, and Freddie slapped him on the back, smiling to reassure everyone who looked over in concern.

Blinking furiously, Archie looked at his cousin. “You *what*?”

“We can discuss it later. The point is, I shall have our things moved.”

Archie considered pressing the matter—they had spoken in London just over a fortnight ago, and Freddie had not mentioned a woman, to say nothing of marriage—but he decided against it. “I would much rather you didn’t have them moved. I will quite happily take a spare bedchamber.”

“Are there any?” Freddie asked doubtfully.

“Mother never puts any guests in the west wing on this floor.”

Freddie’s face screwed up. “I should think not. Entirely unsuitable for human accommodation, isn’t it?”

“The rooms have remained largely untouched since I was a boy. She will hate it above all things.” He grinned.

The next quarter of an hour passed without incident until the men rejoined the women in the drawing room, where Mother announced that they would be playing parlor games after tea.

Archie yawned. He might have known parlor games would feature heavily during the party. They provided an acceptable excuse for just the sort of flirtation and physical contact she would be hoping for.

She swept over to him, and for the next few minutes, Archie was treated to a catalog of the guests present—or the unmarried female ones, rather. She mentioned the men in passing, but she extolled the virtues of the women as though she was eulogizing them.

Eulogizing their celibate lives, perhaps.

“Miss Caldwell is looking very well, is she not?” Mother said, looking pointedly across the drawing room.

“Very well indeed.” Archie fiddled with the cuff of his coat.

Mother elbowed him. "Do you even know who she is?"

"No," he admitted. But just then, his gaze landed upon a young woman who was looking at him as though waiting for him to take note of her.

She smiled, held his gaze with her pretty blue eyes, then turned away.

"I had hoped Miss Orston would be in attendance," Mother said, "but alas, both of her parents have taken ill, depriving her of a chaperone."

Mother had spoken of Miss Orston before. Her father was a viscount, and her parents had recently acquired an estate some twenty miles from Bellthorne. Archie had not yet had the doubtful pleasure of meeting Miss Orston—an oversight he had taken pains to bring about.

"Mm," Archie responded absently.

The young woman Mother had identified as Miss Hollis was trying to persuade the woman Archie had met in the corridor to join Blind Man's Bluff. She was not finding success.

Mother looked at him. "The viscount and his wife are *ill*, Archibald. Is that not most terribly upsetting?"

"Most upsetting," he agreed blandly. "And who is that young woman? The one speaking with Miss Hollis."

Mother had pointed out every single woman in the room save her. Her gaze sought the young woman, but when it found her, disappointment overtook her curiosity. "I believe her name is Miss Prescott. Shall we join the games?" She left him to join the group.

Archie's mouth lifted curiously at one edge. It would seem Miss Prescott did not enjoy Mother's endorsement. It made her all the more intriguing. How did she come to be here at all if Mother did not look upon her with favor?

Miss Prescott had managed to convince Miss Hollis that she would not be participating in Blind Man's Bluff, but she was not alone as a spectator.

Mr. Fowell—the man who had elicited blushes during dinner—took the chair beside her. She smiled politely when he addressed her, then shifted almost imperceptibly away from him.

Archie took amusement in watching her respond civilly when what she clearly wanted was to watch the games afoot. Based on the way her eyes lit and she shifted to the edge of her seat as she laughed watching, to play them.

Which was why Archie found it so curious that she had refused to do just that.

Doubly intriguing, then.

Archie's friend, Oliver Cole, wore the blindfold, and a number of guests shifted to avoid his chaotic movements. Miss Caldwell was among them, gathering up her skirts and rushing out of his reach.

And toward Archie.

"Do come play, Lord Dalmeer," she urged, reaching for his arm.

"I am quite entertained from here, I assure you."

She gave him a saucy sort of look, then tried to tug him along. "I am determined you shall be my shield. It is the chivalrous thing to do, my lord."

"There is nothing I would enjoy more," he said, gently extracting his arm, "but I fear you will have to manage without me this evening. I have a matter to attend to with the servants. Mr. Fowell would undoubtedly oblige, however."

Mr. Fowell seemed to have little interest in Blind Man's Bluff and every interest in Miss Prescott, who did not reciprocate.

"You are cruel, my lord," Miss Caldwell insisted, though she smiled as she said it. "But I trust you will redeem yourself soon enough."

Archie smiled, then turned toward the door, ignoring Mother's attempt to catch his eye. "Disappointment awaits, Miss Caldwell," he said under his breath.

He stopped one of the footmen in the corridor and instructed that his valet, Raine, be summoned to the Billiard Room.

Archie began a solitary game, toying with the idea of having Raine pack his things for a morning departure. The whinings of conscience that had brought him hither had quietened. Freddie, the knave, had pleaded for him to come but evidently had no further need of his cousin. Archie had wondered if he had been toying with him when he had said he was married, but Mother had confirmed the union—as had the way Freddie had hung about his new wife.

What, then, would Archie do if he remained?

Wrestle Mother for dominance, certainly. Perhaps hang about Miss Prescott to annoy her.

When Raine arrived a few minutes later, Archie did not have him pack his belongings. Instead, he instructed him to have them taken to one of the vacant bedchambers off the Antique Passage.

Raine raised a brow at this but did not otherwise give any sign that he thought the command singular.

Archie finished his game of billiards at his leisure, then retired to his bedchamber, where he slept soundly despite the room being *unfit for human accommodation*.



THE FOLLOWING morning was spent entirely on estate affairs. When his steward, Jeffard, informed him just how much money Mother would be spending on the party, Archie could only laugh.

“Perhaps this is one of her stratagems,” he said. “To spend so much money that I have no choice but to marry an heiress.”

Jeffard coughed away a laugh as he closed up the ledger on the desk between them.

Archie might not have plans to wed, but he had worked hard to ensure the estate was flush in the pocket. It was a battle at times, for Mother seemed intent on draining the coffers at every opportunity.

He leaned back in his chair, crossing his ankles and interlacing his fingers behind his head. “Do *you* think I should marry, Jeffard?”

The steward shot him a quick glance. “I am sure I have no opinion on the matter, my lord.”

Archie regarded him with a half-smile. “Of course you do. Everyone does. Come. Out with it.”

The steward finished buckling his leather satchel, then faced Archie. “My opinion, my lord, is that you deserve happiness, whatever brings it about. I have not observed positive outcomes when a man enters into marriage by anything but his own will and desire.”

“I should ask your opinion more often,” Archie said amiably. “Or was that not the end of your response? Go on.”

“I was only going to say that, as someone who cares a great deal about you and this estate, I would find it a shame if it were to pass out of your direct line.”

Archie could not disagree. His cousin, Thomas Thorne, would inherit, and the man was an utter and complete fool.

Jeffard tucked his satchel under his arm. "But you are young yet. Perhaps the desire to marry will find you. Good day, my lord."

"Good day, Jeffard."

When the tall, mahogany door shut behind him, Archie stared at it, a pensive frown on his brow. He was tolerably certain the desire to marry would never find him.

Despite that, he *would* marry someday. He was not so derelict in his duty as to avoid it forever. When he did wed, he would even choose a wife fit for the title of Countess of Dalmeer.

He had not informed Mother of this intention, perhaps because he had not truly come to accept it himself yet. Or perhaps it was because anything he told Mother was inevitably used against him in an attempt to manage his life.

He rose from his seat and made his way out of the study, taking the long path to his bedchamber. His timing was unfortunate, for he reached the entry hall just as a number of guests arrived at the bottom of the staircase.

"Archie!" Freddie called out.

Any idea Archie might have had of trying to continue on his way without being noticed was quashed.

Freddie's wife—he still could not fathom it—was at his side, and he led her over and made the introduction to the newly minted Lady Weymouth. From the short interaction, it seemed he had at least chosen well, for she was warm, sweet, and very pretty.

There was no polite way for Archie to pull himself away as the crowd moved toward the drawing room, so he resigned himself to whatever lay ahead.

It turned out to be something only Mother could have arranged: an expedition to scavenge for greenery to decorate the rooms of Bellthorne.

No plain expedition would do for Lady Dalmeer, though. She meant to put together the very couples she had her eye on. In reality, her control was not as universal and total as she would have liked, however, for people began to do their own arranging. Naturally, Freddie and his wife would not be separated.

"Shall I join you?" Archie asked. "Or do you mean to sneak off into the hedges together?"

To his surprise, both Freddie's and Lady Weymouth's cheeks went red. Such was the newlywed state, he supposed.

Archie grasped his cousin by the shoulder. "Do not answer that. I shall go where I am wanted."

Mother stood beside Miss Caldwell, and both of their gazes were upon him. He avoided them studiously, making his way across the room to the one person he knew Mother would not wish him to partner.

But Mr. Fowell reached Miss Prescott first.

She did not look particularly pleased by this and looked around until her eyes met Archie's.

He closed the remaining distance just as Fowell said, "Shall we make a team, you and I, Miss Prescott?"

"Miss Prescott," Archie said as though he had not heard this. "Are you ready?"

Her wide eyes met his, then flicked to Mr. Fowell.

"Forgive me, my lord," Mr. Fowell said amiably, "but I have just asked her to join *me*."

"Ah!" Archie said. "I believe my mother wished for you to partner with Miss Caldwell, Fowell. She is just over th—" He turned to direct Fowell to her, only to find Mother and Miss Caldwell approaching.

"Here he is," Mother said with a great smile. "Son, you will accompany Miss Caldwell."

"And deprive Fowell here when he had set his heart on it?" Archie replied with good nature. "I am not so ungracious a host as that, I hope. Shall we be on our way, Miss Prescott?" He put out an arm.

She hesitated, her gaze flicking to Mother's.

What history lay between them? He was determined to find out.

"I am more than happy to accompany Miss Prescott, my lord," Mr. Fowell said, though he sent a kind smile in Miss Caldwell's direction.

"That settles it," Mother said with a joyful clap. "Miss Caldwell, Lord Dalmeer will accompany you"—she guided the young woman until she was beside Archie—"and Mr. Fowell, you will accompany Miss Prescott."

Mr. Fowell smiled his agreeability to this plan, while Miss Prescott looked like a hare with a hound on its heels.

"We shall all venture out together," Archie said, as though he was merely continuing what Mother had been on the verge of saying. "There is safety in numbers, after all. Which room shall we have the pleasure of decorating, Mother?"

She fumbled over her words but seemed not to know how to undo what Archie had done.

“The Antique Passage, perhaps?” Archie suggested with a glance at Miss Prescott.

She met his gaze, and he swore there was both laughter and gratitude in it.

It had not been entirely unselfish, what he had done, however. He hoped the presence of Mr. Fowell and Miss Prescott would ensure he was not obliged to take drastic measures to deter Miss Caldwell, who was gripping his arm as though she feared Miss Prescott might prise her hand off at any second.

With her work complete, even if not entirely satisfactorily so, Mother left to arrange the remaining groups.

Mr. Fowell offered his arm to Miss Prescott, who took it with an admirable pretense of pleasure, though her eyes met Archie’s.

This expedition ought to be interesting, at least.

Four

NELL

It could have been worse.

Perhaps.

Mr. Fowell had offered her his arm, but it was he who gripped *her* as they traipsed through the little remnants of crunching snow behind Lord Dalmeer and Miss Caldwell. He seemed to fear she might collapse without his firm hand or float away on the chill breeze.

He was kind enough, and certainly handsome enough, but there was something about him she could not like. Something in his eye.

It was, of course, entirely possible that Nell simply struggled to like *any* man after what she had been through.

Her gaze shifted to Lord Dalmeer ten feet ahead. He was assisting Miss Caldwell over a large patch of snow. Despite the great care he seemed to be taking, she slipped, tumbling, quite fortuitously, into his chest.

When he had stabilized her, she looked up at him through her lashes to thank him.

Nell suppressed an eye-roll. Perhaps Miss Caldwell could benefit from Mr. Fowell's unyielding clutch, then Nell and Lord Dalmeer could get on with the activity.

Had she been imagining it, or had the earl been attempting to save her from Mr. Fowell back in the drawing room?

She had been sorely tempted to take his arm when he had offered it, but the way Lady Dalmeer had regarded her had made it abundantly clear she wished her son to be paired with Miss Caldwell.

They reached a thicket of bushes, and the young stablehand who had been instructed to hold their scavenged items brought them tools to clip greenery. Once he had done so, he stood a ways off. No doubt he had been

given stern instructions regarding what was expected of him—to lend propriety without encroaching on the opportunity for flirtation.

Mr. Fowell released Nell's arm, and the four of them explored the area to identify the most promising possibilities. Nell inspected the nearest bush, trying to envision the Antique Passage and what would show it to best advantage.

She clipped a few branches and gave them to the stablehand.

"Come, Miss Prescott." Mr. Fowell beckoned her to a little alcove within the bushes two dozen feet away from their companions and out of view of the stable boy.

Nell had no desire to distance herself from them, and even less to enter an alcove where no one could see her, but neither did she know how to refuse. This was what they were meant to do, after all.

She followed him but stopped short of entering the alcove where he stood waiting.

"Tell me what you think of this branch here," he urged. He held one that looked identical to a hundred others that would *not* require her to lose sight of Lord Dalmeer and Miss Caldwell.

"Very pretty indeed," she said, craning her neck to appear interested from a safe distance. "We must certainly add it to our collection."

Mr. Fowell smiled at her, but it was a quizzical smile, as though he could not understand why she would not draw nearer.

She looked at Lord Dalmeer and Miss Caldwell.

The earl was attempting to clip a branch, but Miss Caldwell had insisted that they do so together, holding either side of the tool's handle. This approach, however conducive to opportunities for intimacy with the earl, was not an effective manner of clipping greenery.

The earl's exasperated eye caught Nell's, and she looked away hurriedly, trying to suppress a smile.

"What is it?" Mr. Fowell asked curiously. "What makes you smile so?"

"Nothing," Nell said. "I merely...had a memory."

"Oh?" He revealed his handsome smile. "Do tell. I am quite curious to know more about you, Miss Prescott."

Warmth rose to her cheeks, and she grasped for any memory she might offer that would explain her smile.

"Shall we go elsewhere to find something different?" Miss Caldwell called over, holding the back of her bonnet to her head as a small breeze

swept by, nipping at Nell's cheeks.

"Yes, let us," Nell agreed, wanting to embrace Miss Caldwell for her timely suggestion.

Lord Dalmeer sent Nell the most subtle of accusatory expressions as though he had hoped she would suggest they return to Bellthorne.

"Where shall we go, my lord?" Miss Caldwell asked the earl, taking his arm with both of her gloved hands.

"I know a place up ahead," he said.

They trudged through the shallow but crisp snow, avoiding the muddy spots as best they could, until Lord Dalmeer announced that they had arrived.

They faced a line of holly bushes, red berries brightening the mass of pointy, green leaves and looking very festive.

"How beautiful," Miss Caldwell exclaimed. "These will look very well in the passage."

Mr. Fowell began to walk along the bushes, examining them, and Nell crouched on the pretense of retying the lace of her boot to put a bit of space between them.

A pair of glistening black boots came up beside her, and Nell's heart jumped.

But a glance up informed her that it was Lord Dalmeer's boots, not Mr. Fowell's. The earl began clipping a holly branch. "Are you enjoying your time with Mr. Fowell?" He kept his voice low, as though he did not wish either Mr. Fowell or Miss Caldwell to hear.

Nell hesitated, glancing at the former, who watched from a dozen feet away. She returned her focus to her boot. "He is...very attentive."

Lord Dalmeer chuckled softly as he clipped another bough. "He is certainly that."

"And are you enjoying your time with Miss Caldwell?"

"Oh, immensely. She, too, is very...attentive. If these boots had laces, I would be pretending to tie them too."

Nell's cheeks filled with heat, but he shot her a smile, then returned to clipping the holly bough.

Nell stood and arranged her skirts.

"You know," Lord Dalmeer said conversationally, "I think you look a bit unwell, Miss Prescott."

Nell's brows pinched together. "I beg your pardon?"

He tilted his head to regard her, his eyes twinkling. "You look as though you have a touch of the headache."

Her hand stole to the hair beneath her bonnet, as she wondered just how disheveled she looked that he should say such a thing. "I find you quite uncivil, my lord."

Lord Dalmeer smiled. "Do you? And here, I thought I was helping you."

"By telling me I look unwell?"

He leaned toward her, speaking at a lower volume. "Believe me, Miss Prescott, you look very well."

Her stomach swooped as he pulled back and met her gaze, his own full of meaning.

Suddenly, she understood. He was trying to find a reason for them to return to the house.

"Very well," he conceded after her silence continued. "Not the headache. But are you not prone to take a chill?"

She failed to suppress a smile. "What a poor creature you think me, my lord."

"Only today. But if you also refuse to take a chill, you might pretend an injury. A gruesome one, even, if your pride prefers it."

"Must all rely upon me? *You* might pretend an injury just as easily as I."

He laughed. "Even if I did, it would do you little good."

She could not dispute this. An injury to her own person would require an escort to the house, while an injury to *his* would not.

Before the topic could be pursued, however, Mr. Fowell and Miss Caldwell returned.

Lord Dalmeer sent Nell a final, significant look, as if to say *Only you can save us* before turning to answer Miss Caldwell's plea for help.

They had no opportunity to converse further, as Mr. Fowell requested Nell's assistance searching out a few larger boughs to hang at either end of the passage.

Nell had a competitive enough spirit that she still wished to win the competition, and she suggested that a bow tied neatly in the center of the boughs would make a striking sight.

"I quite agree," Mr. Fowell said. "I found a few candidates for such an important position just over here."

Nell tensed as his hand pressed lightly against the small of her back to guide her.

Was he simply forward, or did he believe she would welcome such an intimacy because of her reputation?

“Oh, how pretty this one is!” She hurried to an entirely ordinary bough that was far enough away that Mr. Fowell’s hand dropped from her back. Thoughts of winning the competition gave way to a need to save herself from any more of Mr. Fowell’s familiarity.

Injury was looking more and more appealing.

“May I clip it this time?” She put out a hand for the shears.

“Of course,” Mr. Fowell said politely as he ceded them to her.

Nell studied the tool, trying to decide if there was a way she could cause herself injury without too much pain or danger. Perhaps she was a poor creature, however, for the prospect turned her stomach.

With Mr. Fowell’s eyes on her, she had no choice but to set to clipping the first bough. She grasped the branch with her left hand, avoiding the red berries.

An idea occurred to her, but it would require removing her gloves.

Her heart raced, and she glanced at Mr. Fowell, then let out a sound of feigned frustration. “These silly gloves!” She removed them, and he took them.

“Carefully now,” he adjured her, setting his hand in the same place on her back.

She forced herself to breathe evenly when what she truly wanted was to turn the shears on him.

“Now with as much force as you can muster,” he said. “I will help if you cannot manage.”

She stifled an eye-roll.

He was too close and watching too carefully for her to employ any artifice at the moment, though, particularly as she was not practiced at such things. She clipped the bough with a snapping sound, and it fell to the ground. She stepped aside for Mr. Fowell to retrieve it.

He stooped, and she took advantage of his distraction to grasp at a bunch of berries and pull.

She winced as the sharp leaves scratched the palm of her hand. Ignoring the stinging, she squeezed the berries until she felt liquid slipping through her palm. A drop fell to the snow beneath her.

Now was her chance.

What, precisely, was she to do, though?

She let out a scream and opened her hand, which stung as the berry juices soaked into the scrapes.

Mr. Fowell stood, his eyes rounding at the sight before him.

For a moment, Nell wondered what he would do, for he seemed frozen.

He made a convulsive movement and stumbled backwards. "My lord!" he managed to call out before clapping his hand over his mouth and averting his gaze.

Lord Dalmeer was already on his way over, while Miss Caldwell gathered her skirts and tried to follow as quickly as her dainty movements would allow.

The earl's gaze met Nell's, a question in it. It dropped to the shears she held, the red soaking her other hand, and the drips in the snow below.

The question in his eyes turned to apprehension, and he closed the final distance in two enormous strides. He took the shears from her right hand and tossed them a few feet away, then swept Nell into his arms.

Five

ARCHIE

Archie held Miss Prescott's body to his. "Remain with Miss Caldwell and Mr. Fowell," he instructed the stable boy, who looked nearly as green as Mr. Fowell.

His heart raced as he began trudging through the brittle snow toward Bellthorne.

Not in his wildest dreams had he imagined Miss Prescott would truly injure herself. Had he not been quite clear with her?

"How painful is it?" he asked.

"Not very," she replied, sending a glance behind them toward the others.

"I said *pretend an injury*, Miss Prescott. I would never in a million years have wished for you to—" He looked at her, his brows bunching together. "Are you laughing?"

Her uninjured hand covered her mouth, but her eyes were wrinkled at the sides, the lift to her cheeks betraying a smile.

He let out a disbelieving laugh. "Are you or are you not injured, Miss Prescott?"

She shook her head, eyes brimming with restrained merriment.

He pressed his lips together. "I have a mind to drop you this instant, you know. How did you draw bl—" He cut himself off. "The berries."

She put out her hand, reddened with juice. "I feared Mr. Fowell would take note of the difference, for upon inspection, it does not truly resemble blood."

"Mr. Fowell wanted nothing to do with you, to say nothing of making closer inspection. Though, it is valuable to know how you may keep him at arm's length, I suppose."

“I shall just traipse around the party with holly berry juice on my face, shall I?”

He grinned. “I wish you would.”

“Undoubtedly.” Her sparkling hazel eyes met Archie’s, and he was suddenly aware of her body pressed to his. He had never held a woman like this. Given the strange feeling in his chest, it would be advisable not to repeat the experience.

She looked over his shoulder. “They cannot see us from here. You may set me down safely.”

“Drop you, you mean?” Smiling, he set her down gently and put out a hand. “Let me see this holly berry juice, then. Fowell was not the only one fooled by it.”

She gave her hand to him, the palm stained red in a way that he saw now was more like wine than blood. He frowned as he noted a few uneven lines across the skin. “You *are* injured.” He touched a gentle finger to one.

She withdrew her hand quickly, as though startled. “A few scratches.” She clenched the hand shut and smiled at him, then continued walking. “Well worth it, I think.” She looked at their surroundings. “Only now, we will likely lose the competition, which is a shame.”

He thought of her behavior during the parlor game. “You are competitive.”

“Unfortunately so, I fear.”

“Then why did you refuse to play Blind Man’s Bluff?”

Her gaze flicked to him, then away, though a smile played at her lips. “I had a touch of the headache.”

He chuckled softly at the evasive but clever answer—adding the evasion to the collection of observations he was gathering.

He did not press her, however.

“We needn’t return if you would rather continue scavenging,” he said as they neared the house. “I happen to know a place where we could find a few more things to add to our arsenal.”

She considered him, looking tempted yet reluctant.

He smiled. “I shan’t put my hand on your back, if that is what you fear.”

The color rose in her face. “That was not what I feared, though I do think it would be beneficial for us to have a chaperone of some sort.”

He gave a little bow. "Your wish is my command." He led them around the west wing of the house, where he knocked on a curtained window. Just seconds later, it shifted aside, and a footman appeared, looking surprised to find himself facing his master.

Archie motioned for him to join them outside, and within minutes, they had their chaperone.

He led the way along the gravel path toward a wooded area that ran parallel to the French gardens and the fountain in their center. The trees sprawled over them in a canopy of mostly barren branches, but they had only walked another minute when they reached a little copse of pines.

Their conversation was confined to a discussion of which branches to clip, but without shears, they were obliged to break the branches with brute force, something only Archie could do given Miss Prescott's injury. A clip of the shears would fix the mangled edges easily enough when they returned to the house.

The footman had soon amassed enough branches in his arms that he was obliged to find a place to set them down before he could accept more.

Archie and Miss Prescott took the opportunity to sit upon an obliging log for a respite, and Archie instructed the footman that he might do the same.

He chose a stump a score of feet away.

"You know, Miss Prescott," Archie said, "I think we might help one another."

She glanced at him, her brows raised as she unfastened the strings of her bonnet. "In what way?"

"Well," he said, "*I* have no desire to be pushed toward every eligible female in attendance here, including Miss Caldwell, and I suspect that *you* have no desire to be pursued by Mr. Fowell."

A little *v* formed in her brow. "Yes..." It was as much question as affirmative response.

"If we made a point of spending time in one another's company, we might both avoid such things—and be all the happier for it."

Her eyes searched his. "Are you suggesting we...feign some sort of courtship?"

He chuckled softly. "I suppose I am."

She said nothing for some time. "I cannot think your mother would like that."

“No. She would not. Which is part of the allure.”

Her brow furrowed. “For *you*, perhaps. Not for me.”

His mouth drew up at one edge. “Do you care so much for my mother’s opinion?”

“Is that so strange?”

“Frankly, yes. Mother is...” He struggled to find the words to describe her. Silly was the first that came to mind, but it felt too unkind. He loved his mother. He simply did not *like* her a great deal of the time. “She is...”

“The hostess of the party I am attending. And a countess. It seems unwise to set up her back for a feigned courtship. At the risk of sounding selfish, my lord, I cannot see how that would serve me.”

“Well, at the risk of sounding arrogant, Miss Prescott, courting an earl *would* serve you, regardless of my mother’s opinion.”

“You are right,” she agreed. “It does sound arrogant.”

Archie smiled. “It is simply a truth of the world we live in. Beyond that, however, it is a known fact that I have no interest in marriage, which would make my display of interest in you all the more powerful.”

She considered this, and he watched her with amusement.

“My confidence is suffering a blow, Miss Prescott. I had not thought I would find it so difficult to persuade you to spend time in my company.”

“Oh, I am certain it would be very enjoyable, my lord.”

He bowed ironically. “You are too kind, ma’am.”

“You have persuaded me that I would benefit—perhaps enough, even, to make up for the damage it would do to your mother’s opinion of me. But what of you? Spending time with me would do *you* harm.”

“Again, I think you underestimate the benefits of my position.”

“Or perhaps *you* underestimate my reputation.”

He shifted, looking at her more intently. “What *is* your reputation?”

She regarded him, and he could see her considering her response. “Suffice it to say, my lord, that it is not good.”

“Capital,” he replied. “A woman with an impeccable reputation would not serve my purposes at all.”

She gave a grimacing smile. “You are very kind to make such an offer, my lord, but I fear I must refuse despite that.”

“I find you quite uncivil.”

The smile in her eyes acknowledged the echo of her own words. “How so?”

“In essence, you are telling me you would rather subject yourself to Mr. Fowell’s attentions than accept a hand of friendship from me.”

She laughed. “Is it mere friendship you are offering? I thought you were proposing courtship.”

“A friendship that others might interpret as a courtship.”

She smiled. “You are very persuasive. But I maintain my position.”

Archie sighed, leaning his elbows on his knees. “And therefore subject both of us to slow torture.”

“You are a resourceful man, Lord Dalmeer. I feel certain you will manage without my help—or my harm. There are plenty of other young women who would be happy to oblige you, I am sure.”

“Which is precisely the problem, isn’t it?” He rose to his feet. “I shan’t press you further, Miss Prescott, but I hope you will change your mind. If you do, a mere look will suffice to inform me of it.”

She nodded, though it was obvious she had no intention of changing her mind. “I think we have amassed enough greenery to do justice to the passage, don’t you? Shall we return to the house?”

Archie agreed, though his thoughts were elsewhere.

What *was* her reputation that she thought herself such a threat to him?

He meant to find out.



HIS ATTEMPTS WERE NOT MET with much success.

Freddie had no particulars to offer beyond some notion that it had to do with a man.

Archie asked Oliver Cole as they conversed in the drawing room before dinner too. Cole had a reputation as a determined flirt who knew all the young women. If anyone would know, it would be him.

Cole’s brow drew together. “Was she the one who shot her footman? No. I don’t think I am remembering right. That was Miss Littleview, wasn’t it?” He snapped. “Ah! She is the young woman who dressed up as a man and infiltrated White’s”—he frowned—“though I thought that was one of the Gilford twins. Hm. Prescott...Prescott...I know the name, but I cannot think why.” The corner of his mouth lifted provocatively. “I am more than happy to see what I can find out.”

Aware that this offer would likely end in Cole kissing Miss Prescott, Archie gripped the man's shoulder. "I would rather you didn't. I am enjoying the mystery of it. But thank you for the, uh...selfless offer."

Archie might have asked Mother about Miss Prescott, of course, but he would not give her the pleasure—and she was sure to exaggerate whatever the truth was.

A closer observation of Miss Prescott as they waited to go in to dinner easily kept Archie's interest, for he watched twice as guests avoided her company and another time as two of the gentlemen whispered about her.

More curious than ever, Archie took his usual place at the head of the dinner table opposite Mother but kept an eye on Miss Prescott for the duration of the meal.

Mr. Fowell seemed concerned that her injury would make using her utensils difficult. As he picked up her fork for her, her gaze flicked to Archie.

He lifted a brow.

She smiled but broke her gaze away and demonstrated that she was quite capable of holding a fork.

"Do share the source of your amusement, Dalmeer," Lord Stanhope said.

"You would not find it amusing even if I did."

He found his gaze veering to Miss Prescott many times over the course of the meal and a strange, twisted hope growing within him that Mr. Fowell would annoy her enough to make her change her mind.

Six

NELL

After the humiliating attempts to hand-feed her at dinner, Nell avoided Mr. Fowell in the drawing room as well as she could. She was relieved when he played cards almost the entire time with one of the other gentlemen. His concern over her injury had been genuine if shallow, for he had not seemed inclined to discuss the details before eating.

The guests mingled and talked, and Wesley and Millie performed introductions. Mr. Stroud was polite to Nell, but his sister's lips pinched together in a speaking way before she forced them into a smile—one that stretched large and genuine when she addressed Wesley afterward.

It was not the only cool introduction of the evening, but Nell tried to bear it with as much grace as she could, even when Mr. Kendrick's response to learning her name was a stiff bow and an "Ah, yes. I have heard much about you."

She tried not to sigh. It seemed her lot at Bellthorne to be treated to condemnatory looks and whispers—or even liberties being taken.

Plague take her reputation!

Once everyone dispersed to their bedchambers for the night, Nell paid a visit to Millie. Seeing her friend's accommodations—a fine, large room papered in pink with mint trim—only reaffirmed that Lady Dalmeer had chosen Nell's room for one of two reasons: to keep her as far as possible from the guests she truly wanted at Bellthorne or to make her experience there as uncomfortable as possible. Both, perhaps.

Nell did not recount her own experiences from the day to her friend, for Millie had far more exciting news to tell, and Nell's thoughts were still too jumbled to know what to say.

Perhaps she was being too sensitive and should be flattered by Mr. Fowell's attentions. She might call herself fortunate to be receiving such

attention from *anyone* after the scandal last year. How many times she had wished she could turn back time and shake herself for her naivety and selfishness.

The fact that Lord Dalmeer seemed to like her was unaccountable—except when she remembered that he had no idea why he should not be associating with her. Though, he seemed intrigued rather than deterred by the references she had made to her indiscretion.

Perhaps, then, it was not that he liked her but rather wished to use her for his purposes. Or he thought the damage to her reputation came from something trivial like arriving late to Almack's.

Should she have accepted his offer? She would not be opposed to spending more time with him, which was precisely why she had refused.

The last time she had allowed herself to spend time with a man whose company she had enjoyed, she had found her character in shreds and her heart bruised almost beyond bearing. The biggest difference in the situation, she supposed, was that at least Lord Dalmeer had been frank that he had no interest in marriage.

Now, her reputation was such that she was obliged to knock on Wesley's door after her tête-à-tête with Millie and ask him to walk her to her bedchamber for propriety's sake.

"How was your day?" Wesley asked as they made their way down the corridor.

"It was...interesting. And yours?"

He nodded. "Interesting is a good way to put it. Are you enjoying yourself?"

She kept her gaze ahead, but she could feel his keen eyes on her. Wesley felt responsible for her, and she had no wish to burden him with her cares when he should be enjoying himself. Finding himself a wife, even.

She smiled. "Yes, very much so."

"Have people been...kind?"

She thought of the way Miss Stroud had spoken to her—as though she was trying her very hardest not to hold her nose. She fancied Wesley, though, which she seemed to accept would mean finding a way to endure Nell. There had been others, though, who had taken fewer pains to pretend they welcomed her at Bellthorne.

"Quite kind," Nell reassured him as they reached the staircase. "Has anyone caught your eye?"

Wesley stopped, frowning and looking around. "Where are we going, Nell?"

"My bedchamber."

He looked at the stairs. "It is downstairs?"

Nell hesitated, wishing she had braved the walk alone rather than bring to her brother's awareness where she had been relegated. "It is very convenient at mealtimes."

He frowned.

She started down the stairs. "You were about to tell me whether anyone had caught your eye."

"There are a number of very agreeable young women here, of course."

"Miss Stroud, for instance?"

He glanced at Nell. "I have no thought of marriage or courtship at present."

"Why ever not? Surely, there is no better place for such thoughts than this."

"I simply wish to see you happy, Nell."

She stopped, incredulous. "But, Wesley, I *am* happy."

He gave her a flat look. "You know what I mean. I intend to see you well cared for."

Married. That was what he meant.

She laughed. "Good heavens. Please tell me we did not come here because you imagined I would find a doting husband in this house of well-bred, wealthy gentlemen. That ship has long since sailed."

He frowned in that deep way only he could, and when he spoke, his voice was soft. "You made a mistake, Nell. We all make them. And the true blame lies with that blackguard."

She swallowed.

After a year, Nell thought she had come to terms with what had happened. The heat in her cheeks at the mere mention of Henry Linton belied such a belief.

Wesley looked around. "This seems quite out of the way. I thought everyone was in one of the wings on the first floor."

"Even a house like Bellthorne cannot accommodate a party as grand as this in two enormous corridors. Besides, I quite like it in my little corner of the house." It was not entirely true, but she blamed no one but herself for her situation. "You may safely leave me here. I am just around this corner."

After hearing he had come to Bellthorne for her sake, Nell was even more reluctant to show him the corridor in which her bedchamber was located. He might well insist upon seeing the room itself, and that was sure to rouse his pity and frustration.

And to what end?

He would worry more and devote less of his energy to enjoying himself or, dare she hope it, falling in love.

Lord Dalmeer's offer again presented itself. If his interest would be a credit to her and lend consequence to her reputation, it might allay Wesley's worry.

She could not think the earl would stand behind the offer, though, if he knew the full truth of her history.

"Before you go..." She waited until his gaze met hers. "Promise me you will enjoy yourself, Wesley. That you will not worry over me so much. I cannot enjoy myself if you are not."

Wesley smiled slightly. "I will do my best."

"As will I."

"Good night, Nell."

She passed through the doorway into the corridor, glancing behind her to ensure he did not follow. The sound of his retreating footsteps reassured her, and she continued to her room.

She slowed at the sight of the light under the door of the bedchamber next to hers.

She had been quite certain she was the only one housed in this part of Bellthorne, but there was a distinct humming within. A man's humming.

Her stomach clenched.

Could Mr. Fowell have persuaded Lady Dalmeer to change his room to be nearer hers?

Surely, he was not so brazen. She was overreacting to his hand on the small of her back. He had merely been trying to keep her steady on the slippery ground.

She tiptoed the remainder of the distance to her room despite that, slipping inside with a glance down the corridor. Once her maid had helped her prepare for sleep, she locked the door, then verified it could not be opened before settling into her bed.

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“SHALL WE DIVIDE AND CONQUER?”

Nell tried not to raise her brows at the suggestion from Mr. Fowell.

She had assumed he would insist upon remaining together for the decorating. Yet more evidence she had been reading too much into his behavior yesterday.

He handed her a basket of red bows with a number of tacks in a cushion on one side. “Perhaps you would be willing to hang these between each bust on the east wall. I shall place holly boughs on the plinths.”

Nell took the basket willingly.

Lord Dalmeer and Miss Caldwell were taking on the passageway entries, where they would be draping garlands. From what Nell could see, Miss Caldwell would not be agreeing to the divide-and-conquer method. She kept quite close to the earl, as though she feared Nell might trip and hit her head on one of the busts, depriving her of her partner yet again. Miss Caldwell seemed to like Mr. Fowell well enough, but he could not compete with an earl—and certainly not against the Earl of Dalmeer.

Nell made her way to the first gap between the busts while Mr. Fowell detangled the first bough. There were sconces between every other bust, providing a convenient place to loop the ribbon. Anywhere else, she would use the tacks to secure it.

She made quick work of the first one, offering a smile to Mr. Fowell as he came to place his first bough on the plinth as she was moving to the next gap.

A glance down the passage brought her gaze to Lord Dalmeer.

As though he sensed it, his eyes met her. Was there a hint of accusation in them as Miss Caldwell’s fingers tangled with his on the greenery?

Nell smiled and went back to work.

By the time she had reached the end of the passageway, she was convinced she had been unjust to Mr. Fowell. Or perhaps he had decided she was not worth his attentions.

She had no desire to be the object of Mr. Fowell’s interest, and yet, somehow, she felt a bit piqued at the thought that he had lost interest in her. She was a walking contradiction.

Or perhaps she had simply been glad that he, at least, did not find her presence distasteful.

She reached into her basket for a tack and found there were none left. She looked at what remained of their task—at least a dozen more would be necessary.

“I must ask for more tacks,” she informed Mr. Fowell, holding up the basket. “I shall return directly.”

“Shall I go in your stead?” he asked.

See? He was thoughtful.

“I am quite glad for the exercise, but I thank you.” She gave him a smile, then made her way down the passage. It was looking very festive now, hung with red ribbon, the busts adorned with green and red holly, and the entries soon to be hung with greenery too.

The Antique Passage was shaped in an *L*, creating two separate but connected sections, hence Nell’s confusion the first evening. She had only passed through one portion on the way to her bedchamber that evening.

Lord Dalmeer stood atop a ladder at the base of the *L*’s turn, arms raised as he held a pine bough with one arm and tried to fix it in place with the other hand.

Miss Caldwell stood below, her face upturned to watch him, showing the pretty lines of her neck to advantage.

The earl’s gaze flitted to Nell as she approached, fixing upon her. “Is all well, Miss Prescott?”

“Yes. I am off to fetch more tacks. I have not been judicious enough in my use of the ones provided. Might you tell me where the nearest bell pull can be found?”

He let one end of the bough drop and made to descend the ladder. “Allow me to show you.”

“Oh, that is not necessary,” Nell said, noting the way Miss Caldwell’s brow had puckered. “You are occupied, and a few words of direction from you will suffice.”

Lord Dalmeer shot her a look that said *Curse you, unkind soul*. “You will find a cord past the end of the next passage, just before you reach the entry hall. On your right.”

“Thank you, my lord.” She offered a smile to Miss Caldwell, who returned it, seeming to feel more in charity with Nell now that Lord Dalmeer would remain with her.

Nell took her journey to the bell cord and found it precisely where the earl had promised. She gave it a firm tug, then waited, listening to the sounds of voices echoing in the nearby entry hall, which was being decorated by Lord and Lady Weymouth.

It was a few minutes before a maid answered the summons. Nell gave her the empty basket, and the maid disappeared once again.

Enough time elapsed in her absence that Nell began to wonder if the maid had become distracted from her task, but after nearly ten minutes, she returned with an overabundance of tacks and a breathless apology for the delay.

Nell assured her it was no trouble at all, thanked her, and made her way back down the first section of the Antique Passage.

Lord Dalmeer and Miss Caldwell had finished their work at the archway in the first section and had moved to another. The ladder stood at the ready, but there was a moment's discussion between the two of them.

Miss Caldwell smiled at the earl and put out her hand.

Lord Dalmeer took it, and she lifted her skirts to ascend the ladder. She wobbled slightly on the second rung, and Lord Dalmeer was obliged to stabilize her at the waist.

"Perhaps you had better hold me in place," Miss Caldwell said with a laugh.

Nell suppressed a smile as the earl's gaze met hers.

"Or I could take your place," he suggested, his tone light, but his eyes gently accusatory as they held Nell's.

"No, no," Miss Caldwell said. "I am quite determined. If we are to win the competition, I will not be satisfied if I have not done my part."

Amused by Lord Dalmeer's pretended distress, Nell smiled at him and continued around the bend until he and Miss Caldwell were no longer in view.

She stopped short to avoid colliding with Mr. Fowell.

"I was just coming to find you," he said. "I feared you had lost your way."

Her heart began to settle from its surprise, and she smiled. "The servants are quite busy fetching things, so I was obliged to wait. But we have plenty of tacks now." She held up the basket.

"Very good," he said, returning the smile. "Perhaps you could help me with something."

“Of course.”

He led the way past two more busts, then turned into the gap between two. “It is just here.” He turned his back to one of the busts to make space for her to join him.

Nell stepped in, her eyes searching for what he might be referring to. They had not yet decorated this area, however, so there was nothing to be tended to.

“What is it?” she asked.

Mr. Fowell did not respond. Looking at her with a slight smile, he stepped toward her.

Never had a step felt so full of import—or danger.

Nell matched it with her own step backward, but her heel met the plinth. Her heart raced, but she tried to persuade herself she was overreacting.

“Miss Prescott...” The low volume at which Mr. Fowell spoke and the look in his eye was enough to tell her she had not, in fact, been overreacting.

She took a quick step to the side and tried to keep her voice bright, though her heart thumped. “I should return to the ribbon. I am quite determined to win, you know.”

Mr. Fowell watched her, a curious light in his eye, as though he could not understand her.

“In fact,” Nell said, looking down the passage, “seeing just how much of the passage we have left to decorate, I rather think we will need more of that too. I shall call for it to be brought.” She did not wait for him to respond but instead made her way around the bend, exhaling in relief at the sight of the earl and Miss Caldwell.

Lord Dalmeer’s gaze fell upon her, and his expression shifted into something teasingly severe, only to change, growing alert as his eyes searched her face.

“I think we shall need more ribbon,” she said, annoyed to find her voice shaky. “There is still a great deal to do. When you have finished, perhaps you would be willing to help us...”

Miss Caldwell looked ready to make their excuses, but the earl spoke before her.

“Of course,” he said, his eyes still fixed firmly on Nell. “We are just finishing here. There is one more doorway to do, but my arms could use a

respite.”

Nell thanked them with all the genuineness she possessed, and for the next hour, she worked without fear of Mr. Fowell’s advances.

But she could not avoid him forever. She would not even be able to avoid him for the next two hours, for he would be seated beside her at dinner. She could only be grateful there would be enough people around them that he would likely be on his best behavior.

Had she given him some indication that she would welcome his advances? That was the question she continued to ask herself. Had her polite smiles been interpreted as something more? Or had he simply assumed what type of woman she was based on what he knew of her past?

Whatever the reason, it made her feel ill. Perhaps another year’s solitude would have been wise before venturing into public.

The four of them separated to dress for dinner once the Antique Passage was decorated, and Nell walked the length of the passage, noting the sound of footsteps echoing behind her on the stone floor. She was afraid to look back and find Mr. Fowell following her.

When she turned the bend, however, she could not prevent herself any longer.

But it was Lord Dalmeer who trailed her.

“Where exactly are you going, Miss Prescott?” he asked as he approached.

“To dress for dinner. Where are *you* going?”

“To dress for dinner.” He regarded her curiously, and they began walking the second stretch of the Antique Passage together. “Are you lost again? You might have followed Miss Caldwell and Mr. Fowell to the stairs, you know.”

“It would not have done me much good. My bedchamber is this way.”

He shot her a quizzical look. “Are you certain of that?”

She huffed out a laugh. “Unequivocally.”

He stopped, his amusement shifting to something more like concern. “Do you mean to tell me that you were given a bedchamber in that corridor there?” He pointed to the doorway that led to her room.

“Very astute, my lord. That *is* what I mean to tell you. Now, if you will excuse me...” She continued walking.

He skipped up beside her.

She gave him a strange look as they turned into the darker corridor.  
“You do not need to escort me, Lord Dalmeer. I was lost but the one time.”

“I am not escorting you.” He stopped.

She hesitated, trying to understand his strange behavior—until it dawned on her why he had stopped in front of the door next to hers.

He put a hand on the doorknob. “This is my bedchamber.”

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# Seven

## ARCHIE

The look on Miss Prescott's face was priceless.

"But...but...this is *your* house," she said.

"It is," Archie agreed. "What of it?"

"I merely thought you would prefer a room that..." She closed her pink lips.

Archie's amusement grew. "Are your accommodations not to your satisfaction, Miss Prescott?"

Her eyes widened. "No, they are quite...satisfactory, I assure you. I did not intend to give offense, my lor—"

"They are abominable."

She stared at him, her mouth open but soundless.

"I must apologize on behalf of my mother, who I can only assume is responsible for giving you that poor excuse for a bedchamber."

Miss Prescott let out a relieved laugh. "It is quite all right. I understand why she did."

Archie did not, however. There was a great deal he did not understand about Miss Prescott. What was more, he *wanted* to understand it.

"How did you fare with our dear friend Mr. Fowell today?" he asked.

Miss Prescott had passed Archie and Miss Caldwell when she had brought back the basket of tacks, only to return two minutes later, her color heightened and that same look of the chased rabbit in her eyes. Archie had observed Mr. Fowell enough to notice his interest in Miss Prescott—to recognize the way he looked at her.

She did not respond immediately, but her cheeks grew pink as she searched Archie's face. "The suggestion you made yesterday," she said, not answering his question, "do you still wish for it?"

"What? The pretended courtship between us?"

“Yes...that.”

He smiled. “Have you experienced a change of heart?”

Another hesitation. “Let us say my interest in the option has grown.”

He gave a shallow bow. “I am flattered, ma’am.”

She laughed softly. “I assure you, my lingering reluctance has little to do with you.”

“Little,” he repeated, intrigued, “but not nothing.”

Her cheeks infused with more color, and she gave a rueful laugh. “I only meant, my lord, that my hesitation remains a matter of consideration for *you* more than it is for myself.”

He frowned. “You must expound on such a statement, Miss Prescott.”

She swallowed, then lifted her chin slightly. “I assume you are familiar with my...history.”

“I am not. Merely that you think it an obstacle—and that it is perhaps the reason you believe yourself deserving of that hovel of a room.”

She glanced behind her, smiling. “It is sufficient for my needs, my lord. Is your bedchamber”—she nodded at the door he stood before—“so very different from it?”

“You may judge for yourself.” He opened the door and stepped aside for her to look within.

She hesitated, but curiosity lit her eyes, making him wonder just how often she refrained from doing the things she wished to.

“Go on,” he encouraged her.

After another pause, she stepped forward and peeked within. Her brows lifted.

Archie smiled as she looked at him. “Worse, isn’t it?”

“You can hardly expect me to agree with that.”

“Why ever not?”

“It would be bad manners to insult the accommodations in the presence of the host.”

“This host prefers the truth to flattery.”

“As do I.”

They regarded one another.

“Good,” he said. “How can I persuade you to pretend to be enamored with me, then?”

Miss Prescott laughed, just as he had hoped she would. “The true concern you should have is that when you know more of me, you will not

wish to be near me at all, to say nothing of pretending to be enamored with me.”

He straightened, regarding her intently. “Try me. What is it you did?”

She swallowed. “Very well. I...” She faltered, as though finding it difficult to say aloud. She pressed her lips together determinedly and lifted her chin. “I...”

“Shot a footman.”

Her brows snapped together. “What?”

“Did you shoot a footman?”

“Of course not.”

“I am certain he would have deserved it if you had. Very well. Go on.”

She looked a bit flustered, and he waited a few moments for her to gather herself.

“I...”

“Infiltrated White’s?” he suggested.

She stared.

“An impressive feat.”

“Undoubtedly, but not mine. Why would you assume it? Or that I had shot a footman?”

“When I asked Mr. Cole whether he knew what had caused you to fall under Mother’s disapproval, he could not remember the scandal attached to your name. Those were the ones that came to mind first. I confess, I am a bit disappointed. I maintain a hope, though, that the truth is even more shocking. The more scandalous, the better, as far as I am concerned.”

Miss Prescott let out a disbelieving laugh. “I find you quite strange, Lord Dalmeer.”

He merely smiled and waited.

“If you must know—”

“Beyond a vivid but passing curiosity, I have very little interest in your scandal, Miss Prescott. It is you who insists on telling me.”

She stared at him as though looking at a fantastical creature. “There is no scandal at all which would give you a disgust of me or make you think twice about pretending, in your words, to be enamored with me?”

He shook his head, only to stop suddenly. He put up a finger. “If you were known for murdering your suitors in cold blood, I might think twice. Then again, I rather think I would enjoy the challenge.” He tilted his head and surveyed her. “Is that your scandal?”

Another incredulous laugh burst from her. "Could you rely upon me to tell you if it was?"

Archie grinned. "I am becoming more and more attached to the idea. What a game it would be!"

"Then, you will be disappointed to discover I have never murdered a suitor in blood cold or otherwise."

He frowned. "Hm. You had better tell me the real reason for your besmirched reputation, then."

She smoothed her skirts, her color heightening again. "A year ago, I..." She let out a breath, and the next words came in a rush. "I nearly eloped."

Archie felt a flash of surprise, but he concealed it. "Nearly....Did you shoot the man?"

She blinked. "What?"

"You said *nearly* eloped. I only wondered if your penchant for violence was what put a stop to it."

She looked half-aggravated, half-amused. "I do not have a penchant for violence, my lord. I did *not* shoot my footman, nor do I murder suitors as a matter of course."

"That is precisely what a person who *did* murder her suitors would say, is it not? But very well. Let us pretend for the sake of argument that you are not prone to violence, and that a shooting was not the reason for your *near* elopement. Were you apprehended en route to Gretna Green? Did you become so violently ill in the poorly sprung chaise that you were obliged to give up? Or did you merely lose your resolve?"

There was a pause. "*He* did."

Archie's teasing humor flickered, for those two words cost her a great deal to say. "It sounds to me as though you are well out of a bad bargain."

She smiled wryly. "I believe *I* was thought the bad part of the bargain. He married two weeks later by special license. Something of an heiress, as I understand it." The smile she offered pricked his heart.

"Well," he said, "I would have preferred a greater scandal than a near-elopement, but I suppose it will do well enough for our purposes."

She gave him an enigmatic look. "You become ever-stranger. I assure you, I shan't be offended if you change your mind about the...uh..."

"Feigned courtship," he offered.

"Yes."

"I am as enthusiastic about it as I ever was, but if you cannot even say the words, Miss Prescott, I rather think you might struggle to carry out the action."

Her gaze grew thoughtful. "What *would* the action be?"

He looked at her in amusement. If she had nearly eloped with a man, she ought to understand a bit about courtship.

"I ask," she explained, "because feigning a courtship might help us now, but when it ends..." She took in a breath. "If people believed there to be an understanding between us, I doubt my reputation could sustain the blow the end of that understanding would cause."

He considered this. She had a fair point, and, truth be told, he had not thought too deeply about what it was they would do.

"It needn't be anything formal," Archie said. "Just enough to make it clear we prefer one another's company. To convey to Mr. Fowell that I take an interest in you and your happiness—and deter him from attempting anything...untoward."

"And to persuade Miss Caldwell of the same?" Miss Prescott teased.

"Miss Caldwell is a secondary concern for me," he said. "It is my mother to whom I wish to send a firm message."

"And what message is that?"

"That the more pressure she exerts, the more resistance she will meet."

"She has high hopes of you making a match from this party, I take it?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I am the one person she least wishes you to take an interest in."

"Yes." He searched her face. "Do I offend you in saying so?"

"No. As I said, I cannot blame your mother for her dislike of me. If I had a son, undoubtedly, I would feel the same way. Shall you marry to spite her, then?"

He frowned and regarded his boots. "Between the two of us, no. I have told her I do not mean to marry, but it would be nearer the truth to say I do not mean to marry anytime soon. When I do wed, it will be with due deference to my title. Some dull, wealthy woman with a pedigree she can trace to Edward the First, no doubt." Even the thought made him melancholy.

"Edward the First was anything but dull, my lord."

"Which is precisely why she would be. He kept all the best attributes for himself, leaving none to his progeny. But enough of me. Perhaps this

arrangement is not to your liking. *You* might well find a match here.”

“Mr. Fowell does not intend marriage, my lord. I think you know that.”

“And yet, he is far from the only one here.”

She shook her head. “I did not come with an intent to marry. I have been successfully dissuaded from that pursuit. And, as you have been frank with me, I shall be frank with you in return.”

“Please do be.”

“Just as I would be entirely unsuitable as a match for you, you would be unsuitable for me.”

He smiled. “I am certain you are right, but will you tell me why?”

She took a moment before responding. “You are too much like...him.”

It was quiet for a moment. “Should I take offense? I have no great opinion of the man, you know.”

“Not at all. He was handsome and charming and...far too capable of leading me into folly.”

“Like a feigned courtship.”

Her mouth broke into a smile. “Are you trying to dissuade me from it now?”

“Not at all. I merely wish to ensure it serves your purposes as well as it serves mine. If finding a husband is not your goal, what business have you at this ridiculous matchmaking party?”

She fiddled with her glove. “I have stayed out of the public eye for nearly a year now. I cannot do so forever. I came in hopes of reestablishing my reputation—assuming it is possible to do so.”

“Quite possible,” he said. “And at the risk of sounding arrogant again, allow me to reassure you on two points. Firstly, that attention from me *will* help to reestablish your reputation.”

“It does sound arrogant, as you say, but I believe you.” She clasped her hands. “What is the second point?”

“That I will take pains to safeguard your reputation.”

Her head tilted curiously. “How so?”

“I believe I am skilled enough to strike the balance between thoughtless flirtation and serious intention. Having said that, your own handling of my attentions will matter just as much—if not more. If you receive them with a confident sort of amusement, people will take notice without worrying that you are falling victim or lacking propriety or whatever nonsense people assume. Are you capable of that?”

She contemplated the question. “Yes.”

“I agree. In which case, this party will be over in less than three weeks, and we may go our separate ways at that point without, I trust, much to-do and with—if we play our cards right—renewed interest in you among the gentlemen in attendance.”

Her lips pressed together in a line. “My lord, I was not being coy when I said I am not contemplating marriage.”

“I did not think it.”

The echo of footsteps sounded somewhere in the Antique Passage, and Archie was reminded for the first time in many minutes that they were meant to be dressing for dinner.

How long had they been standing here together?

“I promise not to do anything that will harm your reputation, Miss Prescott. In return, let us agree to enjoy ourselves. Yes?”

She smiled. “Yes.”

He stepped toward her, reached for her hand, and, with a teasing smile, brought it to his lips. “Then let the games begin.”

# Eight

NELL

Nell was quiet as her maid helped her dress for dinner, her thoughts on what had just occurred. Had she truly agreed to this strange alliance with Lord Dalmeer?

On the one hand, it did seem like folly—to trust another man with her reputation when the last one had nearly destroyed it without a second thought.

On the other hand, she could not deny what the earl had said: he had the power to help her rebuild her reputation. As she had come to find out, it was inextricably connected to that of her family, and if there was a way to repair even a bit of the damage she had done with her mistakes, she could not refuse it.

At the very least, she could now look on the prospect of seeing Mr. Fowell with equanimity instead of dread.

The drawing room had been transformed with festive decorations, thanks to Lady Dalmeer's competition. It was a remarkably handsome room on an ordinary day, but with garlands and bows and mistletoe, it was breathtaking—and far more thoroughly decorated than the Antique Passage.

When the countess showed signs of wishing to proceed to the dining room, Nell looked around for any sign of her son, but he was not present.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noted Mr. Fowell making his way toward her from the other side of the room, where he had been speaking with Miss Stroud.

Nell looked again for any sign of the earl, as though she could possibly have missed someone with his presence even in a room as full as this one.

Just as Mr. Fowell reached her, the door opened, and Nell's heart skipped.

The earl strode in with his characteristic nonchalance, bringing a smile to Nell's face. The relief she felt was quickly replaced by a strange mixture of anticipation and nerves.

They had made an agreement together, but to make an agreement was quite different than to carry it out. She had a feeling the earl would not be satisfied with doing the simple or expected—if there *was* such a thing in this situation.

His gaze took in the room in an unhurried way, only to halt on her. The corner of his mouth lifted, and Nell's stomach somersaulted as she smiled back.

Mr. Fowell looked over his shoulder for the cause of her reaction just as the group began to file out of the drawing room. His gaze flicked back to Nell, to whom he offered his arm.

Whether that small interaction had been enough to give Mr. Fowell pause or whether he was simply on his best behavior because they were surrounded by the other guests, he did not do anything to make Nell uncomfortable over the course of the meal. She was able to divide her conversation equally between him and Mr. Hawthorne on her other side.

She found Lord Dalmeer's gaze upon her numerous times over the course of dinner, always with that little smile in his eyes that made her skin tingle.

The ladies retired to the drawing room after the meal, and Nell debated telling Millie about the arrangement, but as she considered how to convey her strange decision, she found it difficult to know what to say. She would rather see what Lord Dalmeer had in mind before trying to explain it to Millie.

The men rejoined them more quickly than usual, for Lady Dalmeer had instructed them not to linger. With great pomp and cheering, the Yule log was lit, after which the countess announced the winners of the decorating contest.

Nell was unsurprised to learn the drawing room was selected as the winner—the room for which Lady Dalmeer herself had been in charge.

Lord Dalmeer applauded with the others. “Very impartial of you, Mother.”

The prize for the winner was a holly crown and the choice of forfeits for the parlor game: Steal the White Loaf.

Lady Dalmeer had thus not only appointed herself the winner of the decorating contest, chosen the parlor game, and become the one to dole out forfeits—she had also appointed herself the one her guests had to steal the loaf *from*. Only, it was not a loaf but a mistletoe.

There was little subtlety about the countess. No wonder her son was so eager to resist her.

“A mistletoe rather than a loaf,” came an ill-concealed whisper behind Nell. “No doubt Miss Prescott will be eager to play.”

Nell stiffened, suppressing the urge to turn around and see who had said it—and who had snickered in response. She had been looking forward to playing, but with a lump in her throat, she determined that spectating was the wiser choice.

She had expected Lord Dalmeer to seek her company now that they were not constrained by the seating at dinner, but he stood across the room with Lord and Lady Weymouth. Perhaps all her talk of the fragility of her reputation had made him timid.

Keeping close to Wesley and Millie, Nell observed as guest after guest was caught trying to steal the mistletoe. She sipped her tea, fighting the urge to make her own attempt, for she was certain she could manage it without being discovered.

Lord Dalmeer made no attempt, but he could be heard laughing and making teasing comments every time Mother caught someone. No doubt he feared what forfeit Mother might require of him.

Nell could not blame him, for between each round, the countess tried to catch his eye. Lord Dalmeer merely smiled back at her, seemingly oblivious to the message she was trying to send.

Again and again, guests tried to surreptitiously snatch the mistletoe; again and again, they were caught and forfeits extracted from them—everything from reciting a poem to snorting like a pig. Nell began to wonder whether her lack of participation might cause more comment than the alternative.

Or perhaps that was merely her competitive nature attempting to justify participation. With her luck, she would be caught, and as forfeit, Lady Dalmeer would force her to recount the night she spent waiting for Henry at the inn.

It was but moments later that Nell heard a voice behind her. “Miss Prescott has not made any attempts,” a woman commented in a low voice—

not, however, low enough to prevent her from hearing.

“No doubt she has already forfeited enough,” came a man’s murmured but amused response.

“Or perhaps these forfeits are too tame for a woman of her... experience,” replied the woman.

Nell’s cheeks burned, and Wesley stirred beside her, but she caught his wrist and gave him a warning look. She hated that she had put him in a position where he felt the need to defend her honor—not that she had any left.

Miss Stroud was caught—Nell could have almost sworn on purpose—and was required to give a forfeit. She chose Wesley as the one to receive it.

A movement brought Nell’s attention to Lady Dalmeer as Mr. Fowell stepped up beside her and whispered something, covering his mouth with a hand.

Their gazes moved to Nell, and Lady Dalmeer smiled and nodded.

Nell looked away in a hurry, her stomach clenching as Mr. Fowell returned to his place.

The mistletoe was returned to the floor behind the countess, and she turned her back to the guests, adjusting the crown on her head.

There was a pause, and Mr. Fowell began to move, setting Nell’s heart racing.

Her eyes darted to the door. Could she step out quickly enough to avoid whatever he intended to do if caught?

“Excuse me,” she said to Wesley.

“Are you unwell?” he asked softly, worry creasing his brow.

She forced a smile to reassure him. “Not at all. I shall return in a moment.” She slipped past him, ignoring the question in Millie’s eyes, and threaded her way through the guests as quickly as propriety would allow.

She set down her teacup on the table near the door, wincing when the porcelain rattled, then reached for the doorknob.

“Ha!” came Lady Dalmeer’s delighted voice. “You are caught!”

Nell turned as though *she* was the guilty party. Only on her tiptoes could she gain a view of the front of the room.

Mr. Fowell stood a few feet from Lady Dalmeer, but he was not smiling. His expression was fixed elsewhere.

Nell shifted to follow it.

Lord Dalmeer stood in front of his mother, the mistletoe hanging lazily from his fingers.

Nell stared. When had he...?

She let her hand fall from the doorknob, relief rushing through her. Whatever Mr. Fowell had been planning, the earl had offered her a reprieve.

“Very well, Mother,” Lord Dalmeer said. “What is my forfeit to be?”

The countess could not have looked more thrilled if the Prince Regent had just arrived for the duration of her house party. “Your forfeit is this: to bow to the prettiest, kneel to the wittiest, and kiss the one you love most.”

Nell suppressed a scoffing laugh. It was a clever forfeit, for it would require her son to consider and then single out three women.

Lord Dalmeer gave a submissive bow. “As you wish.” He rose to a stand. “What was the first?”

“Bow to the prettiest,” his mother readily reminded him.

A smile tugged at Nell’s mouth as he began a leisurely stroll about the guests, as though he was half-heartedly admiring a garden.

He paused in front of his cousin, Lord Weymouth, smiling in a way both teasing and threatening. He tilted his head, considering his cousin’s beauty.

Weymouth gave him a look that said *if you bow to me, you may as well choose pistols or swords*.

After his inspection, Lord Dalmeer made an unimpressed expression, then continued his perusal of the guests. Nell lost sight of him for a time, though there was a general straightening amongst the women—both old and young—to mark his path.

Returning to her tiptoes, Nell caught sight of Miss Caldwell, eyes bright with expectation as the earl approached her and her mother.

But the earl did not pass in front of them, instead disappearing again as Nell’s view became obstructed by the tall men in front of her.

They parted ways of a sudden, revealing Lord Dalmeer, whose eyes fixed on her.

Her heart skipped several beats.

Everyone’s attention was upon her. There were murmurings in the crowd, and she was aware of both Wesley and Millie watching with wide, intent gazes.

Lord Dalmeer came to a halt two feet shy of Nell, his eyes sparkling merrily as they met hers, as if to say *are you ready?*

Everyone could see her face, while his back was turned to them.

Slowly, he went into a deep bow.

Blood crept up Nell's neck and into her cheeks.

She remembered the earl's words: *If you receive my attentions with a confident sort of amusement, people will take notice without worrying that you are falling victim or lacking propriety.*

If she looked bowled over by his choosing her as the prettiest, she would give the impression that she put great stock in the action—that she expected something from it. People might even assume she was repeating her past mistakes, only this time, they would laugh at her presumption for thinking an earl cared the snap of his fingers for her.

She smiled as Lord Dalmeer rose and gave a little curtsy of her own. “You are too kind, my lord.”

He held her gaze for another moment, then turned around. “What was the next one, Mother?”

The countess, who looked as pleased as Mr. Fowell at what had just happened, recovered her annoyance with a wide smile. “Kneel to the wittiest, Lord Dalmeer.”

She insisted on referring to her son by his title, perhaps to remind her guests in whose presence they were honored to find themselves.

Attention returned to the earl, and Nell tried not to betray her relief—or her curiosity over his next choice.

He walked casually amongst the guests, and Nell's eyes flicked from woman to woman, trying to anticipate whom he might choose. She did not yet know all of those in attendance—some had avoided an introduction—but even amongst those of her acquaintance, there was plenty of wit. The room seemed to lean toward the earl in anticipation, and Nell shifted her weight to the back of her heels to counter the same impulse.

Lord Dalmeer filtered through the guests at his casual pace, entirely oblivious to the disappointment he left in his wake.

Nell's gaze landed upon Miss Sterling. She seemed to be a great wit—and beautiful into the bargain. Nell had no notion of her financial situation or her pedigree, but she was dressed finely and held herself with the grace of someone of note.

And yet, Lord Dalmeer passed her by, making his way toward...

Nell's breath hitched as his gaze fixed on her again, the delight of surprising her in the lift of his lip at one edge.

She could not stop the laugh of disbelief that came from her as he stopped in front of her, lowered to one knee, and bowed his head as though kneeling before the king himself.

“You overwhelm me, my lord,” she said in as light a voice as she could manage.

“It is you who overwhelm us, Miss Prescott,” he said with the most charming of smiles.

It was all she could do not to roll her eyes at his theatrics.

He turned back toward his mother, who looked on with a decided frown.

A quiver of discomfort went through Nell at the reminder that this arrangement with the earl was assuring her descent further into her hostess’s bad graces.

Lord Dalmeer, at least, seemed to be achieving his goal very well.

“And the last?” he prompted his mother.

Lady Dalmeer did not seem inclined to answer his question.

“Kiss the one you love the most!” called out Lord Weymouth.

“Thank you, Freddie,” the earl said.

Nell willed her body to relax. Surely, Lord Dalmeer would not—

He faced her again, always with that twinkle of humor and enjoyment in his brown eyes.

She was tempted to take him by the throat and shake him, yet her sense of the ridiculous was too strong to do anything but laugh. Any fear she had harbored of having frightened him into subtlety fled like pigeons at a gunshot.

Had he not promised to strike the balance between flirtation and intention? Three forfeits surely tilted toward the latter, though she could not deny that their audience seemed more amused than scandalized.

Lord Dalmeer met her gaze. “Kiss, you say?” he asked loudly as his gaze dipped to her lips.

Nell’s stomach somersaulted.

Two other guests had given kisses on the cheek as forfeits. Lord Dalmeer could not be so dismissive of propriety that he would kiss her on the lips in front of every guest at the party, even to teach his mother a lesson. He had promised to safeguard her reputation.

He took a step closer, and it was all Nell could do to breathe, to say nothing of keeping the smile on her face.

His eyes, no longer sparkling, seemed to ask *do you trust me?*

Sudden fear gripped her. She *had* trusted him, but perhaps she had been too quick to do so, just as she had been too quick to believe Henry's assurances that he loved her and would care for her all their lives.

Lord Dalmeer reached for her hands, gripped tightly below her chest.

She surrendered one to him, and he lifted it away from her, slowly brought it to his lips, and pressed them to the back of her glove.

A laugh bubbled up inside her, emerging shaky but genuine—and full of relief.

The guests seemed to breathe a collective sigh, and a number of chuckles rippled through the drawing room.

The earl's gaze lifted to Nell's, and this time, his smile said *you should not have doubted me*. She marveled at how he could be so pointed with his attentions but do it with such a light touch that laughter and smiles abounded amongst the guests.

With the exception of his mother.

Nell's immense relief made her want to box his ears—a desire she shared with Lady Dalmeer, no doubt—but she determined instead to have her revenge upon him at the soonest opportunity.

The game proceeded, though the countess showed a bit less enthusiasm than before. The guests had drawn nearer the front for a better view, making an appreciable gap between them and Nell and Lord Dalmeer.

"Were you going somewhere?" Lord Dalmeer asked her as someone tried their hand at stealing the mistletoe again.

Nell's gaze flicked to Mr. Fowell, who wore a slight frown as he watched the game.

"I thought so," Lord Dalmeer said, following her focus. "Well, you needn't leave. I shall remain with you."

"It is kind of you," she said, "but I rather think you have done enough for one evening."

His mouth stretched into a grin. "And yet, I have only just begun. I have already seen two gentlemen look back here at you since my forfeits. I would say you are well on your way to becoming another one of Mother's successes."

"I very much doubt she would regard it that way."

"Oh, at this point, she would be delighted to see you find success with anyone but me."

A sliver of hurt lodged itself in Nell's chest, but she brushed it off. "She wants to see you happy."

He shot her a quizzical look. "How very charitable you are." His eyes narrowed as he regarded her more fully. "Except with yourself, I think."

"Oh, I hold myself in the very highest esteem, I assure you."

His eyes twinkled. "Rightly so. Ah! You see? There was Mr. Tinston looking at you. That makes three already. If you are not married by Midsummer, I shall eat the feather in Miss Stroud's hair."

This was a generous stake, for the feather in question was enormous. Nell was not certain what sort of bird could have supplied such a monstrosity.

Lord Dalmeer leaned toward her and spoke with a low voice. "What do you think of Mr. Hawthorne? Do you regard him as an eligible parti? Someone worthy of your deepest affection?"

"I am sure he is very amiable. But if I were to marry, my lord—something I deem unlikely—it would not be driven by love. It would be a sensible match. A vicar, perhaps."

Lord Dalmeer's brows went up. "A vicar?"

"A man of the cloth might be more inclined to have mercy on my past failings."

There was amusement in his eyes as he responded. "Or he might berate you all the more for them."

She frowned. "I think you too harsh, my lord."

"Realistic," he amended.

She lifted a skeptical brow. "If you value a realistic approach, I would encourage you to abandon any thought of finding a match for me."

"It is precisely my realism that drives me. I am quite determined."

"Like Mother, like son."

His brows pulled together. "Now, I find *you* too harsh, Miss Prescott."

She laughed, drawing glances from some of the people nearest them. She cut off the laugh with a clearing of her throat.

Lord Dalmeer regarded her. "I wish you had not done that."

Nell's stomach dropped, heat flooding her cheeks. "Forgive me. It is my misfortune to have a laugh that is both loud and distinctive."

"If you do not wish to be married by Lady Day, I would advise you to keep it well under control."

Nell blinked, suddenly confused.

“There is nothing quite so intoxicating to a man as making a woman laugh, Miss Prescott.”

Nell could not find a response and was saved the trouble by the applause that rang out as one of the guests sang his best rendition of *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* as his forfeit.

The natural sequel to this was the entire room joining in on the second verse, accompanied by Miss Caldwell.

“What was *that* about?” Millie asked when Nell rejoined her near the pianoforte shortly after.

“What?” Nell asked.

Millie shot her a flat look.

“It was nothing,” Nell said. “An attempt to garner laughs.”

Millie looked skeptical, but any chance for questions was drowned out by an energetic rendition of *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*.

Nell’s gaze flitted to Lord Dalmeer, who stood across the pianoforte next to Mr. Cole, both of them singing at the top of their lungs.

The earl’s gaze met hers, and he smiled even more widely.

So did Nell.

# Nine

## ARCHIE

Archie was late.

Mother had left to church some time ago, as had most of the guests.

Based on the lack of sounds coming from the next room, Miss Prescott had left some ten minutes ago.

He searched for his gloves, which were not in their usual place. When he had come to his bedchamber the night before, it was to find two footmen moving his belongings. Upon inquiry, they told him the countess had instructed them to have his things taken to the Lion Room in the west wing upstairs.

This had made him smile. Mother had discovered his proximity to Miss Prescott and was taking measures to put a stop to it.

Archie had told the footmen in no uncertain terms that his belongings were not to be touched without his express instruction, no matter what the countess said, and they had returned everything, even if not to their precise places.

When Archie opened the door to the church, a number of heads turned to look at him.

Miss Prescott was seated nearer the back, her brother on one side, Mr. Tinston on the other.

She raised her brows at him as if to say *making a scene again?*

He raised a brow back at her, indicating the man beside her, and she looked away quickly.

Archie made his way to the Dalmeer box pew, slowing as he noted that Mother was not alone within it.

He considered turning back the way he had come, but it was too late. Mother, the Caldwells, and the Bensons had all spotted him.

Mother waved him over eagerly and opened the pew's door for him.

He suppressed a sigh and continued there as the vicar took his place at the lectern.

“Merry Christmas, Mother,” Archie said, kissing her upon the cheek, taut as it was with her smile.

No doubt she had feared he would not come at all.

“Merry Christmas, my dear,” she said, returning his embrace. “There is a seat for you just there.” She nodded to indicate the only space left in the box—a place between Miss Caldwell and Miss Benson, both of whom smiled at him.

He offered a polite one in return and tried not to tread on Mrs. Caldwell’s toes as he took the place created for him.

“Merry Christmas, Lord Dalmeer,” Miss Caldwell whispered as the vicar welcomed them to the service.

“Merry Christmas,” he murmured back, his gaze veering to Miss Prescott.

Her eyes danced.

The vicar of the parish, Mr. Tomlinson, was a young and handsome man who had a great deal to say on the subject of Christmas. On any subject, really. He delivered his sermon as though each word should be sipped and savored by the congregants until they were intoxicated. In reality, they were more likely to fall into a drunken stupor and let out a loud snore.

The restlessness that took hold after an hour had elapsed seemed only to give Mr. Tomlinson a renewed fervor for instilling his audience with the seriousness of the subject at hand. Was this the sort of vicar Miss Prescott had in mind? He would bore her to tears.

A look in her direction informed Archie that Mr. Tomlinson had not bored her to tears but rather to sleep. Her heavy lids struggled to stay open, but they were no match for the entire chapter of the Book of Mark being read at a snail’s pace. Her eyes shut, and a moment later, her head lolled toward Mr. Tinston beside her.

Tinston glanced over in surprise, but when he realized she had fallen asleep, he smiled to himself, letting his eyes take in her head on his shoulder.

Archie lifted a brow.

Tinston obviously would not mind becoming better acquainted with Miss Prescott. He was a decent gentleman, but while he would not bore her

to tears, he was no match for her wit. She needed someone more engaging.

Though, she *had* said she wanted a sensible match.

Despite thinking it was a shame, Archie sympathized. His parents' marriage had been for love. A quick courtship, then marriage, then Archie born less than a year later.

He had watched their love match turn sour. Watched as Mother had driven Father nearly mad. Father had taken refuge in his duty, avoiding her whenever possible, while she had turned outward, filling the void with social engagements and expensive clothing.

Archie would far rather approach marriage as a strategic arrangement than to watch love turn sour and curdle.

After an hour and a half, his backside was numb, and Miss Caldwell and Miss Benson had both, at some point, drawn nearer to him so that he was obliged to keep his elbows pressed to his sides to avoid a degree of physical contact he had no desire for.

He could bear it no longer. Indeed, the only thing that had allowed him to endure so much of it was the saga of Miss Prescott's efforts to stay upright. Her brother had finally taken notice and roused her.

The embarrassment in her eyes and painted on her cheeks had made it necessary for Archie to cover a laugh with a cough that had momentarily paused the vicar's droning sermon.

Miss Prescott had shifted her body toward her brother and had, if Archie was not mistaken, taken to poking herself with something every time her eyelids began to droop.

But an hour and a half was too long. An hour too long.

Archie rose from his seat, drawing the attention of a number of people, and picked his way past the Caldwells and Mother, who tried and failed to catch his eye, as she always did.

Archie made his way out of the church, breathing in the chill, crisp December air and the blessed silence only to be found outside of Mr. Tomlinson's presence.

He considered returning to Bellthorne, but there was something he wished to do.

It was less than five minutes until the door opened and people began to file out.

Archie made his way back inside, wishing people a Merry Christmas as he passed them.

Mother was wont to spend at least half an hour gossiping after the service, but today must have been different, for she sought out Archie.

“Are you here to lecture me over leaving early?” he asked.

“No,” she responded. “I am quite glad you did, for I am sure it was only that which prevented him from keeping us another hour. Did you speak with Miss Caldwell? Or Miss Benson?”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “I can no longer remember a time in my life when anyone but the vicar was speaking.”

She swatted him with her fan. “How very vexing you are. It was not so long as that. And you might have used the time to speak with the young ladies.”

“And risk the vicar’s censuring looks? Mother, I do beg of you.”

“As though you care for such a thing.” Her eyes pleaded with him. “It is my dearest yuletide wish that you pay heed to one of these beautiful young women I have gathered at Bellthorne for you. For you to enter into the blessed state of matrimony—”

“You sound like Mr. Tomlinson. Now that you mention it, though, I did wish to thank you for inviting Miss Prescott to the party.”

The woman in question was speaking with Mr. Kendrick a dozen feet away.

Lady Dalmeer’s pleading posture gave way as she shot a glance in Miss Prescott’s direction. “Please, my son...anyone but her. You must believe me when I say she would be a decision you would regret for the rest of your life.”

“You would know something of that, wouldn’t you?” The words were out before he realized it.

Mother stiffened.

Archie spoke more gently. “I love you and wish you a very merry Christmas, Mother, but I need you to believe me when I tell you that I have no intention of marrying—and certainly not to be directed in such a thing by you.” He kissed her on the cheek again, then walked to Miss Prescott.

He stood far enough away not to disturb her conversation with Mr. Kendrick, taking the opportunity to observe instead.

She had a ready smile—and an engaging one—but there was a hint of reserve in her manner, as though she feared Mr. Kendrick might, at any point, remember her sins and throw them in her face. As the man was particular and a dead bore, her fears might not have been unfounded.

When they parted ways, she watched Mr. Kendrick, then noticed the earl.

She smiled at him and walked over. "I thought you had left, my lord."

"Did you? I was not aware you were conscious for the past two hours."

She bit her lip. "I did not sleep well last night."

"Lumpy mattress? Damp sheets?"

She shook her head but did not elaborate.

Archie offered an arm. "I would like to introduce you to someone."

She looked at him warily but slipped her arm through his. "Who is it?"

"Mr. Tomlinson."

She halted. "The vicar?"

He raised his brows. "After our discussion last night, I thought you might wish to meet him."

"I must watch my tongue near you."

"I expressly forbid it."

"We were discussing a purely hypothetical situation which, *if* it were to become reality—which I very much doubt—would take place several years hence."

"But why not plant the seed now?" He put his hand on hers to keep her from retracting her arm and pulled her toward the vicar, who was approaching. "Mr. Tomlinson. Allow me to wish you a merry Christmas and introduce you to one of our guests: Miss Prescott."

Her attempts to pull her arm from his ceased as politeness took over.

"Thank you for your lovely sermon, Mr. Tomlinson," Miss Prescott said.

"She was rapt, I tell you," Archie said. "Utterly rapt. In fact, she was just saying that it seemed to pass in almost the blink of an eye."

Her fingers pressed into his arm. If she had not been wearing gloves, her nails would have dug into him.

This should not have made him smile as it did.

"It is very kind of you, Miss Prescott," the vicar said. "I do feel I was not able to do the subject justice—I only presented half of what I had prepared."

Miss Prescott's fingers pressed into Archie's arm again.

"We have been robbed on Christmas day," Archie said. "What I *truly* wish to hear from you, however, are your thoughts on a different subject altogether."

The vicar's brows went up. "By all means. What subject is it?"

"Past mistakes," Archie said. "Tell me, vicar, *is* there mercy?"

The vicar's brow furrowed. "Well, yes, of course, but"—he looked at Archie more studiously—"what sort of mistakes?"

"Oh, anything," he replied. "But, for the sake of an example, let us say two young people were to act...rashly in matters of the heart. Society is unforgiving, of course, but what does the church say?"

The vicar looked between Archie and Miss Prescott warily, as though he feared this hypothetical situation was standing before him, preparing to act rashly together.

Archie opened his mouth to disabuse the man of this notion, but the vicar cut him off.

"Well," Mr. Tomlinson said, choosing his words with care, "as a man of the cloth, I strongly discourage any rashness at all, for it demonstrates an impurity of heart and instability of character that scripture tells us God cannot abide. But most particularly in matters where virtue is concerned, rashness would be catastrophic. God may forgive, but Society's judgment serves an important corrective function and should not be ignored."

Archie had intended to demonstrate the vicar's lack of mercy to Miss Prescott, stupidly not anticipating that the vicar's response would rub salt in her wound—or that he would assume it was Miss Prescott and Archie who were planning some sort of romantic mischief.

But Miss Prescott's eyes, fixed upon the vicar, danced with suppressed amusement.

"But what if the damage is done?" she asked.

The vicar's eyes widened.

Archie cleared his throat to mask a laugh. "I think what Miss Prescott means to say—"

"I quite understand what she means," the vicar said, his mouth tight. "Marriage. Marriage is the only answer when virtue has been compromised."

"Mercy from God," Archie said, as though working out a sum, "marriage to appease Society. Yes, that makes a great deal of sense." He looked at Miss Prescott. "You see...marriage."

Miss Prescott met his look with one that promised revenge before turning back to Mr. Tomlinson. "But, vicar, what if the man refuses to

marry? For, who in their right mind would marry a woman when virtue has been, as you said it, catastrophically compromised?”

Horror and confusion lit his eyes, which darted between them like a cornered dog.

“Mr. Tomlinson!” the parish clerk approached the vicar with an open registry in hand.

The vicar looked at Archie and Miss Prescott uncertainly, as though reluctant to leave them in the middle of such a fraught conversation.

“We shan’t keep you any longer,” Archie said with a smile. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Tomlinson.”

“Merry Christmas, sir,” Miss Prescott murmured as Archie guided them away from the vicar and toward the door.

He glanced over his shoulder to ensure they were out of hearing distance as the impulse to laugh bubbled up inside. “I think we have ruined his Christmas.”

“You are quite wretched, my lord,” Miss Prescott said.

“I?”

“Yes! You were the one who insisted upon introducing me to him. If you had not, none of this would have happened. I am mortified by my behavior, and now the vicar believes you and I are planning some folly.”

“Or that we have committed it already and I have refused to do my duty by you, though I don’t think he knows what to believe. But I have no regrets. I have never enjoyed a Christmas service more.”

“That *is* impressive, seeing as you left it early.”

“And yet still heard far more of his apparently abbreviated sermon than you did.”

The look she shot him sent a quiver of delight through him. Something about Miss Prescott made it feel like a victory anytime she showed true, unfiltered emotion. Perhaps it was because she was trying so very hard to contain herself. But it was the unfiltered version of her he most enjoyed.

“Are we to dine when we return to Bellthorne?” she asked.

“I believe so. Mother has planned for everyone to do silhouettes afterward.”

Miss Prescott’s step faltered. “Everyone?”

Archie watched her as they passed the lines of pews, his eyes slightly narrowed. “Decidedly everyone. Are you opposed to silhouettes?”

“Not to sitting for one. I shan’t be required to...draw one, shall I?”

“Oh, yes. You most decidedly shall.”

She shook her head.

“After such a reaction from you, no amount of opposition will change my determination.” He opened the church door for her, catching the sweet scent of violets as she passed.

“Everyone should be opposed to an attempt on my part at any form of drawing or painting.” She touched a hand to her head. “I am quite certain I feel the beginnings of the headache. Perhaps even a cold.”

Archie was prevented from responding, as Miss Prescott’s brother and Miss Hollis awaited her outside. Both of them looked at Archie with interest—and perhaps a bit of uncertainty—as he and Miss Prescott emerged from the church into the cold.

He had wondered if she would tell either of them of their arrangement, but based on the way they both looked at them, it did not seem as though she had.

They separated, and Archie was obliged to surrender to Mother’s insistence that he join Miss Benson and her in the carriage to Bellthorne.

The quick ride felt longer, in some ways, than the hour and a half sermon.

# Ten

NELL

Wesley helped Nell, then Millie into the carriage, and Nell settled in next to her friend for the ride home, looking through the small window onto the landscape of patched snow and mud.

“Lord Dalmeer is very attentive,” Millie said in a voice that failed in its attempt to sound casual.

Nell looked at her, then at Wesley, who was watching her closely.

“He wished to introduce me to the vicar,” she explained.

Millie and Wesley shared another look.

“To what end?” Millie sounded very much as though she had inferred a great deal from Nell’s explanation.

Based on his keen expression, Wesley seemed to share her inferences.

Nell let out a laugh. “Not due to whatever both of you are thinking. I had mentioned that, if I were ever to marry, a vicar might suit me, and he thought it quite entertaining to see that I became better acquainted with Mr. Tomlinson.”

Nell’s cheeks began to warm, for she did not think Wesley would approve of the exchange with the vicar. It had been unwise, but it had also been so amusing that she had not cared at the time.

Sitting in front of her brother and without the earl’s support, she began to realize just how improper it had been.

“But that does not explain last night,” Wesley said.

Nell’s mind returned to the game of Steal the White Loaf and how everyone at Bellthorne had witnessed Lord Dalmeer single her out not once but thrice. “The earl enjoys teasing.”

Why she was taking such pains to throw water over their assumptions—the very sort she and Lord Dalmeer were trying to cultivate with their arrangement—was beyond her. She disliked misleading her brother and her

best friend, particularly into believing the Earl of Dalmeer regarded her with any degree of serious intention, but the thought of explaining to them the reckless arrangement she and the earl had come to was equally unpalatable.

And yet, the plan had been working. Even since last night, fewer people had given her sidelong looks or whispered when she was near, and if they did, the tone was not one of hushed gossiping or pity but of curiosity.

Perhaps the future would not be so bleak as she had feared.



THE CHRISTMAS FEAST Lady Dalmeer had arranged might have been offered at Carlton House, so expansive was it. To the festive decorations in the dining room were added a dizzying assortment of dishes. Turtle soup, roast beef and goose, venison pasty, Yorkshire pudding, mince pies, and many Nell could not even name.

She was seated, as usual, beside Mr. Fowell and Mr. Hawthorne. The former's demeanor toward her had shifted since the other night, for which she was deeply grateful, but she caught him looking at her once or twice. No doubt he was struggling to reconcile his own opinion of her with the interest she was receiving from Lord Dalmeer.

She could not blame him, for if it had been true, it would have stretched the bounds of belief. Only Lord Dalmeer's tendency not to conform to expectation lent it any credibility at all.

Once the men had rejoined the women in the drawing room, Lady Dalmeer announced that everything was prepared in the Long Gallery for silhouettes, where pairs would take turns tracing each other.

Nell was relieved to find Lord Dalmeer in discussion with his cousin, Lord Weymouth. Capitalizing on his—and others'—distraction, she made her way to the door. She winced as she turned the knob, but it gave way without a sound. She opened the door just enough to slip through, then closed it gently behind her.

Letting out a relieved breath, she began the long walk to her bedchamber, a little smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. This was the passage she had taken her first day at Bellthorne. Now, she was well enough acquainted with the house to know that the Music Room and Tapestry

Room lay to her left. What the final room in the corridor housed, she did not know, which was why she started when its door opened as she was passing.

Lord Dalmeer emerged, pulling the door closed behind him. "Going somewhere, Miss Prescott?" A smile played at his lips. "A touch of the headache?"

"Yes, if you must know."

He came toward her. "You look far too well for anyone to believe such a thing."

Her heart skipped. She wished he would not continue their ruse when they were alone. It was too confusing. "Appearances can be deceiving, my lord. I declare I am quite ready to faint from the pain."

"Then I shall be here to catch you—and take you to the Long Gallery, where you may distract yourself from the pain by demonstrating your tracing skills."

An image of him carrying her limp form in his arms flashed across Nell's mind, reminding her of when he had carried her toward the house after her pretended injury.

"Or," she offered, "I may enjoy my headache in peace in the comfort of my bedchamber."

He regarded her thoughtfully. "If I am forced to partner with Miss Caldwell, I shall be very displeased, Miss Prescott. We have an arrangement, do we not?"

"Is there a reason you must join the party in the Long Gallery? Why not plead the headache yourself? Or an unstable digestion?"

His lip quirked in a half-smile. "I quite yearn to see my portrait in silhouette form. I am impossibly vain, you know."

"Then you had better let Miss Caldwell do it." She began walking, only for him to put out his arm, barring her way, his fingers wrapping around her waist.

Her heart leapt into her throat, and she met his gaze, now so close to her own.

She should have wanted him to release her, but she did not. Instead, she wished the arm that hung at his side would join the other at her waist.

This was why she should not be at this party; all her impulses were wrong.

She was not proper and respectable. She wanted Lord Dalmeer to pull her into the room he had emerged from, stare into her eyes, then press his lips to hers, for no one's benefit but their own.

Her cheeks warmed, and her gaze darted down the corridor. "If they find us here together, tongues will wag."

"Tongues will wag no matter what. Will you please come to the Long Gallery, Miss Prescott?"

She hesitated, finding it difficult to deny him just now—or to deny herself more time with him. All she could think about was the feel of each of his fingertips at her waist.

Down the corridor, the door to the drawing room opened, releasing the sound of happy chatter.

Nell's eyes widened, and she looked at the earl, a sense of panic growing within her.

"Come," he said, pulling her toward the door he just emerged from.

They slipped inside, and he shut the door softly.

His eyes stared into hers, and Nell's heart hammered. She was vaguely aware of a billiard table in the center of the room.

"I promised I would not let your reputation come to harm, did I not?" His eyes held none of their usual humor. They were intent, their brown darker than usual, like the forest floor after rain.

She nodded, though she could not see what he intended to do to prevent it. Her own absence from the silhouette gathering might go unnoticed. After last night, the absence of them both might well occasion comment Nell could not afford.

"This way." Taking her by the hand, he led her across the room.

Nell's steps behind him were quick, but not as quick as her heartbeat. It was her fault as much as his that they were in this situation, for he had made it clear he expected her to participate in the silhouettes, and she had tried to sneak away despite it.

Perhaps she had even hoped he would come after her.

They passed through a door into the Tapestry Room, which was dimly lit with walls covered in fading tapestries.

"You will slip out just after the group passes." Lord Dalmeer's gloved hand still gripped hers as they walked to the door. He stopped at it, cocking an ear. "The one in the billiard room squeaks."

"And what of you?" The question was breathless.

“I shall wait to join until you have all assembled in the Long Gallery.” A little smile lit his eyes. “Three minutes should suffice, don’t you think?”

She let out a shaky laugh. “The bare minimum.”

His smile widened, and he looked as though he was about to say something, but the deep rumble of footsteps increased in volume. He put an ear to the door. “Here they come.” He put a hand on the knob, then stepped aside so that when he opened the door, it would conceal him.

Nell ran her hands down her dress.

Lord Dalmeer took her hand and held her gaze. “Confidence, Miss Prescott.”

She took in a breath and straightened, and the footsteps and voices grew louder, then began to dissipate.

Lord Dalmeer gave a curt nod, then opened the door enough for her to slip out.

The last of the group had just passed, and blessedly, none of them turned when she emerged. She picked up her skirts and hurried up behind them, not even hearing the door to the Tapestry Room close.

Wesley was just ahead of the stragglers, and after ensuring she was not breathing too rapidly, she quickened her pace just enough to catch up to him.

His head turned, his brow furrowed. “There you are. I could not find you in the drawing room.”

“I...stepped out for a moment. I was not certain I wished to participate.”

He smiled slightly. “I am sure you are not the only one in the group who wishes her skill in drawing was stronger.”

“Perhaps not,” Nell said faintly, for she could feel Mr. Fowell’s eyes upon her.

Had he noticed where she had come from? Or that Lord Dalmeer was absent?

They took the stairs to reach the Long Gallery, which was a wide and lengthy corridor, papered in peach tones and covered with artwork. It had grand windows to exhibit the abundance of paintings it housed, but night had fallen, leaving it dark except for a dozen candles, set at even intervals between portraits. Pieces of paper had been fixed on the walls, and baskets of pencils and shears sat atop a table at the near end of the gallery.

“I had thought you were not joining.”

Nell turned and found Mr. Fowell beside her.

"You disappeared from the drawing room," he explained, his shrewd gaze on her.

She had been so focused on avoiding the earl's notice that she had paid no heed to whether Mr. Fowell had been watching her leave.

"I was a bit warm," she said.

He merely smiled, but the shadows of the room gave it an unsettling air. "And where, I wonder, is Lord Dalmeer?"

Heat rose in Nell's cheeks, and she could only be grateful it was too dark for him to see. She looked around. "I have no notion. Perhaps his mother knows."

"Hm."

"If you will excuse me," Nell said, giving a shallow curtsy, "I must speak with my brother." Before Mr. Fowell could say anything, she walked away, forcing herself to breathe. He could not have seen her with Lord Dalmeer. He was merely assuming things based on what he knew of her.

She hated that he was right.

Not entirely right, of course, for nothing untoward had passed between Lord Dalmeer and her.

But she had wished for it to.

No wonder Lady Dalmeer did not want her at Bellthorne.

"Would you care to partner, Miss Prescott?" Mr. Tinston said, pulling her from her thoughts before she had reached Wesley, who stood with Miss Stroud.

Three minutes had certainly passed, but Lord Dalmeer was nowhere in sight. The quality of the dim lighting made it difficult to be sure of anything not within a few feet of her, though.

"I..." Again, she looked for the earl.

It was a compliment that Mr. Tinston was asking to partner with her. She had no wish to give offense by refusing his offer when she had no reason to.

Nor, however, did she wish to give offense by the terrible silhouette she would inevitably create.

But she could think of no alternative or excuse to give him. "I would be—"

"Miss Prescott." Lord Dalmeer came up on her left, appearing, not for the first time, as if from thin air. "I have our things ready. Do you wish to sit

or trace first?" He looked at Mr. Tinston. "Ah, forgive me. I did not mean to interrupt."

"No, no," Mr. Tinston replied. "I had not realized Miss Prescott had a partner already. I shall leave you both to the important task ahead. Good evening, Miss Prescott. My lord."

Nell smiled and bid him the same, then turned to the earl. "What an interesting concept of three minutes you have."

He smiled, then took a pencil. "Three minutes at a minimum, you said." He led her down the gallery, and they passed Mr. Fowell, who was too busy tracing Miss Caldwell to notice.

Lord Dalmeer led Nell to the only open space: the last stool and candle in the gallery. At least they would be far from Mr. Fowell's eyes.

Lady Dalmeer swept into view, wearing a wide—and forced—smile. "Lord Dalmeer, I had intended for Miss Prescott to partner with Mr. Tinston."

"You know what they say about intentions, Mother. Next time, perhaps. Mr. Tinston would be happy to do *your* silhouette, I am sure."

Lady Dalmeer looked at Nell, who had no notion what to say and settled on, "What a wonderful idea for an activity this is, my lady."

The countess offered a sour smile, then swept away again.

"Sit or trace?" Lord Dalmeer asked Nell, unbothered by the exchange with his mother. Did anything ever bother him?

"Neither."

Smiling, he handed her the pencil. "Trace, then."

She set the pencil down on the stool and worked to remove her gloves. "I have warned you sufficiently, my lord, and now you will have only yourself to blame when your vanity is wounded." She picked up the pencil as he came to take his seat.

"My vanity is made of stern stuff, Miss Prescott."

"We shall see."

He situated himself on the stool so that his profile was parallel with the wall. The light of the candle in front of him cast a shadow on the paper affixed to the peach wallpaper.

It was strange to see the familiar shape of his face without the details that brought it to life—the glint of humor in his eye or the charm of his smile.

Face resolutely forward, his eyes followed her with that very glint of humor as she passed him to take her place at the wall. She put her pencil to the paper, setting it where the shadow curved for his hair, which waved gently, leading naturally to the crown of his head.

The shadow suddenly shifted.

She looked at Lord Dalmeer, who was watching her. "You must sit still, my lord."

"Yes. I shall do that." He returned his gaze ahead.

She continued along the curve of the back of his head, hoping her hand would steady by the time she moved to the most difficult section: the face.

She tried her best to follow the shadow of his tailcoat collar, and once that was done, she lifted her pencil and moved to the face.

No sooner had she begun to trace the line of his forehead when it disappeared entirely.

The earl's head was turned toward her again, his gaze upon her.

She dropped her hand to her side. "Are you, in fact, capable of sitting still, my lord?"

"I very much doubt it."

"Well, unless you wish to be a faceless monster, you must turn your profile to me again."

He shifted obediently, but the line of the forehead did not precisely match the one she had begun on. She did her best but was stopped no less than three times by the earl's gaze shifting to her.

"I like to watch you trace," he defended, returning to the proper position. "It is far more entertaining than sitting here."

"Entertaining for whom?"

He chuckled as she traced the other side of his collar, then stepped back to survey the finished product.

She let out a sigh and pulled the paper from the wall. "It is not a factual likeness, perhaps, but it captures your capricious spirit."

He stepped off the stool and came to look at it over her shoulder.

Something very much like a snort ruffled the hair at her ear, and she looked over her shoulder, her breath catching when her nose nearly collided with his.

"It is every bit as good as I had hoped it would be," he said, his voice shaking with amusement.

“And every bit as good as you deserve, my lord,” she said, the last two words coming out with a bite of acerbity. “Let us see how *you* do.” She set down the silhouette on the floor against the wall, gave the pencil to him, then took her place on the stool, trying to decide whether to be the model of stillness or to make his task as difficult as possible.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him go to the wall and hang a new piece of paper.

He took the pencil and put it to the paper, and Nell understood the impulse to turn her head and watch him. Smiling, she surrendered to it.

His hand halted on the paper, and he turned his head to look at her.

“Miss Prescott,” he said patiently. “Would you kindly turn your head forward?”

Without a word, she complied.

He went back to his task, and Nell let him trace for a few seconds before slowly turning her head to watch him.

He stopped again, and even though she could not see his mouth, she saw the lift of his cheek betraying a smile.

He strode over and stood before her, his free hand on his waist. “My dear Miss Prescott, every time you turn your head, I must stop tracing your lovely silhouette. And even when you return your head to its place, it is not in the same exact position it was before.”

“Maddening, isn’t it?” she said sweetly.

His lip lifted at one edge, and he put a finger to her cheek, guiding it back to its proper place. His eyes flitted to the wall to check that the shadow matched the little work he had done.

Nell admired his real-life profile, thinking yet again how unjust a world it was where a man born with every privilege of position and wealth should also be so handsome. Or that his touch should affect her so.

He dropped the finger from her cheek and returned to the silhouette.

How very ordinary her profile must look. At least it matched every other ordinary thing about her. The only extraordinary thing she could boast of was the scandal she had made. What an offering!

The next time she shifted—this time not on purpose—he walked over to her with a feigned breath of aggravation to move her head to the precise position in which he needed it.

Gaze fixed on the wall, his finger lifted her chin from beneath. “There.” His gaze met hers, and he smiled.

She returned it, and his finger lingered, his eyes searching hers.

Her breathing paused, suspended as they regarded one another in the flickering candlelight. It gave a false sense of privacy that made Nell's skin tingle and her eyes want to explore every bit of his face.

He dropped his finger and cleared his throat. "If you move again, I shall have no choice but to give you horns."

"Your mother would like that."

He laughed. "Be *still*, Miss Prescott, or horns shall be the least of your worries."

"Oh?" But she kept as still as she could.

He tweaked the position of her face once more. "Yes. For, I find that I have the same problem as you."

"A mortifying lack of feminine accomplishment?"

"No, though I suppose I do have that problem as well. The problem"—he met her eyes again, and his gaze flickered to her lips for a fraction of an instant before he dropped his hand—"is that when I am with you, I am inclined to do things I ought not."

Nell's heart raced, but her body kept still for the duration of the tracing.

# Eleven

## ARCHIE

The village of Applebury was teeming with people. Archie could not remember the last time he had seen it so lively—not that he made a point of going there much.

It was St. Stephen's Day, though, which meant the servants had the day to themselves. The vicar had arranged a fete in the village—paid for by Archie, though Mother took the credit—where people could buy tickets to play a variety of games. The proceeds would go to charity for the parish.

Archie had not intended to come at all—indeed, he had told Miss Prescott he would not—but after a morning of estate business, he had found the house strangely silent. This should have pleased him, but instead he felt restless, and then, his conscience had pricked him for leaving Miss Prescott to face the vicar and Mr. Fowell on her own.

So, here he was.

He tipped his hat to various familiar faces as he took in the happy scene.

“Lord Dalmeer!”

He shut his eyes before arranging his face in a smile and turning. “You can call me Archie, Mother. You gave me the name, after all.”

“I did not think to see you, my dear,” she said. “It is a pleasant surprise.”

He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “I aim to please, Mother.”

She turned her head, searching amongst the crowds. “Miss Caldwell was watching the blacksmith's demonstration last I saw.” She said it as though it was the question that had been burning in his bosom.

“How thrilling for her. And what of Miss Prescott?”

The countess's lips pressed together, and she looked at Archie. “Must you always be in company with that woman?”

“I truly must.”

“Hmph. I thought you shrewder than that.”

He gave a little scoffing laugh. “Than what?”

She turned to him. “Oh, Archie, you must see it, surely.”

He looked around the fete, feigning bemusement at what he was meant to see.

“She means to *trap* you.”

Archie lifted an amused but skeptical brow. “Does she?”

“Yes,” Mother said. “You cannot be ignorant of her story—how she eloped with that man, only for him to leave her at a common inn after... taking her virtue!” She shuddered. “And because she could not persuade him to wed her, she thinks to trap *you* into marriage. Setting her sights even higher, as though she had not forfeited any claim to gentility.”

Archie’s jaw ached, and he forced it to unclench.

Mother put a hand on his cheek. “I know you are trying to vex me by paying her any heed, my dear, but I beg you will not. These desperate young women can be very cunning, you know, and I would hate for you to be taken in.”

He grasped her hand and pulled it gently but firmly from his cheek. “Mother, there are fifty people present at Bellthorne, but I assure you, the only one trying to trap me into marriage is you.”

She blinked at him. “Trap? Good heavens, my dear. Is a mother not permitted to want the best for her son? And may I remind you what is at stake if you continue to refuse to marry?”

The reference to his cousin Thomas was unmistakable—and not wide of its mark. Thorne would taint the family legacy and mismanage the estate until it was unrecognizable.

If Archie had possessed a younger, sensible brother to take on the title, he would not have bothered marrying, but Thorne changed the equation. Archie’s secret fear was that some accident would befall him, leading his cousin to take his place before he was ready to consign himself to marriage and its resulting heirs.

“I am confused,” Archie said. “Which do you regard as the greater threat: my cousin as Dalmeer? Or Miss Prescott as my wife?”

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“I shall leave you to reflect. Have a good day, Mother.”

Archie inhaled a large breath of cold air, forcing it into his lungs as he walked through the crowds. Mother was often aggravating, but he had rarely been so out of charity with her as just now. The idea that Miss Prescott was attempting to trap him into marriage was as laughable as the idea of Mother as a scullery maid.

Beneath his annoyance, however, was a thread of curiosity. He did not know how much of Mother's information about the near-elopement was accurate rather than information warped and exaggerated through gossip, but the idea of Miss Prescott alone at an inn could not help but make his chest pinch with sympathy.

Archie watched two of the guests roll cheese wheels before his gaze veered to Miss Caldwell and her mother, sipping from mugs. Based on the smell wafting through the chill air, the contents were mulled wine.

He regarded Miss Caldwell, imagining a life married to her. She might be forward, but she was pretty and well-mannered and the daughter of a baron, which was why it made no sense at all that the prospect was so unpalatable to him. Was it because her interest in him seemed pragmatic rather than romantic?

That was the point, was it not? A marriage in which he expected and wanted nothing more from his wife? Miss Caldwell would enter the contract with the promise of title and status, while Archie would do so with the knowledge that he was fulfilling his duty.

Better that than to be swept up in love as his parents had been, only to watch that love curdle over the years and be left with nothing but fond memories of the past and a tense and loveless future.

He caught sight of Freddie and his wife taking their turn at cheese rolling, and the smiles they shared sent a jolt of envy through Archie's chest.

"Dalmeer," Cole said with a tip of the hat.

"Cole," Archie responded, offering a polite smile to the young woman at his side. She looked familiar, but it was not until they had passed that Archie realized where he had seen her: at Bellthorne, carrying a heap of folded linens. She was one of the maids they had taken on for the house party. Perhaps that was why she was trying to hide her face.

He chuckled softly, shaking his head at Cole's antics, then slowed as Miss Prescott came into view. She stood beside her brother and Miss Hollis at the ring toss. She flicked her wrist, sending a ring flying through the air

and onto its mark. The delight on her face as she turned to Miss Hollis made Archie smile.

Mother might think Miss Prescott cunning, but she was the most artless and genuine woman of his acquaintance. He was never in her company but he found himself smiling.

In fact, more and more, he found the prospect of participating in any activity without Miss Prescott insupportable. It was why he had come to the fete at all—not simply to satisfy the arrangement they had made or to relieve his conscience. He had come to see her. To be with her and enjoy her.

The realization settled in him uneasily.

He did not approach her. He stood, rooted to the spot, trying to decide what to do with the way Miss Prescott's smiles brought about his own, the way her laughter made his chest ache with affinity when the ring sailed wide of its target.

His pulse hastened, and he took a step backward, for every moment his eyes rested upon her, his affection seemed to grow, and along with it, his unease.

He should not have come.

He began to turn as Mr. Fowell approached the ring toss, his gaze on Miss Prescott.

Annoyance flashed through Archie.

Confound the man's persistence.

Mr. Prescott and Miss Hollis were tossing their own rings and did not notice Fowell come up behind Miss Prescott.

He said something that brought her head around, and her smile after the victory of her last toss flickered, then turned polite.

She offered a response, her eyes darting to her brother, who was focused on tossing a ring.

Archie sucked in a breath and strode over. "Miss Prescott!"

She turned, and when she saw him, he felt her relieved smile in his chest.

"I bear good news," he said. "The mulled wine has been replenished." He put out his arm for her. "Ah! Good day, Fowell."

Fowell inclined his head politely, though his eyes held a glint of annoyance.

Miss Prescott took Archie's arm, then smiled at Fowell. "Forgive me. I have worked up a great thirst. I hope you enjoy the fete."

"I hope you do not mind, Prescott," Archie said.

Miss Prescott's brother smiled and shook his head. "Not at all."

"We shall find you after taking some refreshment." With a tip of his hat, Archie led Miss Prescott away, his body full of a new awareness of her proximity.

"I think Mr. Fowell...suspects something," Miss Prescott said in a low voice.

Looking down at her beside him, Archie lifted a brow. "Is that not what we were hoping for?"

Her cheeks and nose were pink from the cold, nearly matching the lips he found his gaze drawn to more and more frequently.

She shook her head. "He was watching me after I joined the group in the corridor last night. He connected our simultaneous absence, and I am quite certain he thinks that you and I...that we...."

Archie's stomach dropped. He had promised to do nothing that would compromise her reputation, but the moment he had seen her slip out of the drawing room, he had been determined to follow her.

And then when she had tried to leave him in the corridor, he had acted rashly, stopping her. He had not even realized he had taken her by the waist, and when he *had* realized it, his fingers had not obeyed his command to release her.

"Forgive me," he said. "What happened in the corridor...I...forgot myself."

She glanced up at him, searching his face before speaking. "I should not have tried to sneak away."

He smiled slightly. "That we can agree upon." He paused, his brow furrowing again. "*Will* you forgive my thoughtlessness, Miss Prescott? I promise I shall ensure no harm comes to you."

"There is nothing to forgive," she said kindly. "I only mentioned it to make you aware."

They reached the mulled wine, and he took two mugs, giving the man a coin in exchange.

Miss Prescott leaned closer, bringing with her the hint of violets. "I detest mulled wine."

Archie chuckled. "Well, as Fowell is watching us at this moment, you will have to risk him knowing we lied or gird your loins and drink it."

She looked into the cup, and after a moment's hesitation, brought it to her lips and tipped it back.

She took one gulp. Then another. And another.

Archie's brows went up with each one, until finally, she sputtered.

She covered her mouth with a hand, and Archie placed a hand on her back until she had recovered.

"Well," he said, "he will certainly not think you detest it. He may well believe you to be passionate about it. Are you well?"

"Of course not," she said, putting her gloved hand to her mouth.

He laughed. "You had better turn toward me, for your enthusiastic consumption"—he guided her so that she faced him—"is still insufficient for convincing when compared with the expression you are wearing."

"You told me you were not coming," Miss Prescott said, still recovering from her overzealous acting.

*I wanted to see you.*

"Yes, well," Archie said, "after forcing you to join in the silhouettes last night, I thought I owed you an appearance."

She let out a laugh. "Appearing at the event your family is sponsoring is your idea of payment for the humiliation you forced upon me last night?"

"I assure you, the cost of sponsoring this fete is nothing in comparison to what it costs me to be here."

"Poor Lord Dalmeer," she replied with humor in her eyes. "I would not wish for you to faint from the harrowing toll of attending a joyful village fete."

He put the back of his hand to his forehead and shut his eyes. "All I ask is that you catch me if I do faint. The ground is muddy, and I am partial to this coat."

"It is handsome," she agreed. "I have never caught anyone before, but I cannot imagine it is so very difficult."

"Child's play." He considered her a moment. "Let me buy you a ticket to play nine-pin with me."

"That is very kind of you, my lord. But *would you survive?*"

He let out a resigned breath. "I shall find a way."

She smiled, and he wished he had come an hour earlier.

He thought of what Mother had said about the failed elopement—how Miss Prescott had been left at an inn by the man she thought she would be marrying.

It defied credulity that anyone could abandon the woman in front of him.

“Perhaps Wesley and Millie would care to join us,” she said.

“By all means, let us ask.” He did not particularly wish for their company, truth be told. He had nothing against Mr. Prescott or Miss Hollis except that being with them would force Miss Prescott to divide her attention, and evidently, Archie was fiendishly selfish when it came to her.

However, nine-pin with the four of them was more entertaining than he had expected. Watching Miss Prescott at the ring toss had been amusing; playing nine-pin beside her was enchanting, filled with so much laughter that his cheeks began to ache.

And all the while, within him were growing two distinct but parallel emotions: fear and something a great deal like love.



NO DOUBT that was why Archie found himself wandering the house that evening, peeking into various rooms without actually entering. He had told Mother he was going to bed early, and yet here he was, roaming the corridors like a lost duckling.

When he reached the library, he paused in the doorway. The room, like all the main ones, had been decorated by Mother’s guests and was looking particularly inviting. Miss Prescott’s friend, Miss Hollis, sat in a chair with an open book, which meant, Archie hoped, that Miss Prescott might be found nearby.

He glanced around, but without opening the door wider, his view was too obstructed to confirm the hope. He stepped inside decisively, and Miss Hollis looked up.

“Good evening, Lord Dalmeer,” she said with a kind smile. It was followed by a glance to her right as Miss Prescott approached the free chair near her friend, a book in hand.

Miss Prescott slowed at the sight of Archie, her mouth stretching into a smile that resonated down to his feet.

“It looks as though we had the same idea,” he said, ignoring the fact that not once in the past six months had the idea to read in the library presented itself to him.

Miss Prescott’s smile turned amused, as if she knew this somehow. Her eyes flicked to her friend and back to Archie, as if to say *You needn’t perform for her*. She took a seat on the sofa and opened her book, though her gaze rose to Archie’s over its edges as he made his way to the shelves and pulled out the first book he touched.

He took it back with him, debating for a moment over which seat to choose. The vacant spot next to Miss Prescott called to him, but he chose the chair across from her instead.

Mr. Tomlinson would marvel if he knew the might of Archie’s chivalry.

He opened his book, but his eyes were far more interested in reading Miss Prescott’s expression than the text before him. Her peaceful presence was at odds with the liveliness she had shown in the village—her wine consumption in particular.

Miss Prescott’s gaze lifted, catching his, and she smiled slightly with a quick glance at Miss Hollis, who was immersed in her reading.

Three more times Miss Prescott caught Archie looking at her, and twice he found her looking at him. Those two times were little victories even Nelson would have appreciated.

Miss Prescott’s peaceful pose grew more restless as the minutes passed, and finally, she rose.

Was she leaving already?

Miss Hollis looked up as though with the same question.

“I am not enjoying this book,” Miss Prescott explained. “I think I shall look for another.”

“Heaven knows there are enough to choose from,” Miss Hollis said with a smile. “I have not even ventured upstairs.” Her eyes returned to the page.

Miss Prescott made her way to the shelves, her fingers running along the spines and her head tilting as she read certain titles. Eventually, she reached the stairs that led to the second level of the library, where a path wrapped around three of the four walls, enclosed by a railing.

She lifted her skirts and took the stairs up.

Archie's restlessness soon eclipsed hers. He was not enjoying his book, either. Perhaps he should choose another, as well. Miss Prescott seemed to have found a selection more to her liking.

He looked at Miss Hollis, wondering if the decision to follow her friend would be noticed—and how she would look upon it.

But Archie and Miss Prescott were meant to be pretending some sort of courtship, were they not? Miss Hollis was enough of an audience to demand it. Or justify it, at least.

Archie rose, and though Miss Hollis seemed to note it, she continued reading. He took the stairs with the lightest feet he could manage, his heart beating faster than the ascent could explain as he stopped a few feet from Miss Prescott and began perusing the titles.

"Dissatisfied with your selection, my lord?" she asked.

"Most certainly."

She turned to him. "Perhaps I would enjoy it."

Archie looked at the front of his book and, for the first time, realized the title he had chosen: *A Complete Treatise on the Human Bowel and Its Disorders*. He cleared his throat, trying to control his amusement. "Do you think so?"

"I am far more open-minded than you suppose," she said, putting out a peremptory hand.

"By all means, then." He put the book in her hand and watched as she read the title.

She rolled her lips between her teeth, her eyes flitting to his.

He clasped his hands behind his back and looked at her with polite interest. "Do you think it shall be to your liking?"

"The very topic I have been pondering on recently."

"Mm. You will no doubt be here until the wee hours of the morning."

"You may depend upon it. But what will *you* read? Shall I choose for you?"

He gestured to the shelves to welcome the suggestion.

She tapped her lips with a finger as she browsed the selection, and Archie was momentarily distracted by their shape and perfectly pink hue.

"Yes," she said, pulling out a title. "This ought to keep you engaged." She handed it to him.

His gaze held hers as he received the weighty tome. "I am certain you are right." He looked down.

*A Lady's Complete Guide to the Domestic Arts.*

He controlled his mouth with effort. "You know me so well, Miss Prescott."

"Shall we?" She put out a hand, inviting him to lead the way to the stairs.

They shared another look, both trying to maintain sober expressions, and Archie preceded her. "I am anxious to begin. As, I imagine, are you."

Miss Hollis's gaze was upon them as they began their descent, and it lingered for a moment before dropping to her book again.

Archie and Miss Prescott resumed their seats and opened their books, sharing a glance before both of them focused their attention on their respective subjects.

Minutes passed.

Then half an hour with only the gentle ticking of the case clock and a dozen shared glances.

They had not verbalized a formal challenge, but instinctively, Archie understood that Miss Prescott was every bit as determined as he not to be the first to break the act.

For what seemed an age, Archie read how to pickle cabbage, air the linens, perform both ornamental and plain needlework, and instruct children in matters of virtue.

He rather thought he had the easier read, as more than once, Miss Prescott's face screwed up in distaste, making it nearly impossible for him to maintain a studious expression.

It was Miss Hollis who saved them from their self-inflicted torture. With a grand sigh, she closed her book and stood. "I think I shall go to the drawing room. Will you join me, Nell? Or will you remain here?" Her gaze flicked to Archie.

Archie raised a brow, watching as Miss Prescott battled what he could only assume were three priorities: propriety, a desire to win this ill-advised exercise in education, and the growing need to think of something besides the bowel.

"I should like that," she said, putting the book aside.

"So soon?" Archie said. "Well, I bid you good evening, then, ladies."

They both curtsied and left the room, and as he read one more paragraph, all Archie could think was that Elinor Prescott was something out of the ordinary.

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# Twelve

NELL

Nell knocked on Millie's door, hoping her friend had not already gone to breakfast. Millie had acquired a mystery admirer, and Nell was anxious to hear if any progress had been made toward discovering his identity.

Muffled voices could be heard within, but the door soon opened.

A maid with blonde hair under her cap appeared. It was Clara, the same maid who had given Nell jumbled directions the first evening at Bellthorne.

Millie dismissed Clara, and Nell stepped aside for her to pass, then entered the room. "I heard voices and assumed it was your maid."

"I hoped Clara might help me find whoever is sending me notes."

"Did she?"

"Not yet, but I am hopeful." She regarded Nell curiously. "I can only assume you come with news."

"I was hoping you would tell me whether you had learned anything more about those anonymous notes, but I see that it is every bit the mystery it has been."

Millie sat on the trunk at the base of her bed and sighed. "I do not understand why the man has not made himself known if he admires me so."

Nell sat beside her. "Men are strange creatures."

Millie looked over at Nell, the corner of her mouth lifted in a smile. "Do you include Lord Dalmeer in that assessment?"

Nell pulled back a bit to regard her friend.

"Come, Nell. I know you are keeping something from me, and I am even more certain it is about him." She took Nell's hands. "I know you, and I have seen the way you two are together."

Heat rushed into Nell's cheeks, and she scrambled for an explanation. But Nell also knew Millie well enough to realize that it would be better to

tell her the truth than to have her run away with romantic notions about what was, in reality, a practical arrangement.

“What you have seen,” Nell said, “is an orchestrated performance.”

Millie’s eyes narrowed.

Nell pressed her lips together, trying to decide how to explain the incomprehensible choice she and Lord Dalmeer had made. “The earl and I agreed to act as a sort of...shield for one another.”

“Meaning...”

“I did not wish to be pursued by Mr. Fowell, and the earl did not wish to submit to his mother’s matchmaking schemes. He wishes to make her understand that she cannot dictate to him in the matter, so he chose to spend time with me—the person she least wishes him to.” She forced a smile.

Nell had been well aware that Lady Dalmeer disliked her since before she had met the earl. Why, then, did speaking that truth aloud feel heavier now than it had before?

Millie gave an incredulous laugh. “That is brilliant! And how amusing it must be for both of you.”

“It has certainly made the party more pleasant than it would have been.” Nell grasped Millie’s hands tighter. “But please do not say anything to Wesley. I am certain he would not approve, and I quite understand why. I did not wish for him to worry over Mr. Fowell’s unwanted attentions, but I am quite sure I have chosen an equally foolish path in this arrangement to avoid them.”

“I shan’t say anything,” Millie said. “But you must know your brother only wishes for your happiness, and no one who saw you and Lord Dalmeer together could assume the two of you are anything other than happy.” She put up a hand to stop Nell’s objection. “I know you say it is all performance, but, Nell,”—she lifted a brow—“I do not think it is. And”—she cut Nell off before she could reply—“the fact that he chose *you* as the person to make such an arrangement with speaks volumes of his regard.”

Nell scoffed. “He chose me with the express intent of irritating his mother, Millie. That is the *opposite* of regard. And understandably so. My reputation is—”

Millie stood, cutting her off. “Not everyone regards you with as much harshness as you regard yourself, Nell. In fact, I doubt that anyone does. Or could. We shan’t argue about it anymore, for I am quite hungry and likely to

say something I will regret, as you well know.” With a wink, she put out a hand, and Nell took it, rising to her feet and squeezing Millie’s hand.

“You have stood by me through it all,” Nell said. “I could not have asked for a better friend.”

“You would do no less for me.”

That was true enough. Millie was like a sister to Nell, so much that she found herself wishing that Wesley and Millie would make a match of it. Millie was far too caught up in the mystery of her admirer, though, for there to be a foundation for the hope, and every time Nell dared to broach the subject, it was brushed aside.

Much like Nell had brushed aside the suggestion that Lord Dalmeer’s affection for her was more than performance.

Nell could not afford to hope such a thing.

He had chosen her specifically for her unsuitability. When combined with his assurances that he did not mean to marry for many years yet—and would do so dutifully when he did—hope would be a strange response indeed.



AFTER THE EXCITEMENT of the previous day, the guests seemed inclined to remain at Bellthorne in calmer pursuits. Breakfast was taken late and at a leisurely pace, after which many chose to read or embroider or play at cards. Two of the more aged guests had fallen asleep, their heads lolling in their chairs.

Lord Dalmeer was absent, and Nell tried not to give in to the feeling of disappointment this left her with—or to pay any heed to the way her heart leapt when he appeared in the drawing room in the early afternoon.

His gaze took in the scene, then settled on her, a smile forming on his lips.

How long had he remained in the library with the book she had chosen for him?

The effect of his appearance was an all-encompassing sense that all was right in the world—and Millie nudging Nell inconspicuously as the earl traversed the room toward them.

“I had worried what I was missing,” Lord Dalmeer said, taking a seat next to the chaise longue where Nell and Millie sat, “but I can see I needn’t

have.”

“Do not be deceived,” Nell said, a current of energy running through her at his proximity. “It has been very lively. Mr. Bowles has snorted himself awake no less than three times, which made his wife start and poke herself in the finger.”

The earl smiled. “Perpetual excitement, then.”

“Precisely. But after yesterday’s exertions, no doubt you required rest.”

His eyes twinkled. “I have been with my steward all morning, I will have you know.”

Their smiling gazes held until Nell realized Millie was watching them with a glint of humor in her eye.

The earl rose from the seat he had just taken. “And because of that, I have no desire to sit or snort or sew. I think a stroll about the gardens is in order.”

Nell looked through the window. It was December 27th—not exactly the best time of the year to admire the roses.

“The winter garden,” Lord Dalmeer said, seeming to understand her response. “It is sparse but not without interest, I think. Will you join me?” His eyes were fixed on Nell, but after a moment, they flitted to Millie in invitation, as though he had just remembered she was there.

Millie was eager to venture outside, and Wesley too, and soon they had a party of nearly a dozen who returned to their rooms to don clothing appropriate for the day’s cold temperatures and gray skies.

They had agreed to meet in the saloon in a quarter of an hour’s time, and Nell made her way there in her warmest coat and gloves, tying her bonnet strings as she walked.

“Miss Prescott.” Lord Dalmeer skipped up beside her at the end of their corridor, wearing a dark blue greatcoat and a black top hat, his gloves in hand.

Nell smiled. She couldn’t help herself. Moments alone with Lord Dalmeer had come to feel like the times she had stolen a Bath bun from the kitchen as a child.

No doubt, she would reap her punishment soon enough, just as she had then.

As they walked, she tried to tie the loop on her bonnet ribbons but failed, for her gloves were new and too long in the fingers.

“Here,” Lord Dalmeer said, cutting in front of her. “Allow me.”

She looked at him skeptically. "Is tying bonnet ribbons one of the domestic arts your reading helped you acquire?"

"My skill pre-existed that, in fact," he said as he took the ribbons. "Compared to tying a cravat, a bonnet ribbon is a mere trifle." He pulled the bow taut with gentle hands.

Their smiling eyes met, and Nell's heart fluttered. Millie's hopeful comments had clearly wormed their way into it despite her best efforts.

She took a step back and tried to look down at the bow, an impossible feat. "I must trust that you have not overstated your skill."

"It would be impossible to do so." He winked, and they continued walking.

There were already a half-dozen people in the saloon when they arrived, and the rest followed quickly.

Lord Dalmeer led the way through the tall French doors, a gust of chill air blowing into the room as they followed him out.

The winter garden was larger than Nell had expected, with nooks and crannies to explore. It was primarily gray and brown, the main color coming from the ivy that dominated the rectangular space. On closer inspection, though, hellebore, winter aconite, and winter jasmine brought pops of color to an otherwise dreary world.

Nell tried not to feel satisfaction when Lord Dalmeer remained with her as the group began to break off into pairs. This was the agreement they had made, and he was doing it as much for his own good as for hers.

Millie cast Nell a look, one of her eyebrows lifted subtly.

Nell lifted her own back at Millie, as Wesley was beside her.

"The secret language of friends," Lord Dalmeer said, apparently noticing the exchange.

"I was obliged to tell Millie about our arrangement," Nell explained as they strolled past what looked to be a promising bunch of snowdrops, yet to bloom.

"Obliged? How so?"

"She was...overly eager about what she had witnessed between us."

The silence that followed this had Nell stealing a glance at him from the corner of her eye.

He was frowning.

"I was quick to disabuse her of such a notion," she assured him.

"And yet the look she just sent you..."

Nell hoped that the nip of the air was justification enough to him for the color in her cheeks. “Millie is the very best sort of friend, who loves me enough to disregard my past—and ignore that it is not so easy for others to do.”

Lord Dalmeer stopped in front of a patch of white and purple hellebore and clasped his hands behind his back. “Then I too am *the very best sort of friend*.”

Nell regarded him. He had not meant that he *loved* her, though; merely that he disregarded her past. As a friend. Allowances could be made for friends which were simply impossible in romantic attachment and marriage.

“I have always liked the winter garden,” he said, looking around.

“This is the first I have ever been in. What is it that draws you?”

He reached out and touched a purple hellebore petal. “My mind can grasp how a beautiful flower may bloom in the lush conditions of spring and summer. But to see something so striking survive the elements and bloom despite them is miraculous, I think. And enviable.” He looked at her.

Nell met his gaze but could not find the words nor the capacity to respond, thanks to the tightness in her throat.

She *had* weathered elements of her own. She had survived. In Lord Dalmeer’s company, she sometimes felt as though she was thriving, even—something she had not thought possible.

“Will you tell me?” he asked.

She swallowed. “Tell you what?”

There was a pause, and when he spoke again, his voice was soft. Gentle, like his eyes.

“About what happened that night.”

# Thirteen

NELL

Nell's stomach twisted into a hundred knots.

Lord Dalmeer wanted to know about the elopement.

Not just that it *had* happened. He wanted to know *how* it had happened. The details that Nell had told no one because they were too humiliating to relive.

What would he think of her if she told him? Would he find her as pathetic as she found herself?

That would be impossible. But he would think differently of her, and she hated that thought.

But perhaps that was precisely why she needed to tell him—to crush the seeds of hope that were trying to push up through the frozen ground of her history.

“We met in York.” She forced herself to begin before she could find an excuse not to. “We were introduced at a ball. We danced. And we danced again. I had never laughed so much.” She smiled slightly at the memory. “He called the next day. And the day after that. The next few weeks were a blur. I had never been courted before. Never been so admired. It was a heady feeling, and I succumbed quickly. His family did not wish for the match, but he did not care. He never wavered in his desire to be wed, and though deep down, I knew it was not right, he insisted eloping was the only option, for his parents would put a stop to it otherwise. Again, I succumbed. He was so...persuasive and charming that I hardly noticed myself agreeing to things I would not otherwise have.”

“Far too capable of leading you into folly.”

Nell glanced up at the earl, surprised to hear him repeat her words. She gave a wry smile. “Just so.” She took another breath before continuing. “He told me to meet him at an inn early one morning, where we would begin the

journey to Scotland. I had hoped to take one of our horses, but Father was traveling, and our only remaining horse was limping, so I was obliged to walk nearly three hours. I left a note with my family.

“I should have known something was amiss when he arrived an hour late, for he was quiet—very much out of the ordinary for him. We made the first part of the journey and stopped for a change of horses, intending to travel through the night. He engaged a private parlor for dinner and said he would join me after seeing to the changing of the horses.”

She forced herself to take a slow, even breath and to say the words with no emotion. “He did not join me. I waited. And waited. The food went cold. The fire had to be stoked. I think I knew, for I waited far longer than I should have. I suppose I was afraid of hearing the truth. When I finally left the room and asked the innkeeper if he had seen Mr. Linton, I was given a note. An apology.” Her throat thickened, but she swallowed the emotion away. “I was obliged to put up at the inn for the night and walk home the next day.”

She tried to brush away the memory of the harrowing approach to her home, agonizing for three hours over what she would say to her family. “Two weeks later, there was a notice of his marriage to the young heiress his family had been trying to encourage him toward.”

It was quiet except for the wind, and Nell could not bring herself to look at the earl.

“And because of this coward,” he finally said, “you are determined either *not* to marry at all or to marry Mr. Tomlinson.”

A laugh escaped her. “You know very well I have no desire to marry Mr. Tomlinson.”

“Why ever not?” His eyes teased her, and the levity made her heart pang.

She had just recounted her most shameful moments, her most humiliating folly, but rather than looking at her with pity or disgust, his eyes sparkled with shared amusement, as though her imprudence was...nothing.

“For one thing,” she said, “he would never agree to such a match—thanks, in part, to your work the other day.”

“It was a joint effort, I think. But what if he would?”

She hesitated. Mr. Tomlinson was respectable. He had a living—and one not so very far from her own family home. If he were to make her an offer today, what would she say?

Her stomach swirled. “I *should* say yes.”

“Should,” the earl repeated.

She smiled ruefully, reaching for a hellebore bloom. “That is why I have no intention of marrying, my lord. My heart insists on marrying for affection, but my mind...”

“Is terrified by the thought.”

She searched his face as little snowflakes began to swirl in the air. “Yes.” She wanted to love and be loved, yet nothing frightened her more. She tried to infuse her voice with more peaceful acceptance than resignation. “So, until my heart accepts that practicality will suit me best, I shall continue as I am.” She offered him a smile.

His gaze was thoughtful until it flicked somewhere behind her. He began walking again, for their privacy was soon to be interrupted by other guests exploring the garden.

It remained quiet, and Nell began to regret her candidness. “I have bored you into silence.”

“Hardly. I was just remembering something you said when we met: *I think we are quite different.*”

She kept her eyes ahead, marveling at his ability to recall a passing comment from a stranger. “And now I have confirmed it.”

“Quite the contrary.”

She glanced at him, and their eyes met briefly as she waited for him to expound.

He did not.

A gust of wind came through, and Nell secured her bonnet with a hand. The little flurries had become larger, and the wind had picked up without her even noticing. A quick look around told her that some of the others had decided to abandon the garden.

“What is a winter garden without a bit of winter weather?” Lord Dalmeer held his hat in place and blinked against the snow.

“Just so,” Nell said loudly, but the wind was louder. It blew at her skirts and nipped at her face, coming from one direction, then the other, as though it could not decide which way to blow.

Another gust yanked at her bonnet, and she only just prevented it from flying away.

Lord Dalmeer set a hand on it as well, laughing. “Perhaps we *should* take refuge somewhere. Here—come this way.”

The last guests were on their way through the ivy archway, and Nell and the earl hurried after them.

The swirling snow made it difficult to keep her eyes open, and even more so to see anything beyond fifteen feet ahead.

Lord Dalmeer took her hand, and Nell kept her other atop her bonnet, letting him lead the way. They made their way through the gusty wind and snow, finally reaching a door.

The earl let her pass through first, and Nell hurried in, blinking the snowflakes from her lashes and releasing her bonnet.

She looked around at the verdant space. It was warm—warmer than any of the rooms—and bursting with plants of all sorts: fig trees, citrus trees, jasmine, heliotrope, and ferns.

It was a conservatory. Nell had not even known such a room existed at Bellthorne.

Of course it did. Bellthorne had a room for every occasion. Even one to ensure Nell knew she was not welcome.

“You shan’t need your coat,” Lord Dalmeer said after removing his own. He set it and his hat on the stone wall lining the pathways that wound through the conservatory.

Nell unbuttoned her coat and allowed him to help her out of it, then set her fingers to untie her bonnet ribbons as he laid her coat atop his.

“My lord,” she said, her fingers fumbling, “*did* you tie my bonnet ribbons as though they were a cravat?”

He turned toward her, and his mouth broke into a half-smile. “Did I make a muddle of it?”

“Oh, I am certain they are tied very fashionably, but I am accustomed to a simple bow rather than...whatever this is.”

He stood in front of her and took the ribbons. “I call it the Dalmeer Contortion. I would not attempt it if I were you. Nearly impossible to replicate.” His brow knit as he worked at the ribbons, his focus entirely on the puzzle.

She watched him, and her chest flooded with warmth. How was it that she felt she knew him so well after such a short time? “May I ask you something?”

“Anything.” He frowned more deeply at the knot.

She paused long enough that his gaze flicked up.

“What did you mean by what you said in the garden, about our being alike?”

His fingers slowed momentarily, then continued their work. “You still think we are unlike?”

“No. That is, yes. By most accounts, we are. I am a woman who, if she had not ruined her own reputation, would be entirely unexceptional and boring. You are an earl with a great deal of...”

“Money?”

She laughed. “I was going to say charm, but your suggestion serves just as well to make the point.”

“Very well,” he replied, finally finding success with the ribbons. “We are different, then.”

She hesitated. “So, you do *not* disagree with the assessment I made when we first met.”

He gently pulled the bonnet from her head. “I do disagree with it. Heartily.”

She gave an incredulous laugh. “You are becoming nonsensical, my lord.”

He regarded her. “Shall we walk?”

She nodded, trying not to show her disappointment at the change of subject.

They strolled the flagstone path that twisted through trees and flowers and bushes.

“My parents married for love, you know,” he said. “It was a match regarded by all as ideal. My mother had beauty and wealth, my father had title and wealth, and they loved each other. They even had an heir less than a year after their marriage when I was born.”

Nell waited, unsure what point he hoped to make.

“I witnessed firsthand over the years as their love turned to frustration, then annoyance, then a tense coexistence. Father drowned himself in the estate and his obligations in the Lords, and Mother consumed herself with social engagements and expensive finery.”

Nell glanced at him. “And you?”

His mouth curled in a wry smile. “I pined in secret for days past.”

She frowned. Lord Dalmeer had seemed so nonchalant. So cavalier, even, at times. To hear him speak of hardship drew her to him in a new way entirely.

“So, you see, Miss Prescott, our histories and circumstances may differ, but the result is the same: we are both determined to marry practically. Not so very different, after all, I think.”

Nell was quiet as she pondered this assessment. “I had assumed your mother’s penchant for matchmaking grew out of her own experience in marriage.”

“Oh, I think it did, but not, perhaps, in the way you suppose. My mother is a woman searching to fill a hole.”

They came to a place where the path forked, but rather than choosing a direction, they slowed.

“Evidence of Mother’s search.” Lord Dalmeer pointed.

A ball of mistletoe hung from the branch of a laurel tree.

“Had she known you and I would be here,” Nell said, “no doubt she would take it down.”

“Quite likely,” he replied, gazing at it.

The confirmation stung. Lady Dalmeer’s dislike of Nell housed a truth that was becoming increasingly painful to acknowledge: there was a chasm between them that no amount of similarity on the subject of love and marriage could bridge.

He turned toward her, smiling. “You have upturned Mother’s best plans.”

Her own responsive smile was weak. “I did not come here with such a purpose in mind.”

“No, but I am glad you did come.”

She looked down at the toe of her boot against the flagstones and forced a laugh. “To be the instrument of torture against your mother?” She cringed as the words came out more pitiful than teasing.

The only reply was silence.

The toe of the earl’s boot, still wet from the snow, stepped into her vision until it nearly touched hers. His hand slipped under her chin, then lifted it gently.

Nell slowly allowed her gaze to meet his, afraid of the pity she would find there.

His eyes searched hers, but there was no pity in the brown depths. All she saw was her own desire—the one that made her heart skip and tumble and race all at once.

He drew closer, and his fingers slid from her chin to her cheek. “It is me you have been torturing.” His thumb grazed her lips.

Nell shut her eyes. For the past year, she had been exerting all her effort to be proper. To punish herself for her mistakes.

The moment his lips touched hers, all of that was swept away, like flurries on the wind, replaced with warmth and fervor.

His mouth took hers again and again and again.

She let his hand slip around her waist and her body press against his, let herself return his kisses without reservation, let her hands find his chest and her mind settle into the passion and pleasure of being held by him.

Her body pressed to his, her mind filled with him, and her heart beat against his.

A throat cleared.

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# Fourteen

## ARCHIE

Archie felt as though he had been wakened from a dream.

He blinked until the footman, whose gaze was politely averted, came into focus.

“My lord,” the footman said, “the countess requests your presence to greet a new guest.”

“Of course,” Archie said, his voice betraying what he had been doing with its breathlessness. “I shall come directly.”

Never had he agreed so quickly to a summons from his mother.

He looked at Miss Prescott, whose head was turned away, the back of her hand pressed to her mouth.

The footman shifted, and Archie looked at him. “I shall come directly,” he repeated.

The footman’s cheeks reddened. “Forgive me, my lord. The countess insisted I personally escort you. She seemed to fear you would not otherwise come.”

Archie grimaced, then looked at Miss Prescott again. He had no desire to leave her here. To leave her at all.

“Miss Prescott,” he said.

She finally looked at him, letting her hand drop from her mouth. It settled at her side.

The door to the conservatory opened, and footsteps followed. Whoever it was stopped—ostensibly at the sight of the footman—but was obscured from Archie’s view by the plants.

“I am looking for Miss Prescott,” the man’s voice said. “Have you seen her, by chance?”

Miss Prescott straightened, then strode toward him. “I am here, Wesley.”

Archie watched her, his chest tight, wanting to know precisely what was going through her mind. With a sliver of hesitation and a quick glance back at him, she disappeared with her brother.

Archie let out a breath, then nodded at the footman and followed him to answer Mother's summons.

His breath was still coming quickly as he strode through the corridor, and he gripped his hands to keep them from trembling.

What had he done?

Too much. And yet somehow not enough.

He was not sure when he would have stopped if the footman had not come.

They reached the entry hall, the sound of Mother's voice echoing in its expanse.

Her mouth spread into her widest smile at the sight of Archie. "My dear Lord Dalmeer. You will be positively delighted to see who has managed to join us."

A woman in a green traveling dress turned to face him.

She was beautiful—there was no denying that, nor that there was something pleasant about her expression as she met his eye. Blonde ringlets framed her face as she offered a warm smile.

"Allow me to introduce you," Mother said with excessive fanfare, "to Miss Orston."

Archie hid his surprise and bowed. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Orston. Mother had feared you would not be able to join us."

She gave a fine curtsy. "I had given up the prospect myself. However, Mother and Father are on the mend, and the countess insisted upon providing both transportation and chaperonage—an offer I could not possibly refuse."

Archie's gaze flicked to Mother, who avoided his eye, instead smiling at Miss Orston.

Mother must have grown desperate indeed to have arranged this.

"Your bedchamber is being prepared as we speak," she said.

"Is it?" Archie asked curiously. "And which bedchamber shall it be?"

"The Lion Room." That was the one she had tried to force him into. She focused on Miss Orston again. "One of our finest, of course."

“I admit to feeling a bit like an intruder,” Miss Orston said. “No doubt the guests have all come to know one another. I am but a stranger. An interloper.”

“Oh, do not be silly, Miss Orston!” Mother said. “Everyone will be exultant over your arrival. And of course, Lord Dalmeer will ensure you are never left without a friend.”

Archie was about to contest this volunteering of his company, but Miss Orston spoke. “I could never inconvenience the earl in such a way.”

Archie had no choice but to reassure her. “It would be no inconvenience at all.”

“You see?” Mother said. “I imagine your bedchamber is nearly ready now, so Lord Dalmeer will show you the way. I am needed in the drawing room. Do join us at your leisure.”

Archie gritted his teeth, but the only indication he gave of his annoyance was to shoot Mother a look that promised discussion later.

She avoided his gaze again and, with one more expression of pleasure at Miss Orston’s arrival, swept off toward the drawing room.

Archie led Miss Orston up the stairs, making polite conversation about her journey.

She was an easy conversational companion, thankfully, so the walk was made painlessly enough. Apparently, the carriage Mother had sent had been two miles from Bellthorne when the storm had begun to blow, making for a frightening end to the journey.

When Archie asked if Miss Orston needed anything else, she was quick to refuse the offer and assure him she would have her maid ask the way to the drawing room when the time came.

No doubt Archie should have given her a tour or offered his own services, but he was too eager to find Miss Prescott. He took the route back to his bedchamber at a quick pace, running a hand through his hair and cursing his recklessness.

What had he been thinking, kissing Miss Prescott like that?

No. That was a stupid question. He knew exactly what he had been thinking: that he was halfway in love with her and had been wanting nothing more than to kiss her for some time.

But that did not mean he had done well.

He had put her reputation in peril yet again, and they had been seen.

He clenched his eyes shut and knocked on Miss Prescott’s door.

There was no answer, and he heard no sounds from within. She and her brother must have joined the other guests when they left the conservatory.

He stood at the window in his bedchamber for some time. The flurries from the winter garden had given way to something of a blizzard. The snowflakes were large, and the grounds already covered in a white blanket. He stared at the scene, trying to decide what to do.

He pulled the bell cord and waited until Raine appeared. His valet was under the mistaken impression that his master wished to dress for dinner.

“Not yet,” Archie said. “I need to speak with one of the footmen. I did not recognize him. Tall. Short, brown hair. A bit timid. Ruddy cheeks.”

“I will enquire which of them it is. Many were hired on to help with the party, my lord.”

“Yes, I am well aware,” he said grimly, for he had seen the accounts. “Have him sent here to speak with me without delay.”

Raine bowed and left.

It was he, however, not the footman who returned more than a quarter of an hour later. The footman in question—Davis—could not be located and seemed, in fact, not to be at Bellthorne at all.

Whether this was something to rejoice over or cause for concern, Archie could not tell.

He dressed for dinner, keenly aware of the moment Miss Prescott reentered her bedchamber, for the muffled sound of footsteps and voices was impossible to ignore.

He timed his own departure from his room to coincide with hers, and she started at the sight of him.

The anxieties that had gripped Archie since last seeing her faded. “Am I so hideous?”

“Most hideous,” she said with a shy smile and pink in her cheeks. They began walking, and she looked ahead. “Were you able to welcome the new guest?”

“Yes,” he said. “The footman escorted me there like a convict to ensure it.”

“It must have been someone important.”

“Yes, I fancy so,” he said vaguely, for he had no wish to speak of Miss Orston. “What did your brother have to say?”

“Nothing. He lost track of me in the garden. He and Millie—Miss Hollis—had wandered and were obliged to seek refuge from the storm elsewhere. When he returned to the house, he came in search of me. He was relieved to see me safe and warm.”

Archie did not immediately respond. *Safe and warm* was an interesting way to put it. *Warm* was certainly accurate, as he could attest to. But *safe*...

Archie could have wrung his own neck. He stopped mid-stride and turned to her. “Miss Prescott, I—”

“Dalmeer!” Lord Potsworth waved from down the corridor.

Archie grimaced and held Miss Prescott’s gaze. “I wish to speak with you. It seems the conversation must wait, however.”

She nodded, then left Archie to listen to Potsworth drone on about upcoming bills to be discussed in the House of Lords. His mind wandered, caught between a kiss in the conservatory and the damage he had done Miss Prescott in those euphoric moments.

# Fifteen

NELL

Nell's eyes had never been so rebellious as they were at dinner.

No matter how much she corralled them to her plate, they *would* return to Lord Dalmeer.

Miss Orston's arrival had required a shift in the seating arrangements. Nell had since learned that she was not only strikingly beautiful but the daughter of a viscount. Whether this connection merited seating her a mere two spaces from the earl was the question.

Nell had no trouble identifying whose decision it had been.

Neither, from her pouty looks, did Miss Caldwell.

Lady Dalmeer seemed very pleased indeed, her eyes veering to her son nearly as frequently as Nell's did.

Nell should not have felt it in her heart whenever Lord Dalmeer smiled at Miss Orston or Miss Orston laughed at something he said. But feel it she did.

It was ridiculous. *Nell* was ridiculous.

The happy result of Miss Orston's arrival, however, was that Mr. Fowell had been shifted across the table from Nell rather than at her side. It was a relief not having to converse with him directly, but twice she had found him watching her.

The women retired to the drawing room, and Nell's gaze caught with the earl's as she filed out of the room with Millie.

The smile on his face wavered for a moment, his gaze growing more intense until a comment from his cousin reclaimed his focus.

Lady Dalmeer took it upon herself to introduce Miss Orston to each woman in the drawing room. Whatever perverse hope Nell had harbored that the viscount's daughter might prove to be insufferable was dashed at the introduction.

Miss Orston was kind and polite, and she chose to stay with Nell and Millie after the introduction. Lady Dalmeer did not seem overjoyed at this decision, but as she had saved an introduction to Nell for last, she had no reason to prevent it.

Miss Orston addressed numerous comments and questions to Nell and Millie, demonstrating both amiability and an admirable facility with conversation that Nell envied.

She possessed precisely the sort of good breeding that made her a candidate for marriage with the earl.

There was no opportunity to tell Millie what had happened in the conservatory earlier, and even if there had been, to do so in company seemed unwise. Nell was both eager and reluctant to recount it to her friend, for she knew she had behaved poorly. It seemed all she was capable of doing. She had come to Bellthorne to salvage her reputation and instead had compromised it again.

The worst part, though, was that she did not regret it. Not yet, at least.

When the men entered the drawing room, Nell offered to fetch tea for Millie, needing an occupation to keep her mind and hands busy.

She had her back turned on the room when Lady Dalmeer's voice pierced her tangled thoughts.

"She is everything one could want, of course," the countess said from a nearby chaise. "A perfect match, I think. Even Lord Dalmeer was surprised by how agreeable she is. I am quite hopeful."

"With every reason to be," Lady Pottsworth replied. "One could not dream up a better match than the two of them. And they seemed to get on well at dinner."

Nell swallowed, her stomach swimming as she took the teacups and returned to Millie.

Millie sipped from the drink, then looked at Nell, for she enjoyed a generous helping of sugar, which Nell had forgone in her haste to escape.

"I am sorry," Nell apologized. "My mind was elsewhere."

"Oh, I am certain it was." Millie's amused gaze moved to Lord Dalmeer, who had just entered next to his cousin, Lord Weymouth.

Nell opened her mouth, then clamped it shut again. It was not the time for an explanation.

Lord Dalmeer's gaze searched the room and found Nell.

She held her breath as their eyes met. Though, for what, she could not say.

He strode toward her but was delayed by Miss Orston, whom he turned toward with his characteristic ease.

Nell's chest tightened, and she rose.

"Where are you going?" Millie asked.

"I need more tea."

"Already?"

Nell nodded, ignoring the fact that her cup was more than half-full. She would trade watching the earl with Miss Orston for the countess discussing their hopeful nuptials.

When she reached the tea, she set down her cup, closed her eyes, and breathed.

It had been two hours since she had kissed Lord Dalmeer in the conservatory, but the effects on her body and mind were still present.

But *why* had he kissed her?

*It is me you have been torturing.*

That was what he had said. What did it mean?

"May I help you?"

Nell's eyes flew open, and she found Mr. Fowell at her side.

He smiled. "You have been standing here but have not poured yourself tea." He peered into her cup, and his brow furrowed.

"I came for sugar." Nell took the tongs and placed an enormous clump into her half-full cup as Mr. Fowell began pouring his own.

She gave him a polite nod, then turned, unable to keep her eyes from seeking Lord Dalmeer, who was still in conversation with Miss Orston. Still smiling.

"I thought I would find you and Lord Dalmeer enjoying one another's company," Mr. Fowell said, coming up beside her again. "Or perhaps you already enjoyed enough of one another in the conservatory."

Blood and white-hot heat rushed into Nell's face.

Mr. Fowell smiled knowingly. "You needn't blush, Miss Prescott. Indeed, I congratulate you. Your timing, in particular, is admirable. Had you waited until this evening, you might have lost him." His eyes flicked to Miss Orston. "I think, however, that you can safely rely upon the earl to do his duty to you. Allow me to be the first to felicitate you for securing such a match. I wish you a pleasant evening."

Nell could not formulate a response before he had walked away.

Feeling more ill than she had since the night at the inn, she set down her trembling teacup and left the drawing room to take refuge in her bedchamber.

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# Sixteen

## ARCHIE

She was gone.

Miss Prescott was nowhere to be found in the drawing room, though Archie had seen her at the tea table not two minutes ago, and before that, beside Miss Hollis. He felt ever-aware of her presence, which was why he could not understand how she had left without his notice.

He considered going to her bedchamber directly but stopped himself. They had been seen kissing in the conservatory; the last thing she needed was for someone to witness him knocking on her door at night.

Neither Miss Hollis nor Mr. Prescott seemed put out by her absence, which, he hoped, meant that it was not a matter for concern.

Either way, he would be obliged to wait until tomorrow to speak with her.

And yet, when he returned to his bedchamber, he stood with his hand on the doorknob for nearly a minute, looking toward Miss Prescott's room and debating whether to take his chances. He was desperate to see her—to know her mind and to tell her his.

But he could not risk her reputation twice in one day.

He would not.

— o o o —

NOT IN ALL HIS life had Archie been the first to breakfast, but he strode into an empty breakfast room the next morning to a poignant sensation of disappointment.

Not because there was no one there—because *she* was not there.

The room was strangely bright for the time of day, a result of the mass of snow that had fallen over the course of the night. If Mother's plans had

involved anything outdoors, they would have to be changed. No one would be leaving Bellthorne unless they dared jump from a first-story window.

The sideboard was full of food—toast, eggs, veal, mutton, muffins, rolls, and Bath buns—and Archie heaped food upon his plate, intent to make the meal last until Miss Prescott arrived.

When footsteps sounded as he was buttering a piece of toast, he turned to see who it was, his pulse thrumming.

“Good morning, my lord,” Mr. Fowell said with a smile. “What a pleasant surprise.”

The corner of Archie’s mouth lifted. “Is it? I had no notion you were so fond of me, Fowell.”

The man laughed softly and took an empty plate. “Everyone is, I think.”

“I am blushing.” Archie chose a boiled egg.

“Miss Prescott fondest of all, perhaps.”

It took everything in Archie’s power not to stiffen. “Her regard is returned.”

Fowell chuckled, and Archie shot him a sidelong glance. “You find that amusing?”

“Come, Dalmeer,” he replied. “Let us dispense with the pretense regarding Miss Prescott.”

Archie faced him. “I am at a loss to understand you.”

“Are you? No, you are too sharp for me to credit that.”

Archie stared at him as the blood in his veins began to simmer.

Fowell lifted a brow. “Ah. Am I to pretend I know nothing of the conservatory? Rest assured your secret is safe with me.”

For perhaps the first time in his life, Archie found himself without a response.

Fowell knew.

But how?

The servant who had seen them had left Bellthorne. Apparently, not before recounting what he had witnessed to Fowell. Had he told others?

Archie’s stomach went sour, but before he could decide what to say, three guests entered, none of them Miss Prescott.

All thought of remaining there until she arrived deserted him. He left his plate at the end of the sideboard, aware that Fowell’s gaze was upon him as he left the room.

His normally comfortable gait was quick and purposeful as he made his way down the corridor. There was only one thing to be done, and as much as it terrified him to think of marrying someone he cared so much for, it was a risk he would take.

Wanted to take? Indeed, the thought of *not* taking held just as much fear.

Archie stopped in front of Miss Prescott's door and raised his hand to knock just as it opened.

She froze at the sight of him, and so did he.

Would this beautiful, intelligent woman be his wife?

He glanced behind her, looking for any sign of a maid. "May I speak with you? In private?"

The surprise in her eyes shifted to something like wariness. "I am not certain that would be wise, my lord."

"Nell," he said softly, taking a step toward her.

She swallowed, then looked down, pulling up at the seam of her glove.

He had never seen her so reluctant. Did she regret those moments in the conservatory?

Had he persuaded himself that she held an affection for him? It had felt undeniable at times, but now...

"Please," he pleaded. "I shan't take much of your time, but...I must speak with you."

She swallowed, searching his gaze as her own grew almost sad. She stepped backward and opened the door enough for him to enter. "Come in."

With relief, Archie entered, and she closed the door softly.

Her bearing was stiff as she turned to face him. Proper. Distant.

"I just spoke with Fowell," Archie said.

Her gaze lowered again.

"He knows about...yesterday."

"It was bound to get out," she said in a colorless voice.

"It was terribly reckless of me," Archie said, taking another step toward her.

Her body tensed, so he withdrew, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

When he had envisioned this moment, he had pictured it differently—gathering up her hands in his and kissing her even before he spoke. But her demeanor did not welcome such demonstration of feeling.

He clenched his hands, then clasped them behind his back.

She might not wish to marry him, but he had to make her see that it was necessary for her own good. That he would make her as happy as she would allow him to.

“I wish to marry you, Nell.” The words were awkward. Strained, even, for it was so much less than he had planned to say. So much less than he felt. He wanted to tell her how the person meant to provoke his mother had turned into the person he looked for in every room he entered. The one he fell asleep thinking of and woke impatient to see.

But she was silent, her cheeks red and her gaze averted.

Archie could not help himself—he stepped toward her and gathered her hands in his, wishing she would look at him. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

The seconds that elapsed before she responded stretched until Archie thought time itself might snap.

She lifted her head until her gaze met his and shook her head.

# Seventeen

NELL

The earl's grip on Nell's hands went slack.

Nell clenched her teeth until they threatened to shatter. Anything to keep the focus on the physical pain rather than the throbbing of her heart.

"I cannot accept your kind offer, Lord Dalmeer," she said.

Oh, how she wanted to! The prospect of marrying him enticed her as nothing in her life had. What did it matter if the motives were noble rather than tender?

She had nearly told him yes when he had called her by her name. Not only her name—the one used by those precious few who truly cared for her and had stayed by her side through everything. In spite of everything.

"I don't...I..." The confusion on his brow and in his eyes tested her resolve even further. "Why not?"

Her throat was too tight for the words she had practiced, though she had hoped she would never need them—that he would not offer for her out of chivalry, as Mr. Fowell had suggested he would.

She forced herself to breathe. When they had made their arrangement, it had been done with full frankness. It was her own fault she had become so attached and certainly that she had allowed herself into a compromising situation yet again.

Would she never learn?

She had thought she could never know pain as she had that night in the inn. She had not slept at all then. She had cried until the tears would not come, but the wracking sobs had continued.

It was a night she had relived many times in nightmares.

But what she felt now rivaled it.

The prospect of being offered marriage out of duty was bad enough. Spending life beside the man she loved while he forever regretted a moment

of recklessness in the conservatory was simply unbearable.

Miss Orston was the woman he should be offering for. She could give him everything he wanted—and so much more.

“I think we both know that it is time we ended our arrangement, my lord,” Nell said. “You are under no obligation to me, nor I to you.”

He stared at her, and she forced herself to meet his gaze—to make him understand that he could accept her answer with calm assurance and a conscience free of guilt.

“Let me offer you the protection of my name,” he begged.

Protection.

A name.

She wanted them both.

But they were so much less than craved.

“I was in earnest when I told you I have no intention of marrying, my lord.”

“The word is out, Nell,” he said. “I do not know who besides Fowell is aware of what happened, but I cannot protect you or your reputation if you will not let me.”

A wry smile curled her lips. “What reputation?”

His mouth parted, his eyes darting between hers. “And what of mine? Am I a scoundrel who ruins women without a second thought?”

“Did you not assure me that you were skilled enough to strike the balance between flirtation and serious intention?” She smiled more evenly. “As a wealthy, titled man who has made it clear he does not intend to marry, I do not think your reputation will suffer much. And I assure you that I will, as we agreed, take pains to show everyone that I expected nothing from you.”

Lord Dalmeer was quiet.

She wished she could divine his thoughts.

Did he feel relief, as he should? Perhaps Miss Orston had come to mind. She was not a dull, wealthy woman with an impeccable pedigree, as he had feared. She was beautiful, well-bred, engaging, and part of his aristocratic world. They would be in love by Epiphany.

He would live to be grateful for Nell’s refusal.

“I thank you—truly—for your concern for my well-being,” she said. “It speaks to your character, my lord. But I pray you will believe me when I say that your offer is neither necessary nor expected. However, I think it is

in our best interests if we are seen to spend less time together. I trust the message you wished to convey to your mother has been received, and you may rest easy knowing you have more than fulfilled the terms of our agreement where I am concerned.” She reinforced her smile.

He did not return it. Nor did he speak.

There was a knock on the door.

It seemed to jar him from his thoughts, and a look of concern entered his eyes.

“It is only Millie,” Nell reassured him, going to the door. “She has come to walk with me to breakfast.” She opened it, eager to put an end to the conversation before she could go back on her decision and beg the earl not only to marry her but to love her as she loved him.

“Good morning, Ne—” Miss Hollis’s gaze landed upon the earl. “Oh...I am sorry. I—”

“It is quite all right.” Nell kept her tone bright and nonchalant. “Have you breakfasted, Lord Dalmeer?”

“Yes,” he said, his posture shifting to its usual confidence. “That is...I am not hungry. I have business I must attend to. Good morning, Miss Hollis.” He smiled at her.

He had been so serious during his conversation with Nell, but all traces of that were gone now.

It confirmed, however painfully, her decision.

Lord Dalmeer was a man meant to laugh and charm. Since their kiss, every time he had looked at her, the twinkling in his eyes had been absent.

“I shall leave you.” He gave a quick bow, then left the room.

The impulse to crumple into a heap on the floor flooded Nell, but she refused to acknowledge it.

Millie came inside and shut the door quickly, her eyes wide. “Elinor Prescott! Are you engaged to the Earl of Dalmeer? Tell me this instant!”

Nell’s eyes burned, and she turned away on the pretense of fetching her reticule. “Do not be ridiculous.”

“Is it ridiculous? I think it a very natural assumption after finding a man in my friend’s bedchamber...in the morning.”

Nell’s cheeks flamed. “He arrived a few minutes before you, Millie, and we were discussing putting an end to our arrangement. That is all.” She was finally master enough of herself to face her friend.

Millie stared at her. “Why?”

Nell shrugged, annoyed to find her eyes stinging again. “It has run its course.”

“Nell.” Millie stepped toward her, her gaze keen and watchful. “What has happened? You can tell me.”

A lump rose in Nell’s throat. “I cannot bear to.” She worked to gain control of her emotions, but with each second, the threads began to unravel. “I have been so very stupid, Millie. Again.”

Millie pulled her over to the bed, and they sat beside one another while Nell recounted what had happened, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“Oh, Nell,” Millie said, pulling her into her arms. “I am so sorry. I still think you underestimate Lord Dalmeer’s affection for you, though. Indeed, I do not think he offered for you out of duty alone.”

Nell shook her head as a fresh wave of tears spilled over. “Don’t you see, Millie? Don’t you see how selfish it would be to accept his offer when he has been nothing but frank with me about his plans and intentions? He *will* marry for duty—but not duty toward a disgraced woman. Duty toward his family and their legacy. His feelings for me, whatever they might be, cannot erase that I am the furthest thing possible from that. He will see soon enough that someone else can give him everything he deserves.”

Millie let out a sigh. “You love him dearly.”

It took Nell time to respond. “That is why I cannot marry him.”

Millie’s lips pressed together. “What a very strange thing to say.”

Nell gave a watery laugh and wiped at her eyes. “Perhaps you should go to breakfast without me. I am unfit for company.”

“Breakfast is just what you need.” Millie rose and went over to the basin. She dipped a clean rag into it, then squeezed it out and brought it over, wiping Nell’s tear-stained cheeks. “Life always seems brighter with a full stomach.”

Millie stayed with her until her tears had dried, her cheeks were no longer red, and she felt more able to face the day.

She might not have the earl, but she had the dearest of friends.

# Eighteen

## ARCHIE

Jeffard tapped a stack of papers on the desk to organize them. “Is there anything else you wished to discuss, my lord?”

Archie rose from his seat. “Not today, Jeffard, but at our next meeting, I hope to discuss the topic of the succession and marriage settlements.”

The steward paused in the act of putting the papers in his satchel. “My lord?”

Smiling, Archie pointed at him. “That is precisely the face I had expected.”

“Are you...contemplating marriage?”

“I am,” Archie replied brightly, ignoring the stitch in his chest.

There was a pause.

“I felicitate you, my lord. May I ask to whom you are contemplating such a joyous union?”

“You may, but you will have to wait for an answer until I have one to give. That is one of the details I have not yet settled.”

His brow knit. “I see.”

Archie ignored the tone of the words and strengthened his smile. A deliberate smile was all that stood between him and spending the next fortnight at the nearest public house.

Not until Nell had refused his offer of marriage had he realized how very much he wanted her to say yes. He had been ready to give everything to her, including the heart he had been keeping safe.

She had rejected him.

Perhaps he should be glad. What if she had accepted? They might have married, only for her to reject him once he was even more assuredly in love with her, even more reliant on her for his happiness.

In the miserable hours since, he had come to the conclusion that there was little point delaying marriage anymore. What did it matter whether he married now or in ten years?

Indeed, better sooner than later. Let it be done before his heart had more time to desire what he should not and could not have.

There was a knock on the door, and Mother opened it. "Ah. I did not know you were with someone."

"It is quite all right, Mother. Jeffard was just congratulating me on my upcoming nuptials."

"Your what?"

He might as well have announced his intention to employ himself as a scullery maid.

"My upcoming nuptials," he said, enunciating every word.

She hurried into the room and closed the door behind her, her eyes bright with an almost fiendish light. "Nuptials with whom?" The words were hissed more than spoken, and the fear in her expression made it painfully clear that she worried his response would be *Miss Prescott*.

If only...

"*That*, I do not know," he replied. "No doubt you will be able to help me with the answer."

She clapped her hands together. "Oh, but this is above anything!" She hurried over, took his face between her hands, and kissed one cheek, then the other. "You have made me the happiest of mothers!"

"I shall leave you two to celebrate," Jeffard said, bowing with a strained smile.

Archie hoped his own smile was more convincing.

For the next fifteen minutes, Mother paced the room, discussing wedding details with herself before remembering that she had come to the study with a purpose: to insist Archie join the group of guests intending to ice skate on the pond.

Archie resisted the impulse to ask whether Nell would be joining the party. He could not have said which answer he would have preferred. He both wanted and dreaded to see her.

He decided to embrace his new role as obliging son and join the expedition.

Not just join it. Enjoy it.

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ARCHIE HAD KNOWN Mr. Tinston for many years. He had always liked the man.

But as Tinston stabilized Nell with a hand on her waist on the other side of the pond, Archie began to suspect the man of unsteady character.

His heart skipped a beat as Nell nearly lost her balance, but she managed to stay upright—with the doubtful assistance of Mr. Tinston, who nearly lost his balance as well.

Unsteady, indeed.

The Bellthorne guests were scattered across the surface of the pond: Freddie and his wife, Miss Caldwell and Mr. Fowell, Mr. Prescott and Miss Hollis. The list continued.

And yet Archie had eyes for one person only.

“You are quite an accomplished skater, Lord Dalmeer,” Miss Orston said, keeping a light grip on his arm.

“Not nearly so accomplished as you,” he replied.

Miss Orston laughed musically. “An accomplished skater *and* a soothsayer, then.”

Archie pulled his gaze away from Nell and smiled. “Far from it.”

But that was not entirely true. Archie was more skilled than she, for he had skated on this pond since he was but a few years old. It had been years since his last time, but a few minutes on the ice had brought back the memory easily enough.

He looked at Miss Orston through the corner of his eye.

She was everything he ought to want.

But he did not want her. She evoked no emotion in him at all.

Which made her the perfect candidate for his wife.

A little yelp nearby brought his head around, and he found its source just in time to watch Freddie fall flat on the ice. Half-laughing, half-concerned, his wife helped him to his feet. Freddie tried to get up, but the result was that he brought her down along with them. They stayed seated on the ice, their heads thrown back in shared laughter.

Archie looked away, annoyed at the pang of envy the interaction shot through his chest. “Shall we try something a bit daring, Miss Orston?”

“Daring?”

“Perhaps something like this.” He turned suddenly so that he was skating backwards in front of her.

She laughed, watching his skates, mesmerized. “Donning ice skates is as daring as I shall be today.”

Archie chuckled but could not help thinking that Nell would have made the attempt if he had asked. She might have fallen, and he would have been obliged to catch her and hold her close until she regained her balance. She would have smelled of violets.

It would have been terrible.

A dull, ordinary skate on the ice with Miss Orston was precisely what he needed.

Just then, Nell wobbled, stretched out her arms in an attempt to regain equilibrium, and fell to the ice.

Once Tinston noticed, he tried to turn, which sent him into a chaotic sequence of slipping and twisting until he too fell.

Nell reached for her ankle and winced.

“Excuse me for one moment,” Archie said, ensuring Miss Orston was safely upright before he left. He skated over as fast as he could without becoming the next victim of gravity, cutting into the ice to stop when he was but a few feet from Nell.

One of her skates lay on the ice, detached from her boot, and she held her right hand.

“Are you hurt?” Archie lowered himself beside her.

There was a gash through her glove, and a glint of red beneath it.

Nell glanced up at him, her hazel eyes fixing on his. She blinked and looked down at her hand. “A minor scrape is all.”

“It cut through your glove, Ne—” Archie stopped himself. “Miss Prescott. Unless you mean to tell me that it is holly berry juice. Come. I shall help you inside so the wound can be seen to.”

Nell met his gaze again, teetering between assent and refusal.

“Are you hurt, Miss Prescott?” Miss Orston arrived on less-than-sure skates, and Archie was obliged to grasp her by the arm to keep her from falling on top of Nell. “Good heavens! Forgive me—I nearly collided with you. Thank you, my lord. But *are* you hurt, Miss Prescott?”

Nell’s eyes flitted to Archie’s hold on Miss Orston and the way Miss Orston’s hand rested on his shoulder for stability. “Only a bit. My skate strap is broken and I stupidly cut myself trying to fix it. It is quite all right,

though. I shall just—” She pushed herself up, but Archie could not assist her without letting go of Miss Orston.

Nell managed it, and by the time she was on her feet—one with an ice skate, the other with only a boot—Mr. Tinston had returned, apologizing profusely and insisting on helping her off the ice and back to Bellthorne.

Archie gritted his teeth and smiled determinedly, thanking the man for his services.

As he watched the two of them make their unsteady way to the edge of the pond, jealousy and regret mingled in his chest. The last time Nell had injured herself, she had allowed him to carry her in his arms.

It seemed like a lifetime ago.

A lifetime he wished to return to.

He rose to his feet and smiled at Miss Orston. “Shall we continue?”

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Nineteen

NELL

“Would you like to return for more skating?” Mr. Tinston asked.

Nell's hand had been seen to by the doctor, who had been called to tend to another injury.

There was nothing Nell desired less than to watch the earl and Miss Orston skate around the pond, arm in arm, smiling blissfully. Watching them was what had precipitated her fall in the first place.

She could not be angry that they were spending time together; she had refused the earl's offer of marriage, after all.

But any hope she had harbored that the offer had been born of sentiment as much as duty—as Millie had suggested—had been laid to a wretched, funereal rest. Lord Dalmeer had offered, been refused, and skipped to Miss Orston's side. Or skated, rather.

It smarted in a way that being abandoned at the inn had not.

History was repeating itself.

Mr. Tinston was polite enough to declare he would remain behind with her, but after Nell insisted several times that she wished to rest before dinner, he finally returned to the pond.

No sooner had he left the morning room than Wesley entered.

“I heard you were injured,” he said, voice full of concern as he hurried to her side.

“Hardly.” She raised her bandaged hand. “A silly moment of thoughtlessness.”

Wesley took a seat beside her, a frown on his brow.

He and Millie had been spending a great deal of time together at Bellthorne Hall. They had been trying to discover the identity of Millie's secret admirer, but Nell had hoped perhaps something might come of it. If

she had not, she would have been tempted to ask Wesley to return home early.

But she would not trade Wesley's potential happiness to assuage a pain she had brought upon herself.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Wesley asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

She smiled. "Yes, very much so."

He regarded her. "I have done my best not to encroach too much."

"You have done well," she said warmly. "Are *you* enjoying yourself?"

"Yes," he said, though Nell was not certain how genuine the response was.

"I believe we are to play parlor games again tomorrow," Wesley said. "I hope you will participate this time. I know how much you enjoy them."

She squeezed his hand with her uninjured one. "You worry far too much over me, Wesley."

Did he not have reason for it? She shuddered to think what he would feel if he knew what had happened in the conservatory—or that Nell and the earl had been seen.

He would blame himself.

Nell's only consolation was that, aside from Mr. Fowell, no one seemed to be treating her any differently than before, which led her to think that perhaps no one else knew.

Yet, at least.

She rose. "I think I shall rest for a spell before dinner."

Wesley nodded. "But you *will* play parlor games tomorrow?"

She smiled. "I shall play to please you, if nothing else."

The edge of his mouth lifted, for they both knew that the moment she began playing, she would not wish to stop for any price.



WHEN THE WOMEN rose to leave the men to their port that evening, Nell was surprised to find Miss Orston waiting at the door that led from the dining room.

She stepped beside Nell and smiled sympathetically. "How is your hand?"

“Better than it looks,” she said, showing a glove that bulged where the bandage was.

“Not too painful, I hope?”

“No,” Nell lied. “You are kind to ask.”

“Lord Dalmeer was quite concerned,” she said, watching Nell’s reaction. “I think he would have preferred to escort you inside himself.”

Nell ignored the skipping of her heart as they stepped into the drawing room. “I was well cared for, as the doctor had been called already.”

Miss Orston nodded, then slowed. “May I ask you something, Miss Prescott?”

Nell’s stomach clenched. “Of course.”

Miss Orston gave her a grateful look. “I hope you will not think me impertinent if I ask whether you and Lord Dalmeer share an... understanding?”

Nell stiffened. “What? No, of course not.”

Miss Orston’s gaze was so clear and direct, it was all Nell could do not to squirm under it.

“Forgive my frankness. I thought perhaps there was something...”

“No, no,” Nell said quickly, forcing a laugh. “We are friends. Nothing more.”

Miss Orston smiled. “I cannot pretend I am not happy to hear it. We are but newly acquainted, but I find him...” Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Magnetic?

Handsome?

Charming?

Amusing?

Intelligent?

Thoughtful?

Nell could have supplied her with any number of words.

“Intriguing,” Miss Orston finally said. “He possesses an ease of manners I have not often found amongst gentlemen.”

Nell thought she might choke on envy. “He *is* something out of the ordinary.”

Miss Orston’s eyes grew focused again. “But not to your liking?”

Nell grimaced. “I fear my *liking* has not proven something to be relied upon. I have no thought of courtship or marriage at present. That is all.” She

smiled at Miss Orston, though her chest ached. "I wish you every success."

Miss Orston slipped her arm through Nell's. "There are two open seats on that chaise. Come."

Nell allowed herself to be shepherded there and forced herself to converse with Miss Orston for the next fifteen minutes. Blessedly, the topic was not the earl, and Nell was able to engage without too much difficulty. More than ever, though, she felt the need to keep her eyes away from Lord Dalmeer for fear Miss Orston might see her looking at him and divine the truth of her feelings.

It was a very long night indeed.

She covered a yawn as she reached her bedchamber, eager for the oblivion of sleep. She turned the knob, but it resisted.

It was locked.

She blinked, then tried again just as Lord Dalmeer appeared down the corridor.

Her heart somersaulted, and she turned the knob more forcefully.

He slowed at the sight of her, his eyes moving to the doorknob.

"It is locked," she explained, lest he think she had been lying in wait to see him.

"By whom?"

"I could not say," she replied. "Perhaps your mother has decided I should not have this bedchamber after all."

Lord Dalmeer opened his own door with ease and disappeared.

Nell stared, her hand motionless on the doorknob. Had he truly left her in the predicament?

But he reappeared just as quickly as he had gone. "I have rung the bell. A servant should be here presently."

"Thank you, my lord."

He regarded her. "How is your hand?"

She lifted it and turned it from side to side. "Doing an injustice to this glove, I think." It had required Shaw's best efforts to get the glove on in the first place. Taking it off to eat and then replacing it had been one of the more daunting tasks in her life. Millie had been obliged to help.

The earl's charming half-smile appeared. "It has an intriguing shape, to be sure."

Intriguing.

The word was like a pitcher of freezing pond water over Nell's head. It was the word Miss Orston had used to describe the earl. But my, how appropriate it was.

Lord Dalmeer was a man who begged to be known. Warm yet mysterious all at once.

His brow knit. "Are you angry with me, Miss Prescott?"

"Of course not. Why would you assume it?"

The corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. "I imagined that we would remain friends, but it seems we have become mere acquaintances."

Nell swallowed. "I believe it is for the best for us to keep our distance, my lord. Only today, Miss Orston asked me questions which..." She pressed her lips together as she tried to decide how to phrase it.

"What did she ask?"

She willed the heat to keep from her cheeks. "If there was an understanding between us."

"Ah." His gaze dropped to the floor. "I see."

"I assured her there was not," Nell said quickly.

Lord Dalmeer gave her a little smile. "Very good of you. I trust Mr. Tinston was able to see that your hand received proper care?"

"Oh, yes. I could not have asked for better care, silly as the injury was."

"You were given faulty skates, Nell. It is fortunate you were not more severely injured."

She broke her gaze away, for she could not look at him without remembering those heady moments in the conservatory, and hearing her name from his mouth made it all the worse.

"Forgive me," he said softly. "Miss Prescott."

Heart aching, she offered him a smile. "There is nothing to forgive."

Their gazes held, and that same force that had drawn her to him in the conservatory pulled at her.

Footsteps sounded, and Lord Dalmeer's valet appeared around the corner. His pace slackened momentarily at the sight of the two of them.

"Raine," Lord Dalmeer said. "Miss Prescott's bedchamber is locked. Would you see that her maid is alerted and a key brought?"

"Very good, my lord." The valet bowed, then returned the way he had come.

It was quiet even after he had disappeared.

“Thank you,” Nell said. “You need not wait until Shaw comes. You have done enough.”

Something almost like hurt passed over his expression. “I shall leave you, then.”

“I only meant,” Nell hurried to say, “that you should not feel obligated to remain here with me. No doubt you are tired.”

He looked at her, and his mouth lifted at the edge. “What a poor creature you think me. Perhaps I have a touch of the headache.”

A soft laugh escaped her. “No one who knows you would credit it.”

“Ah, but no one present knows me as you do.”

Nell gave a laugh, feeling suddenly breathless. “You cannot mean that. Your mother. Lord Weymouth. Your uncle.”

“Certainly, Freddie would be surprised if I pleaded the headache.”

Nell did not respond, for he had not countered her. But they had known each other such a short time that he could not have been serious.

And yet, she felt it too.

Shaw came around the corner, holding her skirts. “Forgive me, miss! I locked the door earlier and it slipped my mind entirely.”

“Do you always lock it?” Nell asked curiously.

“No.” She put a key in the door. “I heard from one of the maids that a man had entered one of the young ladies’ rooms.”

Nell’s face blanched, and her eyes darted to the earl.

The uneasiness in his own eyes made it clear he too was thinking of his visit the other morning.

“The man left a note for her, it seems,” Shaw said, pulling the key from the lock and opening the door.

Nell let out a breath of relief and looked at the earl. “Millie has a secret admirer.”

His eyes lit with understanding and relief.

Nell offered a smile. “Good night, my lord.”

“Good night, Miss Prescott.”

Nell suppressed a sigh as she followed Shaw into the room, wishing things were different. Wishing he would call her Nell again.

Twenty

ARCHIE

The December sun rose late and slept early, but the days had never felt quite so long to Archie. He was tempted more than once to plead the headache.

Mother had planned a candlelit dinner to celebrate the final day of the year. The grand chandelier had been left unlit, but individual candles spanned the long dining table. It was an intriguing scene, if not terribly conducive to seeing well.

Her plans for the evening did not end with a shadowy dinner, however. In the drawing room, she had a stack of small pieces of paper, which were distributed amongst the guests.

“You must each write one hope for new year and one prediction,” she said. “Once they have been gathered, they will be read, and we will guess to whom they belong. Anyone whose hopes and predictions are *not* correctly guessed will receive an extra portion of pudding.”

Archie leaned over and muttered, “Does that not incentivize us all to write down the most outlandish thing we can think of?”

Miss Orston laughed, and the sound caught him off guard.

He had become accustomed to Nell’s laugh—to her being the one he addressed his remarks to.

The guests took their turns with the quills Mother had seen scattered about the room, and Archie leaned over his paper, uncertain what to write.

What *did* he hope for the new year? What would it bring?

Marriage, apparently.

His eyes roved to Miss Orston, who was folding her paper as she spoke with Miss Sterling. His gaze moved past them to Nell who awaited a turn with the quill her brother was using. Her eyes were blank as she stared at the paper in her hand.

The prospect of a new year without her in it left him feeling despondent, a foreign emotion.

“My hope,” Freddie said behind him, “is that Dalmeer will finish writing his hope and prediction before the new year arrives.”

Archie glanced over his shoulder. “Funny. I was just going to write a prediction that you would take ill from overconsumption of pudding before the week’s end.” He scribbled a quick, harmless hope about Cook making her famous seed cake and a prediction about Cole getting leg-shackled, then moved out of the way.

He felt eyes upon him and noted Mother watching him, wearing a strange expression. She smiled as their eyes met, however, then turned to speak with Lord Stanhope.

Nell had the quill now, but it hung above her paper, still.

Archie watched, wondering what was going through her mind. What did she hope for the new year? He was addressed by Mr. Hawthorne, though, and was thus obliged to turn away rather than observe any further.

The hopes and predictions were read one-by-one. They ranged from the silly to the unguarded. The laugh Archie’s prediction about Cole drew was more perfunctory from him than genuine, but Freddie guessed with ease that Archie was the author.

No extra helping of pudding for Archie, then.

With each hope and prediction Mother read, Archie held his breath for the one from Nell.

The identity of each author was guessed and made known.

“May all your hopes become reality,” Mother said, “and only those predictions which will add to the joy of the year come to pass.”

“Is that all of them?” Archie asked, for none of them had been identified as Nell’s.

“It is,” she said happily.

People began to stand and converse, and Archie searched for Nell.

He spotted her just as she disappeared through the door.

The impulse to go after her was one with which he had become painfully familiar.

He tamped it down and forced himself to remain in the drawing room and be a proper host. Indeed, he remained there playing cards until nearly everyone had gone to bed but Mr. Hawthorne and him.

Normally, Archie looked forward to sleep. With his bedchamber being situated beside Nell's, however, he had been finding it more elusive.

Once he and Hawthorne had finished their game, Archie set down the cards and rose, bidding Hawthorne good night through a yawn.

A crackle in the grate drew his attention, and he strode over to it. There was but a small flame remaining, and he took the poker and jabbed at a few of the charred pieces. Something white caught his eye, and he drew nearer, warmth rushing to his face from the embers.

There was a small, crumpled paper at the edge of the grate. It looked like the ones they had just written their hopes and predictions upon.

Archie jabbed it with the poker and extracted it. Taking care not to burn his fingers on the iron, he plucked the crinkled paper off the tip and placed the poker in its stand, his heart beating erratically.

There was no way to know for certain that it belonged to Nell. Indeed, he had not seen her write anything. Anyone might have scribbled something, then changed their mind and disposed of it to author something different.

Careful not to tear the paper, he unfurled it and read the words.

To be loved without reservation.

To remain as I am.

He read it again. And again.

Twenty-One

NELL

The first day of the Year of our Lord 1818 had been interminable.

A number of the men had gone hunting, including Lord Dalmeer. Those who stayed behind spent the day rehearsing a play, written by Mr. Kendrick, who, in his own humble opinion, was the next Shakespeare. But better.

Perhaps that was why the play he had written was so similar to Hamlet.

After a few feeble attempts to decline participating, Nell was cast as Mistress Winterby, the housekeeper of Ravensmere Castle, whose main role was to reveal a family secret at the worst possible moment.

At least they had cast her in an appropriately clumsy role.

The performance took place after the men had returned from hunting, and Nell's finest moment in her acting debut was nearly spoiled just before delivering her line.

Mr. Kendrick, who had cast himself in the primary role of Prince Alaric, made a moving if somewhat drawn-out speech, after which he crumpled to his knees and began wailing.

As this show of emotion was well beyond what he had rehearsed earlier, it had been all Nell could do to maintain her somber expression.

She happened to glance at Lord Dalmeer at that precise moment. A fatal error.

He covered his mouth with a fist, but his eyes were alight with laughter, his shoulders shaking.

The revelation of the family's most guarded secret was, therefore, conveyed less dramatically than Nell had intended as she fought to keep her composure.

Miss Orston, who had found more success than Nell in excusing herself from participation, leaned over to whisper something to the earl.

Nell's desire to laugh fled, promptly replaced by an impulse to crumple to her knees and wail like Prince Alaric.

The following evening, Lady Dalmeer had arranged for the guests to demonstrate their abilities in the estate's music room.

Nell could play the flute quite well, but she had not brought the instrument and had little desire to perform in front of a crowd. That desire was quenched entirely when Miss Orston rose to play the pianoforte and Lord Dalmeer took his place as her page-turner.

Never had the act of turning a page felt so rife with meaning.

Nell had observed the two of them skating and conversing and laughing together, but seeing Lord Dalmeer stand beside Miss Orston while she flawlessly played Haydn's *Andante in F Minor* brought a fresh wave of pain that she could only describe as loss.

He had chosen the more suitable woman, just as Henry Linton had.

Nell quietly rose and went to the back of the room, where the servants were setting out refreshments. She took a glass of punch and stood by the door, forcing herself to take deep breaths.

Mr. Fowell, who had been standing in a back corner the entire evening, came up to her. "Are you well, Miss Prescott?"

"Oh, yes," she said, smiling. "Quite."

He studied her, then his gaze flicked to Miss Orston and Lord Dalmeer. He said nothing, however, merely standing near as he too sipped from a glass.

They had not spoken since their conversation about the conservatory. Perhaps he had been expecting an engagement announcement.

"I hope you do not find me too forward, Miss Prescott," he said softly, "if I tell you that I see sadness in your eyes, and I think I can guess the reason."

A lump rose in Nell's throat, but she tried to smile. It took enough effort that she could not find a response.

"There is nothing worse than facing such sadness alone."

Nell tried to blink away the burning in her eyes.

He took a handkerchief from his tailcoat and offered it to her.

A strangled feeling in her throat, she accepted it, then glanced around the room, hoping no one had noticed her discomposure. "If you will excuse

me..." She turned toward the door, which was blurred by the tears she was fighting off.

She closed the door behind her and began walking, her breath coming shakily.

She had been naïve to come to Bellthorne, just as she had been naïve to think Henry would marry her or that she could have a future with the earl.

A squeak sounded, and Mr. Fowell closed the door gently behind him. "Forgive me, Miss Prescott, but I cannot in good conscience leave you alone in such a state. Would you care for company?"

Nell met his gaze and opened her mouth to decline, but no words came out.

She wanted to be alone, yet she dreaded it. She did not wish to be with her thoughts or feelings without distraction or reprieve.

Everywhere she looked at Bellthorne, people seemed to have their companion. Wesley and Millie had become nearly inseparable. Lord Weymouth and his wife were wrapped up in the bliss of being newly wed. Mr. and Mrs. Bowles had each other. The Potsworths. The Strouds. Lord Dalmeer and Miss Orston.

That one smarted most of all.

Nell had arrived at Bellthorne intending to rebuild her reputation, but at some point, she had come to long for companionship.

She could not have the one she truly wanted, but Mr. Fowell was offering to be with her in her sadness.

Was it so very wrong for her to wish, just for a moment, to forget she had ever fallen in love with Lord Dalmeer?

"I could walk with you," Mr. Fowell offered.

Nell nodded and took the arm he supplied. There was precious little wisdom in it, but there would be company and distraction, at least. As for her reputation?

That was beyond repair.

She had seen to that.

"I am not normally so sentimental," she said with a watery laugh, dabbing the corner of her eye with his handkerchief.

He put a reassuring hand over the one holding his arm. "You needn't apologize, Miss Prescott. I am no stranger to disappointment of the sort you have experienced."

She glanced at him. She had never considered Mr. Fowell's background or experience. She had seen him as a threat to be avoided—much like some had seen *her*.

Perhaps he had his own sad history, though.

“Does it get better?” she asked, desperately hoping for reassurance.

He looked at her as they strolled the corridor, then directed his gaze forward again. “The pain is not always so sharp. But temporary comforts are the most I have found.”

“What sort of temporary comforts?” A reprieve, however short, would be welcome.

He slowed and faced her, his eyes searching hers as his hold on her hand shifted. “Would you like me to show you?”

Nell's breath stuttered as his gaze intensified, then his eyes dropped to her lips.

She froze with indecision.

Would kissing Mr. Fowell help her forget the hurt? Would it feel the way it had to kiss the earl?

Curiosity and desperation urged her to accept Mr. Fowell's offer, if only for temporary comfort.

A memory of the conservatory flashed across her mind. Lord Dalmeer's lips and hands on hers, but even more vividly, the feeling in her body that had drawn her to him.

She felt none of that pull to Mr. Fowell.

Perhaps it *would* be a distraction to kiss him, but what would happen when the distraction was over? She would be left not just with the pain of losing Lord Dalmeer but with a crushing disappointment in herself.

She took a step back, gently but firmly pulling her hand away. “Forgive me. I”—she swallowed—“I must go.” She picked up her skirts and hurried away before weakness overtook sense, as it so often had before.

Eyes brimming, she turned the corner and collided with something.

She blinked as hands gripped her arms, keeping her upright.

Lord Dalmeer's eyes were full of concern. “Are you well?”

Nell forced a laugh, for she could not bear for him to see her in this state. “Forgive me. I was not paying attention to where I was going.” She took a step back, and his hands released her arms.

“I saw you leave the music room,” he said. “Fowell followed and I thought you might need...”

“Protection?” She smiled wryly. “You have no obligation to provide such a thing, my lord. I am quite well, I thank you.” Her throat began to thicken again. She needed to leave before her emotions spilled over yet again. “Excuse me.” She gave a curtsy, then turned and walked away.

“Nell!”

She did not respond, for her eyes were burning again, and she could no longer pretend composure. As she reached the next turn, she refused the impulse to look over her shoulder and see if he was following.

She had intended to go to her bedchamber, but the idea that he might follow her there decided her against it. She turned to the left rather than the right when she reached the end of the corridor, fixing upon the Tapestry Room as the most sensible destination—somewhere she could be alone with her thoughts and feelings. Alone was the safest state for Nell. She could not be trusted to behave in any other circumstance.

She stopped short at the sight of Lady Dalmeer in the corridor, a basket in hand and folded papers all over the floor.

Was she bound to meet everyone in the corridor this evening?

The countess had not noticed her, however, and Nell hesitated. She had no wish to see or speak with Lady Dalmeer in her current condition—or any condition. The woman had never wanted her here.

With good reason.

Nell took in a shaky breath, wiped her eyes with the handkerchief, and strode to help.

The countess, who was bent over picking up papers, lifted her gaze.

Nell crouched and began gathering up everyone’s hopes and predictions for the year.

The countess’s gaze lingered on her. “Thank you, Miss Prescott.” There was surprise in her voice.

“It is my pleasure, my lady.”

“I thought we could string these up on the mantle in the drawing room. Miss Caldwell offered to do it.”

“That is very kind of her—and a good idea.” She dropped two papers in the basket. “I do not believe we heard *your* hopes or predictions, though, my lady.”

“Nor yours,” she replied.

Nell picked up two more papers, then brought the basket nearer the countess. “I have none to speak of.”

Lady Dalmeer dropped the last two papers in. "I have no predictions and but one hope."

"And what hope is that?"

"That my son will marry well."

It was not said in a pointed manner, but Nell dropped her gaze all the same. "I am certain your hope will be realized, my lady."

"We shall see." There was a wistful quality to the words. "Thank you for your help, Miss Prescott."

Nell ceded the basket to her. "It was no trouble at all, particularly when you have been so kind to host me—despite, I think, preferring not to."

The countess's cheeks colored slightly.

"I do not place any blame upon you," Nell said. "Indeed, I would feel the same way in your position. My history makes me an unpalatable guest for any hostess." She was being far more frank than she should have been, but she hadn't the energy for anything else. "I am sorry for the trouble I have caused you. I did not intend it, but it was thoughtless of me to come."

"Miss Prescott," the countess said, "you are too hard on yourself, I am sure."

"Am I?" Nell gave a rueful smile.

"We all make errors of judgment."

"Yes, but mine have been catastrophically large ones."

Lady Dalmeer regarded her with something much like pity.

Was that preferable to her dislike?

Nell could not say.

"I shan't keep you any longer, my lady. I only wished to say thank you—and to apologize. I bid you good night." She curtsied, then continued to the library, where she spent the next hour losing herself in the stories of fictional people whose troubles eclipsed her own.

But Lord Dalmeer's ghost remained with her all the while, peering over the top of his book with his irresistible twinkle, as though to say, *You shall never be free of me.*

Twenty-Two

ARCHIE

Mr. Tomlinson's voice droned on, echoing in the stone halls of the church.

Archie could not have named the subject of the sermon, despite the fact that it had lasted an hour already. Mother sat on one side of him, Miss Orston on the other, wearing an expression of polite interest.

Archie stifled a smile. Three more of Tomlinson's sermons, and she would give up such an affectation.

He looked away, and his gaze found Nell. Far too easily.

Her lids were drifting closed, her head slipping to the side, where it would soon settle upon Mr. Tinston's shoulder.

Envy flashed through Archie just as Miss Hollis noted the precarious situation of her friend and elbowed her.

Nell jolted awake, and Miss Hollis covered a laugh with her hand.

Nell shifted in her seat, as though staying awake was a mere matter of sitting in the correct position.

Perhaps if one had tacks under one's backside.

Archie reached into his coat and pulled a paper from the inside pocket. With a glance at Miss Orston and Mother to ensure their focus was not on him, he opened it and read the words again.

To be loved without reservation.

To remain as I am.

He might have written the hope himself.

As for the prediction, well...

He stole another glance at Miss Orston. In marrying her, he certainly would not remain as he was. He would be a husband. It would be precisely the type of marriage he had wished for: practical, respectable, safe. Where there was no love, there could be no pain.

He read the paper once more and glanced at Nell. Was he merely assuming it belonged to her because he wanted to believe it? Wanted to believe that somewhere in those words was a confession of her feelings for him?

It was a presumptuous hope, for she had rejected him.

You are under no obligation to me, nor I to you, she had said.

Those last four words had wounded him in a way he had never before experienced.

And yet he still wanted her.

Perhaps in time he would forget.

He folded the paper. He should return it to the grate, where it had been cast. The author had not regarded the contents as worthwhile; why should he?

And yet, he wanted to know whether it was Nell's.

Needed to know.

The sermon ended—finally—and people began to file out of the church, Nell some five feet behind Archie.

"I shall be out in a moment, Mother," Archie said as they reached the door.

She squared him with an unusually perceptive gaze, then nodded and continued outside with Miss Orston.

Archie retrieved the paper from his pocket and, grasping it in his fist, turned toward Nell, her brother, and Miss Hollis.

All three of them stopped and looked at him.

"Might I have a quick word, Miss Prescott?" he asked.

Nell's eyes fixed on him, wide and alert in contrast to their sleepy drooping just minutes ago. She glanced at her brother.

Mr. Prescott was watching Archie, but he met his sister's gaze.

"I shall be only a moment," she assured him.

He nodded. "We will wait outside." He and Miss Hollis passed them, disappearing through the door.

Archie's hand tightened on the paper as Nell looked at him expectantly.

"Miss Prescott," he said, "I—"

"Lord Dalmeer. Miss Prescott."

Their heads turned as Mr. Tomlinson approached with quick feet.

"Vicar," Archie said, trying to mask the exasperation in his voice.

“I have been wishing to speak with you,” he said. “Both”—his eyes moved between them—“of you. With the unfortunate cancellation of last week’s services due to the snow, I have not had the opportunity. In fact, I had prepared that sermon with the two of you in mind. I would have delivered it today had it not been requisite that I speak on the topic of...” He put out a hand, inviting them to supply the topic.

Archie looked at Nell for assistance, but she could be of no help.

Mr. Tomlinson’s lips pressed together in displeasure. “Repentance. New beginnings.”

“Yes, yes,” Archie said.

“A stirring sermon, sir.”

Archie shot her an amused look.

“Now,” Mr. Tomlinson said, slightly mollified by this characterization of something that had put her to sleep, “as for last week’s sermon...” He cleared his throat and stood more erect.

Archie’s eyes widened in horror. Did the man mean to deliver it now?

“It would be far preferable for you to hear the entire thing,” Mr. Tomlinson said, “for the topic is one that requires a great deal of care and, quite frankly, a familiarity with the Good Book that is impossible to achieve without the depth of study I devote to it, but”—he looked between them—“as I have been invited to dine with the Riess family today, I shall try my best to be concise.”

Nell pressed her lips together, seemingly to control a little quiver at the edge of her mouth, and Archie was obliged to cough.

Mr. Tomlinson took one of Nell’s hands in his, then reached for the hand in which Archie held the small paper.

Archie pulled it away and offered the other one.

The vicar frowned slightly but accepted the strange choice without comment. “I beg of you both: exercise every bit of power in your wills to repudiate the dark spirit urging you toward the violation of one of God’s most precious laws.”

Nell’s eyes widened in horror.

“Chastity,” Mr. Tomlinson said. “I speak of the law of chastity.”

Archie did not know whether to laugh, cry, or plant the vicar a facer. “Thank you, Mr. Tomlinson, for that clarification.”

“The flesh is weak,” he said simply. “As a man with experience on this topic, I will be frank with you and tell you that I do understand the, for lack

of a better word, avalanche of feelings and urges the body may present us with when we find ourselves in the presence of a handsome member of the opposite sex...”

Archie could not remember his face ever being so hot as it was now—nor having such an overwhelming urge to laugh and vomit all at once.

“But”—Mr. Tomlinson released Archie’s hand to put up a finger—“we are not here to surrender to such carnal urges, are we?”

Nell shook her head, which was bowed so low Archie could not see anything but her lashes.

“Devote yourselves, I pray, to the study of the good word. Strengthen the spirit so that it might overcome the flesh’s weakness. May I trust both of you to do that?”

Archie nodded meekly and murmured assent.

The vicar retook his hand and gave it a squeeze. “I shall deliver the sermon in full next week, but I could not live with myself if I had delayed speaking with you a moment longer. I trust I am not too late already?”

“No, sir,” Nell said quickly.

“I salute you both, then. Be strong, my children. Do not give in to your carnal desires one for another, for they are to be expressed only within the bounds of marriage sanctioned by God. Then—and only then—may you enjoy them to their fullest potential.” He released their hands, bowed, then made his way to the vestry.

The quiet once the vestry door had closed was deafening.

For all his talk of chastity, Mr. Tomlinson had left them alone in the nave. He must have been hungry—a carnal urge apparently less serious than the one upon which he had just lectured them.

Nell’s gaze finally rose and met Archie’s.

They looked at one another for a moment, both of their cheeks still red.

Archie tried his very hardest not to smile, but it was no use. A laugh burst through his lips.

“How you can stand there and laugh is beyond me,” she said, though her voice shook slightly.

“What other option is there?” The paper was still in Archie’s hand, but this simply wasn’t the time for it, so he slipped it back into his pocket.

“Crawl under that pew and never again emerge?”

“Laughing is far more enjoyable.”

Nell put her gloved hands to her cheeks, patting them as though each touch burned her through her gloves. "I shall melt the snow if I go outside."

"They look perfectly pink."

Her eyes flicked to his, then away. "Was there something you wished to say, Lord Dalmeer?"

It was becoming an ambition of his to hear her call him something other than *my lord* or *Lord Dalmeer*.

"I wished to apologize," he said, "for last night. It was presumptuous of me—"

"No." She shook her head. "I should be apologizing to *you*. I should have expressed gratitude for your solicitude."

"It was not my place."

Her hands clenched in front of her stomach, but she did not immediately respond. Indeed, her fingers fiddled until she finally spoke. "He did not pursue me unbidden."

Archie's chest tightened, and he felt the color draining from his cheeks.

She met his gaze. "He remarked my poor spirits and felt I should not be alone."

Archie swallowed. "I see."

She looked down. "It was a moment of weakness on my part, and I realized it quickly."

He observed her, his stomach tying itself in knots, for her words could have meant any number of things. "Did...did you..." He could not finish the sentence.

"Nothing happened. I realized that what I was feeling would only be magnified by an...interaction with Mr. Fowell. I went away, which was when you came upon me."

Archie let out a breath. "And what *were* you feeling?"

She gave a rueful smile and lifted her shoulders. "Lonely, I suppose. But I am better now." She smiled, as though to provide evidence of her assurance. It lacked something.

The door creaked open, and her brother appeared.

"I am coming," Nell said.

He did not leave the door, and Nell returned her gaze to Archie.

"Thank you, my lord, for your apology, but I assure you, it was unnecessary." She curtsied. "Good day." She joined her brother,

disappearing into the bright light of the outdoors.

Archie closed his eyes, inhaled, then let out the breath slowly before joining Mother and Miss Orston outside.

He helped them both from the carriage when they reached Bellthorne. Mother insisted Miss Orston go first, which led Archie to shoot her a bemused look. When it was her turn, Mother paused on the steps and spoke with the coachman, holding Archie's hand for support while Miss Orston went inside.

Archie kept his arm outstretched as he waited for Mother to hold a conversation she could just as easily have carried out on the ground.

She descended the last step, and the coachman signaled the horses to drive the carriage away. She kept Archie's hand as they walked across the gravel to the stairs. "Archie?"

He looked at her through the corner of his eye, for she rarely addressed him thus. "Yes, Mother."

"Do you wish to marry Miss Orston?"

Archie took a moment before responding.

"It is not a difficult question, my dear," she said as they reached the top of the steps.

"Nor is it an easy one."

She faced him. "Why not? It should be. You either want to or you do not."

He worked his jaw and clasped his hands behind his back. "I want to do my duty."

Her lips pressed together.

"I thought you would be delighted."

"As did I. I find that instead I am quite sad."

He surveyed her. There were few occasions when he could remember having a conversation with Mother that had interested rather than annoyed him. "Why?"

"Because you are my son, Archie. I want you to be happy."

"I thought you wanted me to be married."

"Can I not want both?"

He stared at her. "I do not think so. You of all people know that."

Her brows pinched together. "Meaning what, precisely?"

Archie let out a caustic laugh. "Come, Mother. We have lived in the same house for twenty-eight years. I may have been young, but I was not

stupid. I watched you and Father fall out of love.”

She looked away.

“It was painful enough to witness,” he said. “I have no wish to live it myself. I would rather marry practically.”

It was quiet as their gazes held.

“Shall we go inside?” He turned toward the door.

“I never fell out of love with your father, Archie.”

He paused, grasping the handle.

“We simply...stopped.”

Slowly, Archie turned. “Stopped what?”

Her shoulders rose helplessly. “Everything.”

He frowned at the unhelpful answer.

“Love requires work, my dear. It requires communication. Truth.”

He waited for her to go on.

“Your father had a great deal on his mind when you were young. He was new to his position and title. Overwhelmed, no doubt. And I felt neglected. Rather than telling him as much, I pestered him. I complained. And when that did not work, I turned to friends and company to cure my loneliness. He saw me frittering my life away in pleasures and retreated further into his work.”

Archie had never seen Mother look so pitiful, so sad.

“It is my greatest regret that I did not try harder. Try something different.” Her voice trembled, and she put a hand to her mouth, taking a moment before continuing. “That I did not tell him how I truly felt.”

Seconds passed as Archie processed what she was saying. What he had never guessed.

He stepped toward her, wrapped an arm around her, and pulled her to him. He held her in a way he had not done in years and pressed a kiss to her bonnet.

“I could not bear it,” she whispered with uneven breaths, “if you lost yourself in your duty at the expense of a happiness you might have had.”

Archie stared out at the snow-covered expanse of Bellthorne’s land, his eyes stinging.

For years, he had thought Mother and Father had lost the love they had once had—an unavoidable occurrence that had left them both miserable.

But Mother *had* loved him. She still did. Perhaps he too had loved her, but neither had been willing to speak the truth. And now it was too late.

Archie too had been afraid of the truth. Afraid of the fact that more than anything in his life, he wanted to love and be loved.

But not by just anyone.

By Nell.

Had he gone too far down the path with Miss Orston to take the one with Nell?

If he told her the truth, would she reject him a second time?

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Twenty-Three

ARCHIE

Archie spent the afternoon holed up in his study, trying to determine the best course forward.

Unfortunately, the same conclusion at which he arrived again and again forced him to acknowledge his own idiocy—and demand he prepare himself for an uncomfortable conversation with Miss Orston. The outcome of that conversation would determine his future, which was why he was obliged to clasp his hands behind his back to keep them from shaking when he pulled her aside in the drawing room before dinner.

She smiled knowingly at him. “I have been waiting for this conversation.”

Archie’s muscles tightened. “You...have?” Was she expecting an offer of marriage? In the drawing room?

She nodded. “Only earlier today, I decided that, if you had not broached the subject by tomorrow morning, I would do so.”

Archie’s brow rose. This was not particularly encouraging—and he was surprised by her forwardness, truth be told. “I...I am not certain I understand.”

Her smile grew. “Do you not?”

She was right. The problem was that he was afraid he *did* understand.

“You, Lord Dalmeer,” she said, “are in love with Miss Prescott.”

Archie’s mouth slipped open, but he could not speak. He could only stare and blink.

Miss Orston laughed. “That is quite the same expression *she* wore when I asked if there was an understanding between the two of you. I hate to admit that I was foolish enough to believe her when she said there was not. Thankfully, I am not blind, and I tend to trust what I see over what people say. And I have seen a great deal.” Her eyes teased him.

“Miss Orston, I...” He pressed his lips together. There was no way to explain things cleanly. The long and short of it was quite simple, though. “I have been quite foolish, I think.”

“Oh, certainly, but that is expected, is it not, when one is in love?”

He grimaced. “I never meant to deceive you.”

“Only yourself, I think. But there is no need to apologize, my lord. I admit, I came here with some curiosity, for my parents—much like your mother, I assume—have harbored *hopes* regarding you and me. But, much as I admire you, I do not love you. Nor you me. And I am selfish and modern enough to wish for such silly sentiment in my marriage.”

He let out a relieved chuckle. “As, I have discovered, am I.”

“I am confident your wish will soon be granted.”

Archie’s heart thumped. “I wish I shared your confidence. Miss Prescott has been quite clear with me that she has no desire to marry. In fact, she refused when I offered.”

Their eyes both moved to the door as Nell walked in.

Her gaze flitted to Archie, then to Miss Orston, then away.

“Even after declaring your feelings?” Miss Orston asked, a brow raised.

“I...uh...that is...” How could he explain why he had not? That it had been for her sake that he had restrained himself.

Miss Orston gave him a shrewd look. “Well, I doubt you will have much work to change her mind. I wish you luck, my lord—and a happy life together.” She gave him one more smile and a curtsy, then walked away.

Archie forced himself to stand in the corner for three minutes rather than dashing over to Nell and asking her to marry him right then and there.

He was approached by Freddie just before the three minutes had passed, and then Mother led the way to the dining room after that, so the virtue of patience was forced upon him.

Mr. Tomlinson would be very pleased indeed.

Now, if only he could persuade Nell into the God-sanctioned state of marriage, not to please the vicar but because she understood that she was the most adored woman in the world.

Twenty-Four

NELL

“**Y**ou look a vision, miss,” Shaw said as she stepped back and regarded her mistress.

“Thank you,” Nell replied with a smile, glancing down at her blush gown. A thin overlay of silver-embroidered leaves climbed the skirts, ending in a silver band at her waist.

She had saved the dress for this evening. She did not know why, for there was no one to impress at the Twelfth Night ball. In three days, they would take the journey home, and the gown would sit in her trunk for the foreseeable future. Perhaps forever.

She was not even certain she should be wearing it tonight. She had considered keeping to her room rather than joining the Twelfth Night festivities. To watch Lord Dalmeer dance and laugh with Miss Orston was to submit willingly to torture. If she stayed in bed, however, she would be thinking of him and *imagining* them dancing and laughing together, not to mention making Wesley and Millie worry.

She would simply have to do her best to enjoy herself a final time before retreating from the public eye again.

Giving herself a final critical look, she took in a breath, then went to find Millie.

They strode into the Long Gallery a quarter of an hour later, their gazes taking in the scene. The gallery had been decorated so that it was nearly unrecognizable, with holly and garlands strewn about, candles glimmering on nearly every surface, and an orchestra overlooking the scene. Nell was not the only one who had saved her finest gown for the evening. Everyone looked their best, in part because spirits were so high, filling the gallery with smiles and laughter.

Wesley and Millie joined the first set, and Nell went in search of refreshment, trying not to scour the scene for Lord Dalmeer and Miss Orston.

She noted them standing in conversation at the far end of the gallery, and her chest clenched. She turned away.

Strengthen the spirit so that it might overcome the flesh's weakness.

That was what Mr. Tomlinson had said, and though the conversation had smothered her with embarrassment at the time, she almost wished he were present to give her more counsel, for the flesh felt weaker than ever.

She took a glass of punch and slipped into the corridor that led to her bedchamber, nearly draining the glass's contents. She blinked quickly and put the back of her glove to her mouth, her throat burning. She rested her back against the wall and shut her eyes until they no longer stung.

At least the physical pain was distraction from the one in her chest.

Nell let her head fall back against the wall, undoubtedly doing harm to Shaw's hard work.

Was she being a coward? She could not dance with Lord Dalmeer, but he was not the only gentleman present. Mr. Tinston was thoughtful if a bit awkward. Mr. Stroud might ask her to dance—if his sister was not there to persuade him against it.

More importantly, she should not leave Wesley and Millie to worry where she had gone.

"Miss Prescott."

Nell's head whipped around as Mr. Fowell emerged from the gallery.

She stood straight. She had successfully avoided him since their encounter at the musicale.

"I thought you would be dancing," he said as he approached. He was looking very fine, his gray tailcoat neat and hugging his broad shoulders.

"I shall," she said, "but I..." She could not find a plausible reason for seeking solitude in the corridor when the ball had only just begun.

"I had hoped you would save me a set," he said.

She tried for a smile. "I am not certain I shall dance this evening."

"It is no matter," he replied. "I think I would prefer this."

She swallowed, and her back bumped the wall as he drew near. Too near. "Prefer what?"

Smiling, he gently took the empty glass from her hand. "I have been waiting some time now for a moment with you, and while I enjoy a good

game of cat and mouse, our time has run short. Do you not agree?"

"Mr. Fowell," she said, putting her hands up to prevent him coming any nearer. "I think you have misunderstood."

He took her waist in hand, preventing her from moving as a smile curled his lips. "Indeed, I have not. You may play the proper miss amongst the guests, Miss Prescott, but I know what you have to offer."

She pushed his hand from her waist, fear gripping her. "I have nothing to offer you, sir."

He laughed, and the coldness of it pierced her. "Oh, but you do," he said, his eyes dark and intent on hers. "I am not asking for anything you have not already given other men."

Her face flushed as he drew nearer.

She shoved him with both hands, and a shattering sounded as her glass fell from his hand to the floor.

He grabbed her by the wrists, his nostrils flaring. "That was not very polite of you, was it?"

She yanked them from his grasp, anger and fear mixing so that her legs and hands shook. "Do not touch me, sir."

Footsteps pounded, and Nell sucked in a breath as Lord Dalmeer collided into Mr. Fowell.

Fowell went stumbling backwards. He regained his balance quickly, however, and his expression of blinking surprise turned to amusement, curling his lip at one edge. "Welcome, Dalmeer. Might I suggest you return to the ball? I have things well in hand here." His gaze moved to Nell.

"Go," Lord Dalmeer said, his voice dangerously calm.

"Come, my lord," Mr. Fowell said cajolingly. "You have had your fun with her. Let others have their turn. You have no obligation to a wench luring you into her web with matrimonial ambitions."

There was a low-pitched smack, then a thud as Fowell hit the floor.

Lord Dalmeer stood over him, one hand clenched in a fist, and murder in his eyes.

Nell was frozen in place, her chest rising high and falling deep.

Mr. Fowell nursed his jaw with a hand as he looked up at the earl.

"Leave," Lord Dalmeer said. "Or I shall be obliged to assist you."

Never had the word *assist* sounded so much like a threat of death.

Mr. Fowell pushed himself to a stand, his upper lip curling. He stared at the earl for a moment, then spun on his heel and strode away.

Nell's heart battered her ribs as the earl turned toward her.

In a blink, the anger in his eyes turned to concern. He hurried toward her, gathering her hands in his. "Are you hurt?"

Nell shook her head, her throat closed off to any response she might have given. Her hands were trembling, and she tightened them in his hold.

He looked at the shattered glass on the floor, then back at her, a question in his eyes.

"I am well," she managed to say. "I was on my way to my bedchamber, for I have the headache." The moment the words came out, she wished them unsaid.

His eyes searched hers. "The headache."

She broke her gaze away. "It seems you are always rescuing me from my folly. I trust tonight is the last time." She tried to pull her hands from his, but she met with resistance.

"Nell..."

She did not dare meet his eye.

"Will you not dance with me?" he asked softly.

Her stomach somersaulted, and she looked at him.

His eyes were soft. Impossibly so after the fire in them when he had faced Mr. Fowell.

Nell imagined dancing with him one last time. A final memory, a final touch—perhaps even a laugh—before she ceded him to Miss Orston.

She wanted the moments and the memory of them, but the future would hurt all the more for it.

"I shan't keep you any longer, my lord." She pulled her hands again, more firmly this time, and he yielded them.

"Nell."

She stopped, her back to him.

"You forgot this."

She turned toward him as he pulled something from his coat, then came over and placed it in her hand.

Her gaze flew to his. It was the paper from the hopes and predictions game Lady Dalmeer had arranged.

She had quickly thrown hers into the fire when no one was looking.

Or so she had thought.

Lord Dalmeer looked at her a moment longer, then turned and strode back to the Long Gallery.

She shut her eyes, clenching the paper in her hand.

He had read it. He had known it was hers.

That explained his kindness tonight. He pitied her. She was forever falling into imprudence, and he felt responsible for her because of their arrangement. Because of their kiss. He was too good to simply abandon her.

She debated whether to return to the ball or seek her room like the poor creature she was.

Wesley and Millie would be done dancing soon and would look for her.

With a determined breath, she walked to the gallery door just as it opened.

Miss Orston stopped short, and her mouth stretched into a smile. "Just the person I was looking for." She looked both ways down the corridor. "Was Lord Dalmeer not with you?"

Nell's cheeks warmed. "Only for a moment. He returned to the ball."

"Looking very sad indeed before promptly leaving again."

Nell looked down at her gloves. "If I happen to see him, I shall tell him you were looking for him."

Miss Orston closed the door behind her. "May I ask you another question, Miss Prescott?"

Nell's heart clenched, for the last time she had agreed to this, she had regretted it.

She nodded.

"Did Lord Dalmeer speak of me to you just now?"

Nell hesitated before responding. "He did not."

Miss Orston pressed her lips together, but her eyes twinkled with some strange glint of humor as she took Nell's hands. "Then, at the risk of being quite forward and unbearably managing, allow me to tell you what he no doubt wished to."

Nell braced herself.

"He and I have agreed we would not suit." She smiled as though it was a matter for celebration.

It was quiet but for the hum of music and conversation from the gallery.

"Agreed." It was the only word Nell could manage to say.

"Agreed." Miss Orston's tone was decisive. "I simply thought you should know." She winked at Nell, then released her hands, and returned

through the door.

Nell stood in the quiet corridor, trying to understand. It made her mind spin.

She ran her hands down her skirts and realized she was still holding the paper Lord Dalmeer had given her.

She stared at it, then unfolded its crinkled edges. Her own writing stared back at her.

To be loved without reservation.

A hope.

To remain as I am.

And a prediction.

Her brow knit, for another paper of the same shape sat behind hers—and something else besides.

She moved her hope and prediction, and a masculine script stared back at her as a pressed purple hellebore bloom fell to the floor.

To love you without reservation.

Just as you are.

Twenty-Five

NELL

Lord Dalmeer was not in the Long Gallery.

He was not in the conservatory, nor the Billiard Room, nor the saloon, nor the entry hall.

Breathless, the two papers still in her hand and her skirts held up with the other, Nell made her way to his bedchamber. Her slippers pattered on the marble floor of the first Antique Passage, still decorated with the greenery they had cut the day before Christmas Eve.

It seemed a lifetime ago.

She turned the corner into the second part of the gallery and stopped short.

Lord Dalmeer stared at her, his arm resting on the plinth of a marble bust.

Mercury's.

They stared at one another as Nell tried to catch her breath.

He remained quiet, his eyes more subdued than usual.

Now that she had found him, she was not sure what to say.

"You had better not bother with him," she finally said. "He is quite taciturn, I've been told."

Lord Dalmeer let out a short breathy laugh, but his gaze moved to the papers in her hand.

"You might have told me to read them."

His arm dropped from the plinth. "You had the headache."

Nell smiled ruefully, and her chest fluttered as she remembered the words he had written on the paper. For *her*.

She was afraid to believe them. "You do not wish to marry."

"*You* did not wish to marry. You rejected my offer."

"An offer made out of duty."

He gave a caustic laugh. "Devil take duty, Nell! I offered"—he took a step toward her—"because I have not stopped thinking of you since the moment I met you in this wretchedly drafty corridor."

Her breath came with less ease with every word he said and every step he took. "Then it is not because of Mr. Tomlinson's lecture that you feel you must..."

"Mr. Tomlinson's lecture did nothing but put thoughts about you into my mind that would make him faint."

Nell's face flushed, and she broke her gaze away, trying to stop a smile. "My lord..."

He tipped her chin up with a finger until her eyes met his. "Archie. For heaven's sake, call me Archie, Nell. I do not wish to be *my lord* or *Lord Dalmeer*. I wish to be something far dearer." His hand slid across her cheek, his pinkie grazing her neck and sending a cascade of chills across her body.

"I am not a proper wife for you. Archie."

His eyes searched hers. "You are the only wife I will have."

There was only so much resistance within her, and it crumbled as she took his face in her hands and pressed her lips to his.

It was all the answer he seemed to need. His hands held her mouth to his, only to move into her hair, then slide down her back, then grasp her waist, as though he could not decide how best to hold her. The kiss was urgency and relief and vow, and the severe stares of Mercury and the other Greeks and Romans had no power to stop or slow it.

When their lips broke apart, he held her face in his hands, a breath away, which was almost too far. "I love you, Nell. Without reservation. Precisely as you are. And I shan't rest until you see yourself the way I do."

She shut her eyes and rested her forehead against his. "I love you, Archie."

He took in a breath, and his thumbs caressed her cheeks.

"I always shall."

His lips found hers again, and he kissed her. Aching. Slowly. Until she forgot how to stand without his arms to hold her up.

She had given him every opportunity to choose something else. Someone else.

He had chosen her despite it. Chosen her twice.

Their lips parted again. "Dance with me," he whispered.

She pulled back to look at him.

“I want to dance with you, Nell. Will you dance with me?”

She could only laugh, for at the beginning of the evening, a dance with him had been more than she could have dared hope for. “I would like nothing more.”

His smile grew as he stepped back and offered her his arm.

But when they reached the door of the Long Gallery, Nell paused, letting her arm drop from his.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Shall we go in separately?”

He considered this, a thoughtful frown on his brow. “Three minutes?”

She smiled, ignoring the flash of disappointment in her chest. “Three minutes should suffice.”

He narrowed his eyes, the twinkling gone. “Nell, did you not hear me?”

She did not reply, for she did not understand.

“I love you,” he said, pulling her to him again so that she looked around to see whether anyone was watching. “Without reservation. I will *not* wait three minutes. I will not wait three seconds. I want to dance with you. Not once. Not twice. For every set left this evening. When everyone closes their eyes tonight, they will see you and me gliding across the floor, and they will know without a doubt in their mind that you are mine, I am yours. Am I quite clear?”

She could only nod, for words were simply not enough.

“Good.” Archie threaded his fingers through hers and grasped the door handle. “Let us hope Mother has chosen a scandalous waltz for the next dance. Do you know how to waltz?”

“I cannot say that I do.”

He smiled mischievously. “Only let me lead the way.” He thrust open the door with such force that dozens of eyes turned in their direction.

But he had eyes and smiles only for Nell, and she for him.

When the waltz was called, Archie led her to the center of the set, smiling at her in a way that made it difficult to breathe and impossible not to smile in return. His hand gripped her waist unapologetically, and his eyes held hers with a passion and intensity that Mr. Tomlinson would have condemned for its indecency.

Whispers rippled through the audience, but for once, Nell did not care.

There were seven more sets that evening, and they danced every single one, just as Archie had promised. A new scandal.
But this time, Nell would not face it alone.

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Epilogue

ARCHIE

The weight against Archie's arm pressed more firmly against him with each second. He smiled to himself and, keeping his body entirely still, stole a glance at his shoulder just as Nell's head settled upon it.

Mr. Tomlinson had been speaking for some time on the matter of covetousness, and he showed no sign of winding down.

On Archie's other side, Mother too had dozed off, her mouth lolling open. It was only a matter of time before she started to snore, which, in general, produced a tight-lipped glance from the vicar, followed by the end of his sermon.

Archie let his head rest against Nell's, content to be just as he was until that time came. The vicar's long-windedness was far less aggravating now that he was not watching Nell fall asleep on another man's shoulder.

A sneeze from someone nearby brought Nell's head up, and she blinked, looking around as though trying to remember where she was.

Keeping his eyes on the vicar, Archie handed her the paper he had been holding.

He watched her from the corner of his eye as she opened and read it.

You were snoring

She looked at him in horror.

He winked, then reached to turn the paper on its other side.

I love you

Struggling against a smile, she elbowed him.

The only thing he loved more than watching his wife try to stifle a smile was her actual smile.

She leaned over and whispered, "Right pocket."

Giving her a quizzical look, he reached into his tailcoat, fishing in the right pocket with his fingers. The crinkling that resulted made Mother snort. Archie unfurled the folded paper as quietly as possible.

Meet me in the old bedchamber after the service

Archie looked at his wife, who was staring straight ahead at the vicar, the picture of piousness. He reached for her hand and threaded his fingers through hers.

Though she kept her focus forward, she squeezed back.

There were new faces in the pews this week, and once the service had concluded, Mr. Tomlinson took it upon himself to make introductions.

"Allow me to present you," he said to the middle-aged man and woman, "to the Dowager Countess of Dalmeer"—he put out a hand to indicate Mother—"and the Earl and Countess of Dalmeer."

Archie bowed and Nell curtsied, as did the couple.

"I like to think I am somewhat responsible for their happy union," Mr. Tomlinson said, looking very pleased indeed.

"And yet," Mother said, "had I not held the party at Bellthorne last year, they would never have even met."

Mother had changed her tune regarding Nell to no small degree in the last year, and her memory of the house party's events had changed along with it.

"Quite true," the vicar acknowledged with a wide smile. "Necessary but not sufficient without my intervention, of course."

Nell's hold on Archie's arm tightened, as it always did when she was fighting a desire to laugh.

"Forgive me," Archie said to the group, "but my wife has a touch of the headache, so I fear we must take our leave."

Nell put a hand to her head, grimacing in apology as they bid farewell to the Wimpletons while the vicar and Lady Dalmeer continued discussing to whom Archie and Nell owed their marriage.

Though they lived in the same house, Archie insisted on taking a separate carriage to church to avoid having to wait an hour for Mother to

conclude her weekly gossip.

“My headaches have become quite common of late, darling,” Nell said once they were outside.

“True,” he said. “Do you mind them? They are terribly convenient.”

“Not at all,” she replied as he opened the carriage door for her. “In fact, I generally find their results quite enjoyable.” She sent a teasing look over her shoulder before disappearing inside.

With a smile, Archie climbed in, took the seat across from her, then hit his fist against the carriage roof.

It jerked forward.

“You are a bad influence on me, my love,” he said.

Nell’s brows lifted. “Am I?”

He watched her, wondering how in the world fortune had smiled upon him so kindly. “I was listening quite innocently to the vicar’s sermon when your scandalous note was thrust under my very nose, taking my mind from saintly topics.” He snatched her hands and pulled her over to his side of the chaise, knocking her untied bonnet to the floor.

“Hm,” she said, feigning concern as he pulled her onto his lap. “I did warn you that I was not a suitable wife, did I not?”

He put a hand under her chin and guided it until their lips were a breath apart. “I have no memory of this warning. I have been taken in. Totally.” He kissed her. “Completely.” He kissed her again. “And irrevocably.”

It had only been a year, but Archie could not remember how he had lived a day without Nell. He would allow the vicar and Mother to take as much credit as they wished. He was simply glad to be hers and to call her his.

Her lips smiled against his. “Shall I apologize?” She kissed him, her hand threading through his hair so that his hat toppled onto the squabs.

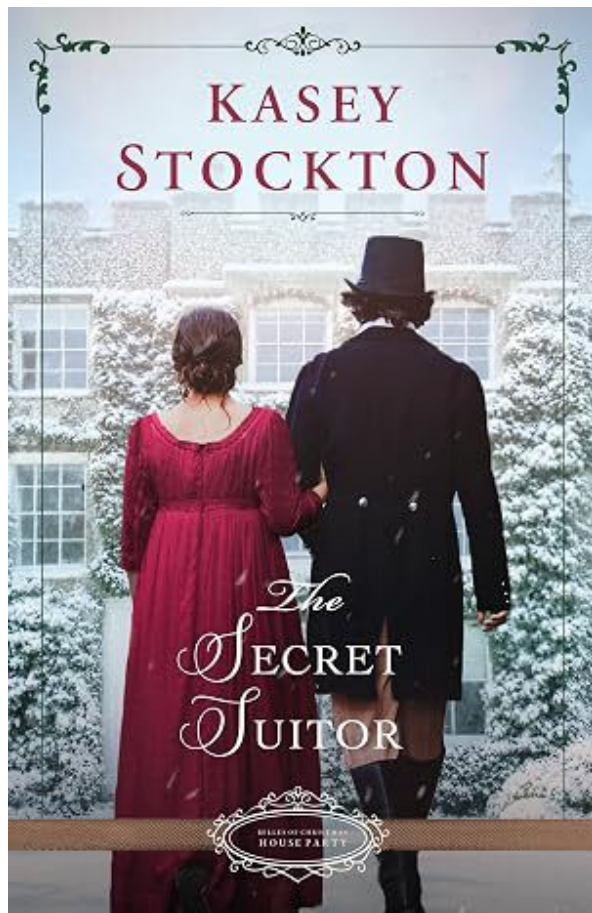
“Never,” he whispered before losing himself in her kisses, her old bedchamber entirely forgotten.

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Acknowledgments

My name is the one on the front of this book, but it's not representative of the many people who got this book to where it is today.

My first thanks always goes to my husband, Brandon. He is anything and everything I ever wanted and needed. Without him, not only would I be totally unable to do this job, I'd have no inspiration for the characters anyway.

Thank you to the amazing women that were part of this series: Deborah, Kasey, Mindy, and Ashtyn. We've done a lot of these together, and there's a reason! I love you all.

Thank you to my editors who made the book not just presentable but pretty and shiny.

Thank you to my beta readers: Heidi, Cindy, Nancy, Brooke, Mom, Dad, and Rebekah. Your feedback was instrumental, and I'm so thankful to you!

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Whitney Award-winning author Martha Keyes hails from Utah and received a BA in French Studies and a Master of Public Health.

Her route to becoming an author has been full of twists and turns, but she's finally settled into something she loves. Researching, daydreaming, and snacking have become full-time jobs, and she couldn't be happier about it. When she isn't writing, she is honing her photography skills, looking for travel deals, and exploring foreign countries with her family.



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