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The Midwinter Daughter

Dilly Court



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Dedication

For Samuel Luke Muggeridge RN

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Chapter One

Vauxhall Gardens, London, December 1856

It was bitterly cold inside the wooden hut that had been set aside as a changing room for the circus folk. Outside, the picturesque gardens had been transformed into a winter kingdom by a thick covering of snow, and the River Thames around the landing stage was coated in ice.

‘I hate these costumes,’ Angelica complained bitterly. ‘When will Pa let us act our age, Lizzie?’

‘Never. That’s the answer.’ Eliza smoothed the crumpled material of her childish smock with mittened hands. She reached for the frilled white apron that completed the stage costume.

‘We’re the daughters of the Great Magicus,’ Angelica said with a sigh. ‘We are doomed to be children for ever.’

Eliza cupped her hands over her mouth and breathed on her cold fingers. ‘We’ll be twenty years old on Christmas Eve. I’m tired of pretending to be a schoolgirl. You can’t convince me that you enjoy the tight binding we use to flatten our titties.’

‘It’s all part of the act, Lizzie. Pa says that the disappearing child is more popular with the audience than sawing a grown woman in half. He says we were born twins in order to assist him in the ring.’ Angelica reached for her pinafore. ‘You must admit, our act goes down well with the public.’

‘You’re a good dancer, Angel. You could twirl around the ring in between acts, wearing a short skirt and pink tights.’

‘Pa would never allow that.’ Angelica fastened her apron and slipped her feet into her high button boots.

‘Pa owns us, Angel. We will be performing this act until we are old crones.’

Angelica shot her sister a sideways glance. ‘I thought you were going to run away with Gaston, the sword swallower.’

‘He’s foreign and he smells of garlic.’ Eliza shivered. ‘Why do the men have a stove in their hut, and we don’t?’

‘Because they are the gods and we are merely their chattels,’ Angelica said, giggling. ‘Don’t give me that look, Lizzie. You know I don’t mean it.’

Eliza snatched her cloak from a peg on the wooden wall and wrapped it around her. ‘I’m going to their hut to get warm. I don’t care what Pa says. I can’t perform if my feet are frozen and my teeth are chattering.’

Angelica did up the last buttons on the boots and stood up. ‘Pass me my cloak, please. I’m coming with you. If we can’t get in with the men, we’ll be better off with the animals. Their keeper has to make sure they are kept warm. A cold and shivery lion is inclined to be a bit snappy.’

‘You’re right. I love Waldo, and Leonardo is very good about allowing me to spend time with the old lion. He’s lost most of his teeth, you know. Poor old boy.’ Eliza pulled the hood of her cloak over her dark brown ringlets. ‘Come on, Angel. Don’t dawdle. We’ve got at least half an hour before we’re on. And take those rags out of your hair. You can’t go out looking like that.’

Angelica stopped and looked in the fragment of a broken mirror that was pinned to the wall. She laughed. ‘I’d forgotten them, but if the damp gets to my hair, it will fall straight as pump water and Little Annie should have ringlets.’

‘I don’t know why my hair curls, especially in the rain, and yours is straight. Apart from that, we’ve both got dark hair and brown eyes, we’re identical,’ Eliza sighed.

‘Except in temperament,’ Angelica said, smiling. ‘You are impatient and outspoken, Lizzie.’

‘I suppose that means you are the angelic one, like your name.’ Eliza shrugged. ‘I know I’m not perfect, but I can stand up for myself. You burst into tears if someone is nasty to you.’

‘That’s not true.’ Angelica’s eyes reddened as if she were about to cry. ‘Don’t be mean, Lizzie.’ She began tugging at the rags in an attempt to untie them, but Eliza relented.

‘Don’t get yourself in a state – if you must wear them at least cover your head.’

‘Oh, all right.’ Angelica pulled up her hood and followed her sister outside.

An icy blast hit Eliza in the face, taking her breath away as she headed for the other makeshift dressing room, which was reserved for the male performers. Somewhere on the edge of the gardens the roar of a lion came

as a reminder that they would soon be called upon to assist their father in his magic act. Eliza strode on ahead, her booted feet leaving prints on the new-fallen snow. Angelica hurried after her.

‘It’s my turn to be Little Annie tonight, so don’t forget it, Lizzie.’ Angelica’s breath curled up in a steamy cloud as she exhaled in the icy air. ‘You are the one who hides off stage until the climax of the act.’

‘I haven’t forgotten. I never forget anything.’ Eliza reached the shed first and flung the door open to protests from inside.

‘Come in and close the blooming door.’ The voice of Gaston de Pledge, the sword swallower, drowned the groans of protest from the other members of the troupe. ‘You know I can’t work if I have a sore throat.’

Eliza blew him a kiss. ‘Don’t be grumpy, Gaston. We’ve come to get warm. You have a stove, but we don’t.’

‘Is this true, Angel?’ Herbert Brown, the Great Magician, conjuror and temporary ringmaster, stopped waxing his impressive moustache and turned to give Angelica a searching look. ‘I told the manager we all need to keep warm, or we cannot perform. We are all artistes.’

‘It’s true, Pa,’ Angelica said, nodding. ‘We have no means of heating.’ She edged her way nearer to the pot-bellied stove in the corner of the long, narrow hut, holding out her hands to the warmth.

Eliza jostled her for a better position. ‘Make room for me, and don’t forget those rags.’

Angelica was about to start taking them out when her father held up his hand.

‘Stop!’ he said sharply. ‘Those silly pieces of cotton make you look even younger, Angel. Leave them in. We might keep them as part of the act.’

‘We can’t do that, Pa,’ Angelica said hastily. ‘If I have rags in my hair then Eliza will have to do the same.’

‘And I refuse to go in front of the public with my hair like that,’ Eliza added firmly. ‘It’s bad enough pretending to be a child when we’re grown women.’

‘You will do as I say,’ Herbert said with a final flick to his moustache. ‘However, you’d better take the rags out of your hair, Angelica. But I don’t want to hear another word from either of you until after the performance.’ He turned his back on them and strode away to the makeshift wardrobe at the far end of the shed. ‘Did you press my tail coat, Sutton? And where’s my waistcoat?’

Sutton jumped to attention and disappeared behind a rack of gaudy theatrical outfits.

‘What’s the matter with your pa? He’s been like this all day.’

A voice behind her made Angelica turn to look at Cecil, part of the troupe of jugglers and tumblers who formed one of the most popular acts.

‘Are you all right, Cecil?’ Angelica asked anxiously. ‘I hope your bunions aren’t playing up again.’

‘They’re chronic in this cold weather, Miss Angelica. It’s because of years of travelling the roads in winter, and freezing dressing rooms, not to mention being on me feet for hours and hours. I don’t get no thanks from the Great Magicus.’

‘Ignore, Pa. He grumbles about everything.’ Eliza pulled up a stool and sat as close to the stove as she could get.

‘I heard that, Eliza. That will be tuppence deducted from your wages this week,’ Herbert said loudly. ‘And,’ he added as a murmur of discontent rumbled around the rest of the assembled troupe, ‘that goes for anyone who wants to take issue with me. Remember that I am the temporary ringmaster due to Mr Ward’s unfortunate accident.’

Angelica pulled a face, but she took the rags from her hair and stowed them away in her pocket.

Eliza gave her a sympathetic smile, but she said nothing for fear of irritating their father even more. It was at times like this that she envied the trapeze artists, who would be rehearsing in the Rotunda, away from the bickering that went on at ground level. Then there was Bella, the beautiful tightrope walker, who wore a costume of glorious spangles and received rapturous applause when she finished her breathtaking act. It seemed to Eliza that she and Angelica were doomed to be children for ever in the eyes of the audience. She turned with a start at the sound of someone banging on the door.

‘Fifteen minutes, please.’

Herbert shrugged on his red tail coat and rammed his top hat on his head.

‘You heard the call. Everyone to their places.’ He picked up his whip and opened the shed door. A gust of cold air brought groans and complaints from the troupe, but no one dared to disobey the master. Eliza and Angelica huddled in their cloaks as they hurried after their father, following in his footsteps until they came to the dressing rooms outside the Rotunda.

Herbert was now in full ringmaster mode, and he barked instructions as he marched through the assembled performers. It was warmer inside but now the air was thick with smoke from cheap cigarillos and the sweet pine odour of the rosin applied to the trapeze artists' hands. Although it was an afternoon performance, it was already getting dark outside and the lamps were lit, the audience was assembled, and the clowns were capering around the arena.

Eliza found a secluded spot where she could view the performance, especially of the horses. They were a separate act led by the dashing Don Diego, whose real name was Gilbert Grey. Not only was Gilbert a brilliant horseman, he was also extremely good looking. His thick corn-gold hair and startlingly blue eyes marked him out amongst the performers, at least in Eliza's eyes. She admired his grace and skill with horses and the breathtaking daring of his act. They had been involved in a romantic relationship less than a year ago, but Eliza had ended it before it became too intense, knowing that it would not work in the long run, and she could not imagine the situation changing.

Eliza watched the first few acts, waiting for her turn in the arena when Pa would take off his red tail coat and replace it with his black one. His persona would change in that moment as he became the Great Magicus. Secretly Eliza thought that this was his true character. He liked to be in charge of everyone and everything. His opinion was the only one that counted and good luck to anyone who dared argue with him. Pa introduced her as Little Annie and she assisted him in some of his less demanding tricks, while Angelica waited out of sight. There was a brief interlude when the clowns were prancing about the ring, much to the amusement of the children in the audience, and most of the adults, too. Cecil strutted around after them, showing off his juggling talents with brightly coloured balls and batons. Gaston came next, brandishing the weapon he would use in his sword-swallowing act. Inevitably this would be met with gasps of horror mixed with sighs of relief when he withdrew the flashing metal from his throat with a flourish. It was here, under cover of the rapturous applause from the audience, that Eliza and Angelica changed places.

Taking her cue, Angelica joined her father in the centre of the ring. Now they were the solo act and had the full attention of the audience. The Great Magicus announced the next and most dangerous part of the performance when Little Annie would enter the Chinese cabinet and disappear. The

audience, as always, were agog with anticipation and they clapped enthusiastically when Little Annie was shut in a cabinet, secured with locks and chain. After some dramatic drumrolls, Magicus unlocked the cabinet and opened the doors to find it empty. By this time the audience were on the edge of their seats. With a grand gesture, Magicus pointed to the sky and Eliza sailed down to the ground on a large silver half-moon. The onlookers erupted into cheers and applause, allowing Magicus and Little Annie to take their bows and leave the arena. The cabinet was wheeled off and, once out of sight, the cleverly concealed back door was opened, allowing Angelica to step out, gasping for breath.

‘Are you all right, Angel?’ Eliza asked anxiously. ‘You’re very flushed.’

‘It’s so stuffy in there and such a tight squeeze.’ Angelica turned to her father, frowning. ‘I’m too big for that space, Pa. We need a larger cabinet or else a different act.’

Herbert’s bushy black eyebrows snapped together in a frown. ‘What? Change the act? We’ve been performing Little Annie successfully since you and Eliza were ten years old.’

‘That’s ten years ago, Pa,’ Angelica protested boldly. ‘Surely the Great Magicus can think up another equally good trick.’

‘It’s not a trick,’ Herbert snapped. ‘It’s an illusion and it’s taken those ten years to perfect the act.’ He turned his glowering stare on Eliza. ‘Are you part of this mutiny, Eliza?’

‘I agree with Angel, Pa.’ Eliza reached out surreptitiously to clutch her sister’s hand. ‘We are too old to be Little Annie for much longer.’

‘After all I have done for you girls.’ Herbert struck his forehead with his hand. ‘How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.’

Eliza and Angelica exchanged weary glances.

‘You can quote from *King Lear* all you like, Pa,’ Angelica said angrily, ‘but I could have died in that cabinet.’

‘The worst thing I ever did was to hire that tutor for you girls.’ Herbert’s eyes narrowed. ‘You are ungrateful, both of you. I should have allowed you to grow up as circus kids, not the young ladies your mother wanted you to be.’

‘No, Pa. I won’t allow that.’ Eliza was too angry to be afraid. ‘That is very unfair. We have done everything you asked of us. All we need is for you to acknowledge that we are young women now, and not little girls.’

‘Yes, Pa. I agree with Lizzie. She is right: you need to let us grow up.’ Angelica took a step backwards. ‘I’m sorry to say so, Pa.’

Herbert rolled his eyes. ‘I suppose it’s asking too much to expect loyalty from you two.’

‘We always do what we can to please you, Pa.’ Eliza eyed him warily. ‘We could surely change the act a little to include us as we are now. Little Annie must be allowed to grow up.’

‘I should never have taken you girls from the orphanage.’ Herbert looked from one to the other, scowling. ‘You were born on the pavement, and you will end up there.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Eliza said dazedly. ‘What are you saying, Pa?’ She shot a sideways glance at Angelica and was alarmed by her sister’s sudden pallor. ‘He’s just angry, Angel. Don’t take any notice.’

‘It’s time you two girls were told the truth,’ Herbert said wearily. ‘We’ve been living a lie for the last twenty years.’

The stunned silence of the onlookers was broken by a subdued babble of conversation.

‘That was uncalled for, boss.’ Gaston eyed him warily. ‘No need to take your temper out on the girls.’

Herbert glared at him. ‘Keep out of this, Gaston. It has nothing to do with you. They are my property. I paid good money for the pair of them.’ Herbert backed away. ‘You heard her being disrespectful. I have been patient long enough.’

‘It can’t be true,’ Eliza said slowly. ‘Ma would have told us long ago if we were not your daughters.’

‘Don’t bring your sainted mother into this,’ Herbert snapped. ‘You are old enough to be told the truth.’

‘You might be in charge while the ringmaster is recovering from an accident, but you shouldn’t treat your daughters like this, boss,’ Cecil said in an undertone. ‘It ain’t right.’

‘Mind your own business.’ Herbert drew himself up to his full height, glowering at their shocked faces. ‘I have nothing else to say. Get on with your work, all of you.’

Mumbling between themselves, the onlookers moved away, leaving Eliza and Angelica facing their father.

Eliza shook her head. ‘It can’t be true, but why did you say such a hurtful thing? You raised us, Pa.’

‘We took you in as babies because my late wife wanted a child.’ Herbert moderated his tone. ‘I’m sorry, girls. I always meant to tell you when the time was right, but your mother cared for you deeply until her untimely death.’

‘You’re just saying these things because you’re angry,’ Angelica said shakily. ‘You don’t mean it, Pa.’

‘This isn’t the time or place to discuss this matter.’ Herbert turned to Eliza. ‘Take your sister back to our lodgings. We will talk later.’ He strode out of the hut, slamming the door behind him.

The recently ejected performers crowded back inside.

‘Are you all right, ducks?’ Cecil demanded anxiously.

‘Should we send for the doctor?’ Gaston added. ‘Angel looks very pale.’

‘We’ve done our bit for this show,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘Angel will be all right by tonight’s performance. If we choose to go on after what Pa just said.’

‘I want to go back to our lodgings, Lizzie,’ Angelica said tearfully.

‘Yes, of course. Don’t fret, Angel. I’ll sort this out.’ Eliza tried to sound confident even though she was reeling from the shock of her father’s sudden pronouncement.

‘I’m truly sorry the old man chose to tell you like that, girls.’ Cecil patted Angelica on the shoulder.

‘Me, too,’ added Gaston. ‘You’re both fine performers. Don’t take any notice of what Magicus says when he’s lost his rag. People say things they don’t mean when they’re angry.’

‘I know I can count on you two.’ Eliza managed a weak smile. ‘Come on, Angel. Best wrap up warm. It’s freezing outside.’

Angelica allowed Eliza to help her into her cloak, and they set off across the snowy gardens to their lodging house in a side street. They had stayed here often when performing in London, and Mrs Trumble, the landlady, always made them welcome. Eliza suspected that Mrs Trumble with her rouged cheeks and luxuriant raven hair, which Angelica insisted was a wig, had a fancy for the Great Magicus. She seemed well disposed to theatricals and musicians, having been married years ago to a drummer who marched with a brass band. Although she made it plain that a magician was not quite up to that standard, this did not stop her from fluttering her eyelashes and blushing like a schoolgirl whenever Herbert walked into the room. However, it did ensure that their rooms were always warm, their beds aired,

and they had good food. If the best cuts of meat and the largest helping of suet pudding went to Herbert, neither Angelica nor Eliza were about to complain. The man they had known as their father was always in a better mood when his belly was full, and much less likely to erupt in a temper when things did not quite go his way. His bursts of irascibility were usually short-lived, but his sudden revelation today had been earth-shattering, tearing apart everything Eliza and Angelica had taken for granted in life. Eliza was too angry for tears, but she sensed that her sister was struggling to keep them at bay.

They crossed the busy street, dodging horsedrawn vehicles, tradesmen's handcarts and pedestrians muffled to the ears in woollen scarves and caps. Number seventy-seven was a three-storey terraced house of modest proportions, but with enough rooms for a widow to eke out a living by taking in paying guests.

Mrs Trumble opened the front door, and her smile froze when she saw Angelica's downcast expression.

'Heavens! What's wrong, dearie? You look as if you've lost a shilling and found a penny.'

'I'm fine, really,' Angelica murmured, sniffing.

'It's the cold weather,' Eliza said hastily. 'A cup of tea would be nice, if it's not too much trouble.'

'There's a fire in the front parlour. Make yourselves comfortable, girls, and I'll be back in two shakes.' Mrs Trumble pattered off in the direction of the kitchen, calling out to her maid of all work, 'Gertie, put the kettle on.'

'Maybe we should have told her the truth, Lizzie,' Angelica said with a wry grimace as they entered the parlour. 'I'm sure she's only being nice to us because she has Magicus lined up for husband number two. I wonder what she would think if she'd heard the way he spoke to us just now. Do you believe what he said?'

Eliza frowned. 'I can't think why he would say such a thing if it were untrue. He's always been too busy to pay much attention to us. It was Ma who loved us and kept us safe.'

'What do we do now, Lizzie? I don't think I can face him again after the way he spoke to us in front of the others.' Angelica sank down on the horsehair sofa. 'It was almost as if he was telling us we're neither wanted nor needed.'

‘Little Annie is only part of the act, Angel,’ Eliza said, frowning. ‘He needs us to help with the rest of his tricks.’

‘They’re illusions, not tricks.’ Angelica managed a watery smile. ‘But almost anyone could assist him with those. When he spoke to us in that manner it went straight to my heart, Lizzie. I felt as if he had never wanted us and had no fatherly feelings for either of us.’

‘I felt that, too. Although he was never what you might call a fond parent. It was Ma who gave us all the love we needed.’ Eliza sat down beside her, taking Angelica’s hands in hers. ‘We need to keep calm and think before we do anything rash.’

Angelica’s dark brown eyes widened. ‘What do you mean by that? You’re not saying we should run away, are you, Lizzie? Where would we go? What would we do?’

‘I don’t know. That’s the honest answer, but for now we need to be careful, or we will end up on the streets, which, according to the Great Magicus, is where we came from.’ Eliza shook her head. ‘Think about it, Angel. What could we do to support ourselves, apart from finding rich husbands?’

‘I don’t know any rich gentlemen, do you?’ Angelica leaned back against the slippery satin cushions. ‘I don’t think anyone who works in a circus earns very much money. Pa is always saying he faces bankruptcy.’

‘Pa exaggerates.’ Eliza frowned. ‘He might even be sorry for telling us that we’re not his daughters. Perhaps it was said in a fit of anger, and it isn’t true.’

‘You don’t believe that, do you, Lizzie? You’re just saying that to comfort me.’

‘I don’t know what to think, but we do need to be careful. We’ve outgrown Little Annie, but we have nowhere else to go. I hate to admit it, but we’re trapped, Angel.’

‘I can’t take it in,’ Angelica said tearfully. ‘All of a sudden everything has turned upside down. You will have to be in the arena with him tonight, Lizzie, but I’m not going in that cabinet again, and that’s that. I’m not sure if I can face Pa after the way he acted today.’

‘He needs us, Angel. Despite what he said, he cannot do the act without us. We have the evening performance to get through. We haven’t any choice.’

At that moment the door opened and Gertie, the fourteen-year-old maid of all work, staggered in carrying a tray laden with tea and a plate of biscuits.

‘Thank you, Gertie,’ Eliza said automatically as Gertie set the tray down on a small side table.

Gertie backed towards the doorway. ‘I like circuses, miss.’

‘I expect Mrs Trimble will get some complimentary tickets.’ Eliza rose to her feet and picked up the teapot. ‘If you ask her nicely, she might give one to you.’

‘I’d get a clout round the ear for being saucy,’ Gertie said sadly.

‘Leave it to us,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘We’ll try to get a couple of tickets for you.’

Gertie’s face lit up with a wide grin. ‘Ta, miss. I’d be ever so grateful, but please don’t tell Mrs Trumble I asked.’

‘You can trust me,’ Eliza said as Gertie backed out of the room. She filled a cup with tea, added a little milk and a lump of sugar and passed it to Angelica. ‘Drink this and have a biscuit or two. We’ve got to go on tonight as if nothing has happened. I don’t see any other way, do you?’

Angelica took the cup and saucer from her. ‘I suppose not, but what do we do if Pa is still in a temper? I thought he was going to hit me earlier.’

‘Be brave, Angel. He’s never raised his hand to either of us, so try not to do or say the wrong thing. Maybe he’s regretting what he said. He might even apologise, having had time to think it over.’

‘Do you really think so?’ Angelica’s hand shook as she raised the cup to her lips.

‘He still needs us. We’ve grown up with the circus; it’s all we know. That must count for something in his eyes, and I know we’re fully booked until Boxing Day. He wouldn’t want to lose us now. Would he?’

Chapter Two

Eliza was undeniably anxious as she and Angelica made their way back to Vauxhall Gardens after a short break. Eliza could tell that her sister was equally nervous, and she tried hard to make light of their father's shocking and painful revelation that they were adopted. Why he had chosen to announce the fact in front of people she and Angelica had known for most of their lives was something she would never understand. Their mother had loved them, of that she had no doubt, but Ma was no longer with them, and in a strange way it was almost a relief to think that she had not lived long enough to witness her daughters' utter humiliation at the hands of the man she had loved.

'I'm scared,' Angelica said breathlessly as they approached the Rotunda. 'What do we do if Pa is still in a terrible temper?'

'We just go on and try to act normally,' Eliza said firmly. 'He's too much of a professional to allow his feelings to spoil the act. Anyway, I will assist him at the start. You just come down at the end and take all the bows.'

Somehow, they managed to get through the evening performance. It helped having an excited audience applauding every trick and clapping enthusiastically when they left the arena. The spirit of approaching Christmas seemed to be everywhere, except perhaps in their father's heart. Eliza could tell that there was something not quite right beneath his forced smile and jovial manner. Angelica, on the other hand, seemed happy to accept his apparent cheerfulness at face value and she responded with delighted smiles.

It was not until they returned to their lodgings after the show ended that it became obvious something was terribly wrong. Herbert brushed aside Mrs Trumble's suggestion that they have supper in the dining room.

'I need to speak to my girls, ma'am,' Herbert said gravely. 'Please ensure that we are not interrupted.' He marched into the parlour and held the door open for Eliza and Angelica. Eliza shot him a sideways glance as she

walked past him. She had a nasty feeling that what he was about to impart was not going to be good news.

‘Take a seat, both of you.’ Herbert loosened his necktie, running his finger around the inside of his starched collar. ‘I want to apologise for my outburst earlier today.’

Angelica sank down on the sofa. ‘It’s all right, Pa. We know you have taken on a lot of extra responsibilities with Mr Ward being incapacitated.’

‘Yes, well, I’m afraid that isn’t the real reason, Angelica.’ Herbert stood by the fire, resting one hand on the mantelshelf. ‘I am not a bad man, as you will know. I think I have been a good father to you young ladies, but you are grown up now.’

‘What are you trying to say, Pa?’ Eliza demanded impatiently. ‘You told us that we are not your daughters, and we were, in fact, foundlings. Is that true?’

Herbert nodded. ‘Yes, it is true, Eliza. I did not intend to blurt it out like that, but it is time you knew the truth. Not only that, but as you told me earlier, you are both too big to continue as Little Annie. I’m sorry to say it, but you have outgrown the act. I no longer have need of you.’ Herbert held up his hand as Eliza opened her mouth to respond. ‘No, it is not negotiable, Eliza. You will continue to perform as normal until the end of the week.’

‘You are giving us the sack?’ Eliza said incredulously. ‘After all these years, you are simply disposing of us?’

‘You said it yourself, Eliza. You and your sister have outgrown Little Annie, and we are coming up to our rest season after Christmas, which gives me more time to train the next two girls.’

‘You have already selected replacements for us, Pa?’ Angelica’s lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears.

‘I must be honest. Yes, it’s true. I have taken on twin girls from the foundling hospital. You two have done well by me, but all things come to an end. I’m sorry, but that is just the way it is.’

‘But Christmas is next week, Pa,’ Eliza said slowly. ‘Surely you will let us stay until Boxing Day.’

‘No, Eliza. I have to take the girls on Friday. I can’t afford to pay for lodgings for all four of you. It’s all settled.’

Eliza rose to her feet, facing him angrily. ‘What is supposed to happen to us, Pa? We grew up believing that you are our father and now you are

casting us adrift. How are we supposed to provide for ourselves? All we know is life in the circus and the magic tricks you have taught us.'

'I never intended to leave you homeless, Eliza. Please believe me. In fact, I have arranged for you both to be taken on to work in a very respectable household.' Herbert turned to face them, clutching his hands behind his back. 'You will be well cared for.'

'We are to go into service?' Eliza stared at him aghast. 'We are not housemaids. Neither of us can cook or do any domestic duties.'

'You will learn,' Herbert said coldly. 'I'm sorry, but there is no alternative. Unless, of course, you would rather leave after the Christmas show and find your own way in the world.'

Angelica burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands.

'You see what you've done.' Eliza laid her hand on Angelica's shoulder. 'Angel isn't strong like me, Pa. She can't take on heavy work.'

'Let me finish, Eliza. The family I have chosen – very carefully, I might add – have a frail daughter who needs constant attention. One of you will be her companion and the other will assist the housekeeper.'

Eliza pulled a face. 'That sounds even worse. Why didn't you place us in a nunnery and be done with it, Pa?'

'You had better adopt a more amenable attitude, my girl. I have done my very best, but I didn't have to do so. You will soon reach your majority and then you can look after yourselves. Until then, I am responsible for you and so after the show on Friday you will go to your new home.'

'Couldn't we stay with Mrs Trumble, Pa?' Angelica asked tearfully.

'No, you cannot.' Herbert drew himself up to his full height, fingering his moustache, which was a sign that he was not entirely in control of his temper. 'You will do as I tell you, Angelica, and that's an end to it. I've looked after you both for twenty years, and now you are capable of making lives for yourselves.'

Eliza slipped her arm around her sister's shoulders. 'We will be all right, Angel. At least we will still be together.'

'But Christmas is always so special with the circus family.' Angelica wiped her eyes on her sleeve. 'How can you do this to us, Pa?'

'You are making it worse than it is, Angelica. I have done my best by you.'

Eliza faced him angrily. 'How do you work that out, sir?'

Herbert took a deep breath, his moustache quivering dangerously. 'You will be living in a grand house in Bessborough Gardens. You will have a permanent home for the first time in your lives. Be grateful for that.' He stormed out of the parlour, slamming the door behind him.

Angelica bowed her head, sobbing into her cupped hands, 'How could he do this to us?'

'I don't know, Angel. But we're not going to give up so easily.' Eliza sat down again, taking her sobbing sister in her arms. 'Don't cry, dear. I'll look after you, no matter what happens. Tomorrow I'm going to speak to all our circus friends. Maybe someone would be willing to take us on as assistants in their act.'

'Do you think it's possible?' Angelica raised her head, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

Eliza managed a wry smile. 'Anything is possible, although I'd say it is unlikely. But we won't know unless we try. You could speak to Sutton. He's got a soft spot for you. I'm sure he needs help taking care of all the costumes.'

'Most people look after their own things,' Angelica said, sniffing.

'You won't get anywhere if you have that attitude, Angel. You need to convince the person you choose that they cannot manage without you. I'm going to start with Cecil. I could probably learn to juggle if he was prepared to teach me.'

'I like sewing,' Angelica said thoughtfully. 'I could mend costumes and sew on sequins.'

'There you are.' Eliza smiled triumphantly. 'There's always a way, if we look for it, Angel.' She turned with a start as Herbert opened the door and stood there, glowering at them.

'I want you two girls in the ring early tomorrow morning. I need you to help me train the new Annies, starting from scratch as they are not from a circus family. They will feel very strange in such an environment, and I will rely on you to make them feel at home.' He retreated before either of them could say anything.

'I can't do it,' Angelica said angrily. 'I won't do it. He can't ask that of us, Lizzie.'

'It appears that he can.' Eliza shook her head. 'To be honest I feel sorry for the poor little girls who are going to be thrust into a situation that is not of their making. We will have to be careful, or we might find ourselves in

even worse straits. Tomorrow we must start looking after ourselves, Angel. And that means putting a brave face on it, no matter how we feel. Can you do that?’

Next morning a pale wintry sun turned the park into a glittering wonderland with the circus in the background. Eliza’s booted feet crunched on the frozen surface of the hard-packed snow as she followed the Great Magicus to the Rotunda. Angelica lagged behind, red-eyed from spending most of the night crying, but resolute after another talk with Eliza.

The tumblers were hard at work practising their act in the arena and the two lead trapeze artists were carrying out a safety check on their equipment.

‘Set out everything we need for the act,’ Herbert said, turning to Angelica. ‘I’m going to take a cab to the Foundling Hospital to pick up your replacements.’ He beckoned to Eliza. ‘I want you to come with me.’

Eliza exchanged wary glances with Angelica, but she did not dare question Herbert’s authority. She could not risk another scene, and she followed him in silence. There seemed to be nothing left to say and neither of them spoke during the cab ride to Guildford Street. Herbert paid the cabby and led the way into the main building of the Foundling Hospital. He seemed to know exactly where to go, and he took Eliza to an office where he spoke in hushed tones to the matron, who was dressed in severe black with a white frilled cap on her head and an impressive chatelaine hanging from her waist. She nodded and responded before summoning a young assistant to fetch the children. As Herbert walked away, the matron turned to Eliza.

‘Take a seat, please. Mr Brown will be back shortly.’

Eliza did as she was bid. ‘Excuse me, ma’am.’

The matron eyed her warily. ‘I am a very busy woman. I haven’t time to stop and answer any questions you might have.’

‘I understand,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘I just wonder if you could give me some information. I believe that my twin sister and I were left here when we were infants. Is there any way we can trace our mother?’

Matron rolled her eyes. ‘If I had sixpence for every time someone asked me that I would be a wealthy woman. However, the answer is yes, we keep detailed records. If you wish to see them, I suggest you put your request in writing.’

‘Thank you, I will do that,’ Eliza said eagerly.

Matron nodded and walked away, leaving Eliza to wonder what could have led their mother to abandon her twin daughters. Whatever the circumstances, it must have been a terrible decision, or one made out of sheer desperation. A shudder ran down Eliza’s spine at the picture it conjured up in her mind. However, Herbert’s reappearance with two small girls clutching desperately to the hands of a youthful care assistant brought Eliza to her feet. The ashen, tear-stained faces of the twins went straight to Eliza’s heart.

‘Wait here with them, Eliza,’ Herbert said impatiently. ‘I’ll go out and hail a cab.’

‘Have they names?’ Eliza demanded, fixing him with a searching look. She could see that the girls were terrified, and she felt their fear.

‘They are both going to be called Annie,’ Herbert said curtly. ‘This is a business deal. I am not going to allow sentiment to cloud my judgement again.’ He strode off towards the main entrance.

Eliza held her hand out to the nearest child. ‘My name is Lizzie. What are you called?’

‘A-Annie.’ The girl’s pale blue eyes filled with tears.

‘We got to be called Annie.’ The other child glared defiantly at Eliza. ‘You heard the boss.’

‘I did indeed.’ Eliza met the assistant’s sympathetic gaze with a nod. ‘That’s all well and good in the arena, but you girls must have given names.’

The one who had just spoken gave her a straight look. ‘I’m Maud and my sister is Nellie.’ She bit her lip, eyeing Eliza suspiciously. ‘The boss says if we don’t do what we’re told we’ll be fed to the lions.’

The assistant uttered a sharp intake of breath. ‘That’s not right.’

‘It most certainly is not,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘No one gets fed to the lions, Maud. If you and Nellie are quick learners, you will do very well in the circus. My sister and I have been part of the act since we were your age, but now we are too grown up to be Little Annie. That is where you girls come in.’

‘I’d rather stay here with Maud,’ Nellie said plaintively.

At this moment Herbert reappeared, beckoning to them. ‘The cab is waiting, hurry.’

Eliza held out her hands. 'Come with me, Maud and Nellie. I'll take care of you until I leave the circus, and so will my sister, Angelica. You won't find it too bad, I promise you that.'

The girls seemed to be too scared to speak during the cab ride back to Vauxhall Gardens. Eliza could feel them trembling as they sat on either side of her, and she tried to take their minds off their situation by pointing out interesting landmarks. Herbert turned his head away and stared resolutely out of the cab window. He did not speak until they were about to enter the dressing rooms at the side of the Rotunda.

He looked the girls up and down with a perplexed expression.

'Take them to Sutton, Eliza. Tell him to have suitable costumes made for them. After that bring them to the ring and we will give them their first lesson in the art of assisting me in my act.'

'Yes, Pa.' Eliza spoke from a lifetime of habit although as she walked away, ushering the girls out of the ring, she realised how hard it soon would be to address the man she and Angelica had been brought up to believe was their father. She took the girls by the hand and led them to the workroom at the back of the Rotunda.

Charlie Sutton stared at the twins, frowning. 'I didn't think he would go ahead with it, Lizzie. It don't seem right, turning you and Angel out after all these years.'

'There's nothing to be done about it, Charlie,' Eliza said gravely. 'I suppose it was inevitable. Angel and I are just too grown up to portray Little Annie now.'

'It still don't seem fair.' Sutton stared at the girls, who were hanging back, holding on to Eliza's skirts. 'They look the part, but will they be able to do what the Great Magicus says? That's the question.'

'They will learn,' Eliza said hastily. 'More to the point, Magicus wants costumes made for them. Can you organise that for me?'

Sutton nodded. 'Of course. My wife will run up suitable outfits for the little ones, but who will train them to take over from you?'

'Magicus has made it plain that Angel and I are to do everything we can to show the twins how to go on.' Eliza laid her hands on the girls' shoulders and gave them a gentle squeeze. 'I'm sure they will enjoy being with the circus as much as Angel and I have. It will be hard to leave.'

'It's a crying shame, if you ask me,' Sutton said angrily. 'Angel asked if I could take her on to help with the costumes and props, but I had to tell her

that the missis doesn't need any help with the sewing. The backstage crew and the riggers do the heavy work, which leaves nothing for either of you. Where will you go, Lizzie?'

'Magicus has already made the arrangements. We will go into service, Charlie. I can't see any way round that, at least for the present.'

'We will all be sorry to lose you.' Sutton took a bright red hanky from his pocket and blew his nose. He stowed it away, turning to Maud, who seemed to be the least scared of the girls. 'You and your sister come with me, child. My missis will measure you up for your stage costumes.'

When Maud hung back, Sutton held out his hand. 'And she makes the best rock cakes you'll ever taste in your lives. I can smell them cooking from here.'

Eliza gave them an encouraging smile as the twins released their hold on her skirt and meekly followed Sutton. Her heart ached for the youngsters, but she knew they would be well treated by the circus folk, and they might come to enjoy the life.

Her thoughts turned to Angelica, who must be suffering from the disappointment of being turned down, albeit nicely, by Sutton. It had been a vain hope, of course, but worth a try. Eliza knew it was going to be difficult for herself, but Angelica was another matter. She would find it even harder to cope with the sudden upheaval and change in their circumstances. Added to all this they would each have to maintain a professional approach to performing with the man who had betrayed their trust in such a heartbreaking manner. It would take all their years of training to keep up the pretence that all was well, knowing that their way of life was going to be snatched from them within days.

Eliza left the workshop and went in search of her sister. She found Angelica in the circus ring with Bella, the tightrope artist.

'I've been looking everywhere for you,' Eliza said mildly. 'Are you all right, Angel?'

'She's being very brave,' Bella volunteered, giving Angelica a hug. 'I would be mortified if my pa treated me like that.'

Eliza shot an anxious look at her sister. 'We're having to face it head on, Bella. It's true that we are too old now to pass as Little Annie. I hope you will be good to the twins. They're new to all this and very scared.'

'Don't worry, love. I'll keep me eye on them and so will everyone else. Although I can't vouch for Leonardo. He loves his lions, but he hates kids.'

I'll make sure we keep the girls away from him, the old misery.'

Eliza laughed. 'He was always a good threat if we misbehaved, which wasn't often because Pa was so strict.'

'I won't miss the lions, or Leonardo,' Angelica added earnestly. 'He still scares me, although I know he's a real gentleman when it comes to the ladies.'

'Not so much of a gent, if you ask me.' Bella rolled her eyes. 'I make sure I don't get too close to him, especially when I'm wearing my short skirt and tights.'

'Maybe we were fortunate to be cast forever as ten-year-olds,' Eliza said, smiling. 'He's always treated us politely, hasn't he, Angel?'

'I suppose so.' Angelica shrugged. 'I've always kept as far away from him and his furry beasts as possible. But I will miss you, Bella.' She wrapped her arms around her friend with a sob.

'The feeling's mutual, love.' Bella extricated herself with difficulty. 'Keep your chin up, as they say. You can always come back and see us when we're in London. Sorry, but I got to go. The new rigger seems to have a problem.' She walked away towards the man who was struggling to adjust the rope ladder leading up to the trapeze.

'Eliza, Angelica.' Herbert's voice rang out, echoing off the high domed ceiling of the Rotunda.

They both spun around to face him.

'Yes, Pa,' Eliza said automatically. 'I mean, what do you want us to do next, sir?'

'Angelica, you can fetch the box of equipment, and you, Eliza, must go and find the new Annies. Bring them here and we'll give them their first lesson in magic.'

'They're with Mrs Sutton, being measured for their costumes,' Eliza said hastily.

'Well, go and hurry her up. They're identical twins so she only needs one set of measurements. Be quick, we haven't got all day.'

'Are you all right, Angel?' Eliza asked in a low voice as they made their way out of the ring.

'Yes, I think so. I'll do my best, Lizzie. And I'll try to help the little ones as much as I can.'

Eliza smiled. 'I know you will, Angel. The next few days are going to be tough, but we'll manage.'

‘Christmas won’t be the same this year,’ Angelica said sadly.

‘It will be different, but we’ll be together. That’s the most important thing.’ Eliza headed for the hut where Mrs Sutton had set up her sewing room for the duration of their time in Vauxhall Gardens.

She found the twins dunking biscuits in mugs of tea and eating them with obvious enjoyment.

Mrs Sutton looked up from the notebook in which she had been writing, and she smiled when she saw Eliza.

‘They’re so small, Lizzie. I remember when you was this age, but of course you and Angel were born and bred in the circus.’

Eliza shook her head. ‘So we believed, Mary. But Magicus only recently told us the truth. I’m surprised you haven’t heard it on the grapevine.’

‘No, dear. I’m always the last to hear anything, being shut in the workroom all day. Sutton isn’t the chattiest of souls.’

‘But you know we’re leaving the circus?’

‘Angelica told me earlier, dear. It came as a shock, but then you and Angel are too grown up now for Little Annie.’

‘Yes, quite so. I knew that, but what I didn’t know until very recently was that Angel and I were adopted. We’re only just getting used to the idea, but it’s hard.’

Mary Sutton jumped to her feet and rushed over to give Eliza a warm embrace.

‘You poor dear. I had to turn Angelica down when she asked if she could work with me, because there wouldn’t be enough for her to do. Anyway, we wouldn’t want to offend Herbert. One word from him and we would be looking for work elsewhere.’

Eliza glanced at Maud and Nellie, who were listening to the conversation open-mouthed. She managed a smile.

‘It’s all right girls. Don’t worry about what you might hear. Mr Magicus is a great magician, and you will enjoy being his assistants. My sister and I have worked for him for most of our lives. Finish your biscuits and come with me. We’re going to teach you how to assist Magicus in his amazing illusions.’

The Great Magicus was not noted for his patience, and it took all Eliza’s tact and powers of persuasion to keep the ten-year-old twins from bursting into tears every time they failed to live up to Herbert’s expectations. Angelica tried to help, but if Nellie started to cry it would set Maud off, too.

Their weeping only served to irritate Herbert more, and many times during the next few days he stormed out of the arena, declaring that the children were useless and his career was over. Eliza was tempted to tell him that he had brought this state of affairs on himself, but again that would only make matters worse. She had lived all her life with Herbert's temperamental outbursts, and she knew that when he was in such a state it was useless to try to reason with him.

Added to the difficulty of performing twice a day as well as attempting to train the new Annies, the next few days were fraught with tears and tantrums; the tears being from the young twins and the tantrums from Herbert. Eliza was feeling drained and close to exhaustion when the time came for them to leave the circus for good.

After the last performance on the Friday before Christmas, the girls' fellow performers threw a surprise farewell party in the Rotunda. Mrs Sutton and Cecil, who was an excellent cook as well as being a good juggler, had made meat pies and pastries. Everyone brought wine or cake, and Herbert was moved to supply a barrel of ale, although he did not stay long at the party, which went on for the best part of the night. Eliza and Angelica left in the early hours of the morning with almost everyone crying and begging them to keep in touch. Leonardo escorted them back to their lodgings and Gilbert Grey rode on ahead, clearing the way of drunken revellers and would-be pickpockets. His horse performed an elegant piaffe in the street outside Mrs Trumble's house, and Gilbert took off his hat with a flourish, bowing to Eliza.

'Adieu, fair Eliza. We will meet again, I am sure.'

'Goodbye, Gilbert,' Eliza said, sniffing. 'I will come and see the show whenever I can.'

Gilbert blew her a kiss, his horse bowed, and they disappeared into the night.

Leonardo waited until they opened the front door, which Herbert had thoughtfully left unlocked. He kissed Eliza on the cheek and embraced Angelica.

'The good ones always leave,' he said sadly. 'If I ever need an assistant I will come and find you, Eliza. You have a way with animals. Waldo will miss you most of all.'

'Goodbye, Leo. Tell Waldo I love him.'

Eliza could see that Angelica was about to burst into tears. 'Say goodbye now, Angel. Leonardo has to be up early. In fact, it's almost morning now.'

Angelica flung her arms around Leo's neck and then drew away quickly. 'I can't believe our life with the circus has really ended.'

'This isn't farewell,' Leonardo said firmly. 'We will meet again soon.' He walked away, disappearing into the darkness.

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Chapter Three

After only a few hours of sleep it was time for Eliza and Angelica to leave for Bessborough Gardens. Herbert summoned a cab and climbed in, followed by the girls. The cabby stowed their luggage on the rack at the rear of the carriage before taking his seat. Mrs Trumble and Gertie waved their hankies as the cab pulled away from the kerb.

‘I don’t know why they’re weeping,’ Herbert said grumpily. ‘I’m returning as soon as I’ve taken you girls to your new home and they have the two little Annies to look after in the meantime.’

‘You could have kept us on until after Christmas.’ Eliza had held her tongue so far, but this morning her head ached; she was tired after partying for most of the night and she was very apprehensive. ‘You haven’t even told us the name of the family for whom we will be working.’

‘You will soon meet Mrs Wildblood, and you will treat her with the greatest respect. I don’t want to have you sent back to me because you feel you are too important to be in service. Do you understand, Eliza?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘That goes for you, too, Angelica. As I said before, you will be companion to Mrs Wildblood’s invalid daughter, Lavinia. I trust you will set her a good example, and you will both remember your manners. Living with circus folk has made you speak more freely than most well-brought-up young ladies, Eliza. Just remember that your opinions will not be sought and are most definitely unwelcome. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

‘Yes, sir.’ Eliza and Angelica spoke in unison.

‘I just hope the new Little Annies live up to your expectations,’ Eliza said sharply.

‘I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, my girl. You and your sister have had a good life. You have no cause to complain, so I don’t want to hear another word from either of you.’

Eliza lapsed into silence for the rest of the journey, which was all too short for her liking. The cab stopped outside an imposing five-storey terraced house. As she stepped out of the cab, Eliza glanced across the street

at the snow-covered triangle of the gardens and the lacework of bare branches of the trees that reached up to the sky. Despite the desperation of their situation, she experienced a small feeling of hope. There was beauty in the grim grey world of London, and in spring this would be a small oasis of greenery situated between Millbank Penitentiary and the Equitable Gas works. The rumble of carriage wheels, the sound of horses' hoofs on cobbled streets and the hoots from the river craft assaulted her ears, reminding her that they were far from the peace and quiet of the country.

Her moment of reverie came to an end as the cabby sprang nimbly to the ground. He took their baggage to the front entrance and Herbert tipped him, although Eliza could tell from the cabby's expression that the sum was paltry. His lips moving in silent disgust, he climbed back on the box and urged his horse to walk on.

Herbert looked from Angelica to Eliza, frowning. 'This is goodbye. Don't disgrace me by failing in this endeavour. That applies particularly to you, Eliza. You have a rebellious nature, which I suggest you curb if you wish to get on in this life.' He strode across the pavement and rapped smartly on the knocker. After a brief wait the door was opened by a maidservant.

'Mrs Wildblood is expecting us,' Herbert said firmly.

'What name is it, sir?'

'I'm Herbert Brown, and these young ladies are my daughters.'

'Please step inside and I'll inform madam that you are here.' The maid retrieved their luggage before ushering them into the imposing entrance hall. Her small feet pitter-pattered across the marble-tiled floor as she went to find her mistress.

The tall ceiling and wide staircase at the far end of the hall made the house seem even more spacious than Eliza had first thought, and she found it rather intimidating. She had grown up used to staying in all manner of lodging houses as well as tents and other temporary accommodation. A gentleman's residence was a new experience for her, and she could see that Angelica felt the same.

'You told this woman we're your daughters?' Eliza said in a low voice. 'Why did you lie, sir?'

'I raised you as my own children, Eliza. You bear my name, even though it is not legally yours. Heaven alone knows who your parents were, but in the eyes of the world you are Eliza and Angelica Brown.'

‘So, what reason did you give Mrs Wildblood for abandoning your flesh and blood in this way?’ Eliza demanded. ‘She must have thought you heartless.’

Herbert’s brows snapped together into a frown. ‘That’s enough of your cheek. It doesn’t matter what I said to Mrs Wildblood. She’s accepted you into her home, providing you both give satisfaction. Leave it at that.’ Herbert’s hand flew to adjust his cravat as the maid returned.

‘Mrs Wildblood will see you now. Follow me, if you please.’ She set off towards the staircase, leaving them no alternative but to follow her. Eliza was vaguely aware of the gloomy paintings in gilt frames that hung on the wall as she ascended the stairs. However, she was more impressed by the ornate iron scrollwork on the banisters and the thick carpet runner held in place by wooden rods with brass finials. Perhaps concentrating on such details was a way of escaping the fate that awaited them, but Eliza dragged her thoughts back to the present when they arrived outside the drawing room and the maid opened door.

‘Mr Brown and his daughters, ma’am.’ She ushered them into the spacious room before backing out and closing the door.

The click of the latch sounded like the bolt on a prison door in Eliza’s mind as she gazed around the room. Despite the obvious luxury and expense that had gone into the decoration and furnishings, it seemed as if the clock on the mantelshelf might have stopped some twenty or thirty years previously and nothing had changed since then. But the most notable thing was the complete lack of a Christmas tree or anything that would have marked the beginning of the festive season. After the colourful world of the circus and the build-up to the Christmas festivities, this bleak home came as a shock. Eliza turned with a start as Herbert called her name.

‘Eliza, Mrs Wildblood was speaking to you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘I was admiring the proportions of the room. So elegant,’ she added in desperation.

Mrs Wildblood lifted a lorgnette to her eyes and looked Eliza up and down. There was a hush in the room while she appeared to consider her response. ‘You don’t look like a housemaid, Eliza Brown.’ She sat back in her velvet upholstered chair, looking every inch the dowager. Her black crepe gown and short black lace veil denoted her widowhood, although there was none of the customary signs that the household was in full mourning, which made Eliza think that the death of a loved one had not

been recent. She shot a sideways glance at Herbert, but he remained stone-faced, staring out of the window.

‘I am a quick learner, ma’am.’

‘And your sister.’ Mrs Wildblood turned her lorgnette on Angelica. ‘She looks meek enough, and quite strong. My daughter has been delicate since birth. She needs constant care and attention.’

Angelica opened her mouth as if to reply but closed it without saying anything.

‘Can she not speak?’ Mrs Wildblood demanded, curling her lip. ‘Is she a mute?’

Eliza eyed her warily. Mrs Wildblood’s extreme pallor suggested that she rarely ventured outside into the fresh air. Her thin lips and the deep lines on her face revealed a volatile temperament. This was obviously a situation that needed to be handled carefully.

‘My sister is shy, ma’am.’

‘You were circus performers, and you tell me that she is shy? I find that hard to believe.’

Herbert cleared his throat noisily. ‘I beg your pardon, ma’am, but Angelica is very reserved. However, she is a sensible girl and well-mannered. I think she will be a very good companion for your daughter.’

‘Oh, do you now? That, sir, is for me to decide, not you.’ Mrs Wildblood glanced at Eliza. ‘You seem to be the only one in your family with a degree of sense. My housekeeper will assign you your duties, assuming that you can start straight away, which is what your father promised, when he answered my advertisement in *The Times*.’

Eliza exchanged glances with Angelica. She could see that the prospect of living and working here did not appeal, but they had very little choice.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Eliza said quickly. ‘We can start today, if that suits you.’

‘Ring the bell, Miss Brown. From now on you will take orders from Mrs Slade, my housekeeper.’ Mrs Wildblood turned her attention to Herbert. ‘I will give your daughters a trial of one month, sir. You have my permission to leave.’

‘Thank you, ma’am.’ Herbert bowed and backed towards the door, narrowly missing a collision with a tall gaunt woman, whom Eliza suspected had been hovering outside. Herbert muttered an apology as he left the room.

‘Mrs Slade, these are the two young women about whom we spoke earlier. I leave them in your capable hands.’ Mrs Wildblood leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes as if the whole episode had exhausted her.

‘Come with me,’ Mrs Slade said curtly. She marched out of the drawing room and headed away from the main staircase, taking a narrow passageway that led to the back stairs. These were uncarpeted, steep and narrow, leading to the secret world below stairs. Eliza had read about such places in books, but this was her first experience of the separate existence of masters and servants. The passageways at basement level led to a series of small utility rooms, Mrs Slade’s office and then the largest room below stairs, which was the kitchen and adjoining scullery. The heat, steam and smell of boiling cabbage hit Eliza forcibly. The rest of the house was chillingly cold, and the contrast in temperature took her breath away. Angelica had flushed suddenly and then the colour faded from her face. For a moment Eliza thought her sister was going to faint and she slipped her arm around Angelica’s shoulders.

‘Are you all right?’

‘What are we doing here, Lizzie?’ Angelica said in a low voice. ‘Pa couldn’t have known what it would be like.’

‘Silence,’ Mrs Slade snapped, scowling. ‘You will speak only when spoken to, Miss Brown.’

Angelica subsided, leaning heavily on Eliza, who took a deep breath but managed to hold her tongue. She glanced warily at the large woman who was seated at the kitchen table, not apparently achieving very much, while her underlings appeared to be doing all the work.

‘This is Mrs Duckworth, our excellent cook. If I am not available to give you orders, Miss Eliza Brown, then you will report to Mrs Duckworth. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Eliza said firmly.

‘She can start by helping Hetty to wash the pots and pans in the scullery, and that relieves Molly so she can peel the vegetables for luncheon.’ Mrs Duckworth raised herself to her feet and took a clay pipe and a leather tobacco pouch from the mantelshelf. She sat down again and proceeded to fill the bowl of the pipe with shreds of tobacco, which she lit with a spill from the fire.

Mrs Duckworth puffed smoke into the air and Eliza glanced at Mrs Slade, expecting to see her frowning in disapproval, but she seemed to be

unconcerned, as if the sight of Cook smoking while food was being prepared was an everyday occurrence.

‘Hetty will show you where everything is kept, Eliza.’ Mrs Slade turned to Angelica. ‘You can come with me.’

Angelica clung even more tightly to Eliza. ‘I need Lizzie to come with me, ma’am.’

‘What?’ Mrs Slade’s voice rose sharply. ‘Are you a baby, Miss Brown?’

‘We are not used to being separated, ma’am,’ Eliza said quickly. ‘Might I accompany her, just this once?’

Mrs Slade rolled her eyes. ‘I suppose it will help you to find your way about the house. Just this once, mind you, and then I want you to come back here to assist Hetty.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Eliza forced herself to sound meek, but inwardly she was seething, and her anger was directed towards the man she had grown up thinking was her father. He might as well have condemned them to prison as put them in service in this household.

Mrs Duckworth puffed on her pipe, her yellowed teeth gripping the stem. ‘If she don’t appear in five minutes, I’ll send Molly to find her, Mrs Slade.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Duckworth. I know I can rely on you.’ Mrs Slade tossed her head and marched out of the kitchen. ‘Follow me.’

Lavinia Wildblood’s room was on the floor below the servants’ sleeping quarters, which were situated in the attics at the very top of the house. As they climbed the stairs Eliza could not help wondering why someone who was supposed to be frail and sickly would have a room so high up in the building.

Mrs Slade stopped when they reached the fourth-floor landing, holding her side and gasping for breath.

‘It’s quite a climb. I don’t come up here unless I have to.’ She glanced at Eliza, frowning. ‘Your room is in the attics. One of the maids will show you where to go, but your sister will sleep in the dressing room off Miss Lavinia’s room. Is that understood?’

Eliza nodded, but Angelica uttered a low moan. ‘Can I not share a room with my sister?’

‘If I hear another word out of you, Miss Brown, I will send you back to the circus and they can do what they will with you.’ Mrs Slade opened the door nearest to her. ‘This is Miss Lavinia’s room.’ She entered the room and they followed her dutifully.

Eliza was agreeably surprised to find Lavinia's room the least oppressive part of the house. Two tall windows allowed light to flood in, and the view of the garden and trees would be delightful in the spring and summer. The polished wood floor was scattered with expensive Persian rugs, and a large four-poster bed occupied the centre of the spacious room. Propped up on lace-trimmed pillows, Lavinia Wildblood stared at them dully. Her lank fair hair hung down past her shoulders and her sickly pallor suggested that she had rarely been exposed to the elements outside. Her large blue eyes widened at the sight of them, and she raised herself on her elbow.

'Who are these people, Slade?'

Mrs Slade caught Angelica by the hand and dragged her towards the bed. 'This is Miss Brown. She's going to be your personal servant, Miss Lavinia.'

'She doesn't look very happy about it,' Lavinia said, frowning. 'Am I seeing double or are you twins?'

Eliza stepped forward. 'We are twins, Miss Wildblood. My name is Eliza, and my sister is called Angelica.'

'Are you both going to take care of me?' Lavinia asked eagerly.

'No, Miss Lavinia.' Mrs Slade nudged Eliza out of the way. 'Miss Angelica will be your companion and maid. Her sister is a domestic, and she's going downstairs right away to begin her duties.'

Lavinia's lips drooped but she managed a faint smile. 'Come again, Eliza. I get to see so few people and you seem interesting.'

'It's time for your physic, Miss Lavinia.' Mrs Slade walked over to a cupboard, opened it and took out a small glass bottle, from which she measured some liquid into a cup, mixing it with a little water from a jug on the washstand before passing it to Lavinia. 'Drink it, please.' Mrs Slade's tone did not invite argument, and Lavinia obediently took her medicine.

Eliza eyed the bottle suspiciously. She had seen similar bottles in Gaston's tent, and she suspected that this one might contain laudanum. However, it was none of her concern. She had no idea what was wrong with Lavinia, who sank back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

Mrs Slade replaced the bottle and cup and closed the cupboard.

'Your room is in there, Brown,' she said sharply. 'You will eat and sleep up here with Miss Lavinia, who must never be left alone. Your meals will be brought to you, as will water for washing and coal for the fire. I'm sure you will be much more comfortable than in your previous employment at

the circus.' She turned on her heel, addressing Eliza. 'I have work to do and so do you, Brown. You go downstairs first and seek out Hetty, who will show you what to do.'

Despite mute pleas from Angelica, Eliza had little option other than to do as Mrs Slade said. She made her way back to the kitchen and found Mrs Duckworth sitting in exactly the same position, puffing smoke into the air as if she had nothing else to occupy her. In the meantime, Molly was chopping up carrots while Hetty rushed to and fro, snatching up used crockery and cutlery, which she deposited in the scullery. A strand of lank mouse-brown hair kept escaping from her mobcap, and she stopped every now and then to tuck it back in place.

'I've been sent to help you,' Eliza said warily. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Make yourself useful, Circus. Wash the stuff in the sink.' Hetty shoved a greasy pan into Eliza's hands. 'There's plenty of sand and soda, but the water's cooling so you'd best hurry.'

'My name is Eliza, not Circus,' Eliza said firmly. 'You must be Hetty.'

'I beg your pardon, Your Majesty.' Hetty executed a deep curtsy. 'I didn't know we had royalty come to help us, did you, Molly?'

'Leave her alone,' Molly said calmly. 'Think yourself lucky you've got some help.'

Mrs Duckworth took the pipe out of her mouth, puffed out smoke and growled, 'Stop arguing or you'll feel the back of my hand. And leave Circus alone. I heard she's a magician's assistant, so if you irk her, she might put a spell on you.'

Hetty's grey eyes widened in fear. 'No, that ain't true, is it?'

'Are you calling me a liar?' Mrs Duckworth half raised herself from her seat, which was enough to send Hetty scuttling back into the scullery.

'Come with me, Circus. I'll show you what to do.'

Eliza followed her reluctantly. Even the worst days beneath the big top could not compare with what felt like a living nightmare.

'You may call me Lizzie,' she said in an attempt to ease the situation. 'And I don't cast spells on people, at least, not very often.' Eliza had the satisfaction of seeing Hetty at a loss for words. She stationed herself at the stone sink and plunged her hands into the rapidly cooling water, wondering how she and Angel had come to this pass. Just weeks ago, they had been part of a vibrant and exciting family of circus performers, riggers and

animal trainers. Now she was up to her elbows in greasy water, being taunted by a rude, uneducated girl who knew no better. Eliza's resolve was at its lowest, but she was not going to be beaten by adverse circumstances. She braced her shoulders and began to work methodically and quickly until all the pots, pans, utensils and cutlery were clean and laid out on the draining board to be dried. The sound of constant bickering in the kitchen died away after a sharp rebuke from Mrs Duckworth, only to start all over again until the crescendo of voices rose to a climax. Eliza closed her ears to the trivial arguing and concentrated on the task in hand. After a while it occurred to her that she had washed the same saucepan at least three times and she had had enough. She picked up the pan and marched into the kitchen.

'I suppose this is your idea of being funny,' Eliza said, directing her remark at Hetty.

'I dunno what you mean.' Hetty shot a sideways glance at Cook, who was refilling the bowl of her pipe. 'She's trying to get me into trouble, Cook.'

'Stop moaning or I'll bang your heads together, then we'll see who cries first.' Mrs Duckworth reached for a spill. 'Molly, plate up Miss Lavinia's luncheon, and put something out for her maid.'

'I ain't doing all those stairs with a heavy tray, Cook. Florrie used to do that, not me.'

Mrs Duckworth pointed the stem of her pipe at Molly, scowling. 'Florrie left to marry the butcher's boy and that's why we have Circus in her stead.' She turned her hand to point the pipe at Eliza. 'She's a servant like you, so she can take the back stairs.'

'Gladly. You won't get any argument from me.' Eliza snatched up the tray and marched out of the kitchen before anyone could comment. It was a relief to get away from the argumentative atmosphere that prevailed below stairs, and she wanted to make sure that Angelica was coping with her new charge.

By the time she reached the fourth floor, Eliza could understand Molly's reluctance to carry the heavy wooden tray upstairs. She stopped briefly in order to catch her breath before entering Lavinia's room. Quite what she had expected to find was not the scene that met her eyes. Lavinia was propped up on pillows with Angelica sitting cross-legged on the bed. She

had an open book on her lap, but she stopped reading when Eliza entered the room, and she smiled.

‘I’ve been reading to Lavinia. She loves a good story, Lizzie.’

‘What are you reading?’ Eliza placed the tray on a table close to the bed.

‘A book by Mrs Gaskell. It’s called *North and South*. I found it in the bookcase.’

‘Miss Thompson used to read to me,’ Lavinia said sadly. ‘She looked after me from when I was a small girl, but she fell in love with Dr Washbourne and now they’re married.’

‘You must miss her,’ Eliza said sympathetically.

Lavinia’s pale blue eyes filled with tears. ‘I do indeed. She was very kind to me and never cross.’

‘Does she come to visit you?’ Angelica asked cautiously.

‘Mama said it would be best if she did not come again because I became very sad when she had to leave. Everyone does what Mama says.’

Eliza and Angelica exchanged meaningful glances.

‘We will try to keep her happy,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘I’ve brought your luncheon up – yours too, Angel.’ She eyed the food on the tray and frowned. ‘It doesn’t look much.’

‘I don’t eat much.’ Lavinia closed her eyes. ‘If I overeat, I am sick, so I just take a little food now and then. Angelica can have my share.’

Angelica picked up the bowl of soup. ‘It smells like carrots. Why don’t you try some, Miss Lavinia?’

Lavinia turned her head away. ‘I hate carrot soup. You eat it for me, and I won’t get into trouble. If I send the tray back with the meal uneaten, I get punished.’

‘Punished?’ Eliza stared at her in disbelief. ‘Surely not.’

‘What does she do to you?’ Angelica lifted the spoon to her mouth and tasted the soup. ‘It’s not too bad. I expect it’s quite nourishing.’

‘If I don’t eat, I get a dose of castor oil or flowers of sulphur and black treacle, which is worse.’ Lavinia retched at the thought.

‘That’s awful.’ Angelica suppressed a sob. ‘You poor girl. No wonder you are so pale and thin.’

‘What do you like to eat, Lavinia?’ Eliza asked, frowning. ‘Surely there must be something you enjoy?’

Lavinia opened her eyes, and a faint smile curved her lips. ‘I once had an ice cream. Cousin Luke came to visit us, and he took me in a cab to

Gunter's. I had the most delicious cakes and ice cream, but Mama was very angry with Luke.'

'He sounds kind,' Angelica said earnestly. 'What did he say to your mama?'

'He laughed and told her not to be mean.' Lavinia clapped her hands to her cheeks. 'I thought he would be given the brimstone and treacle medicine, but of course he is an army officer, so Mama could not say very much.'

'Perhaps we could ask him to take you out again,' Eliza suggested eagerly. 'Does he visit often?'

'He's been away for a long time. His regiment went to the Crimea.' Lavinia's voice broke on a sob. 'He might have been killed in action, for all I know.'

'I'm sure you would have heard if that were true.' Eliza picked up a slice of thinly buttered bread and offered it to Lavinia. 'Why not take a bite of this, and Angel will share it with you. That way you both get fed and no one will be any the wiser.'

At that moment the door burst open, and Molly erupted into the room. She was red-faced and breathless.

'What's the matter?' Eliza eyed her curiously. 'Is the house on fire?'

'Worse than that, Circus.' Molly leaned against the door jamb, breathing heavily. 'Cook gives us five minutes to bring a tray up here and get back to the kitchen. You've been gone for ages.'

'Do you mean she actually times whoever comes up here?' Eliza asked incredulously.

'Yes, that's what I said. Come on now because she'll be timing me, too.'

'Just go, please.' Lavinia snatched the slice of bread from Angelica and bit into it. 'I'll eat up and then no one will get into trouble.'

'You'd best do as Lavinia says,' Angelica added hastily. 'If Cook stops you coming up here we won't see each other, Lizzie.'

'This is ridiculous.' Eliza threw up her hands. 'We can't live this way, Angel. I've a good mind to go to Mrs Wildblood and have it out with her.'

'No!' Lavinia, Angelica and Molly shrieked in unison.

'That would be fatal,' Lavinia said tearfully. 'Promise me you won't say anything to Mama, please.'

Chapter Four

Reluctantly Eliza followed Molly downstairs at a dangerously breakneck speed. When they reached the kitchen Eliza realised that Molly had not exaggerated. Cook was standing, arms akimbo, studying the hands on the white-faced kitchen clock as if counting down the seconds.

‘You’ll have to do better than that, Circus,’ she said angrily. ‘I’ll let you off this time but for every minute you take too long that amount will be taken off your wages. Do you understand?’

Eliza was about to protest but Molly nudged her sharply in the ribs, and she nodded.

‘I understand.’

‘Everything has to be done to the clock,’ Cook added firmly. ‘It’s two minutes before midday and in one minute Dora will be here to take madam’s luncheon to the dining room. Fill the tureen with soup, Molly. And you, Circus, may take the bread rolls from the oven.’

Taking care not to get in Molly’s way, Eliza opened the oven door and with the aid of a thick cloth she took out the tray of bread rolls. The aroma was tantalising, and she realised then how hungry she was, but she was eager to prove herself useful and she concentrated on arranging the hot rolls in a silver bread basket. Almost immediately the door opened, and Dora hurried into the kitchen. Without a word she picked up the tureen of soup and left as hastily as she had entered.

‘Molly, take the bread and the butter dish to the dining room,’ Cook said sharply. ‘Circus, there’s work to do in the scullery. It’s Hetty’s turn to have her midday meal. You’ll eat after everyone else as you’re the last to join us.’

Hetty sidled past Eliza. ‘If there’s any food left after we’ve had ours. I reckon you’ll be going hungry this afternoon, Circus.’

Eliza ignored her and went straight to the scullery to finish what Hetty had started. At least here there was no one keeping a time check on her movements. It was hardly a triumphant end to her first morning in Bessborough Gardens, although it seemed that Angelica was reasonably well situated. Lavinia appeared to be a nice enough person, even if she did

look as though she spent most of her days in tears. The difference between life in the circus and the situation in which Eliza found herself now could not have been more of a contrast. As she scrubbed away at the burned saucepan, Eliza struggled to come to terms with the plight in which she and Angelica found themselves. Her first instinct was to return to the circus and beg for a position doing anything, just so long as they could stay with their surrogate family. But with Pa as acting ringmaster in charge of everything, she knew that this was an impossibility.

She had just washed the last utensil when Hetty returned to the scullery.

‘It’s your turn at the trough, Circus. That’s if you don’t mind the scrapings at the bottom of the saucepan.’ Hetty chortled at her own wit and grabbed the drying cloth from Eliza’s hand.

‘Best hurry or Molly will have licked the pan clean.’

Eliza ignored this jibe and joined Molly at the kitchen table. She glanced around the room.

‘Where is Cook?’

‘She has her meals with Mrs Slade.’ Molly slid the saucepan across the table as Eliza took a seat. ‘I’ve left you some, but you’ll have to fill up on bread. We aren’t allowed butter.’

Eliza took a spoon and scraped the thick residue of carrot and onion from the pan. Hetty had not been exaggerating when she said there would be virtually nothing left, but Eliza had grown up when times were hard and the circus was between engagements. She had known hunger and she could see it facing her now. She reached for a bread roll, broke it apart and ate eagerly. She had barely finished her meal when Mrs Slade entered the kitchen.

She stood, arms akimbo. ‘So, you’ve survived a morning in service, Brown. Cook says you leave a lot to be desired when it comes to kitchen work, so this afternoon I want you to polish the brass on the front door. I want to be able to see my face in each piece of door furniture and I must warn you that I am a very hard person to please.’ Mrs Slade fixed Molly with a hard stare. ‘Show Brown where the cleaning materials are kept and don’t waste time chatting.’

Molly jumped to her feet and beckoned Eliza to follow her.

‘Does everyone start this way?’ Eliza said crossly. ‘Or is it just me?’

‘I suppose we all went through it when we first came here, but I was only nine and glad to have a roof over my head and food in my belly.’ Molly led

the way down one of the corridors and opened a long narrow cupboard, which was lined with shelves. 'The cleaning things are in there.'

'What do I need?' Eliza stared at the startling array of cloths, brushes, mops, brooms and bottles of strange-looking fluid.

'Have you never cleaned brass before?'

'No, I can't say I have. What do I do?'

'Mix salt and vinegar to a paste and rub it onto the brass and then wash it off and polish with a dry cloth. It's not too difficult.'

Eliza smiled ruefully. 'I think the only difficulty will be the weather. It looks as if it's going to snow again. I will probably freeze.'

'Not if you work fast.' Molly thrust a bucket filled with cloths into Eliza's hands. 'We'll get the salt, vinegar and hot water from the kitchen, and then all you have to do is to try your best, as my dear departed granny used to say.'

Eliza eyed her curiously. 'Did you live with your granny before you came here?'

'I did, and I loved her dearly. But she took sick one winter. She went to sleep and never woke up. I ran away and near froze to death in the cold. It was Mr Wildblood who found me, and he brought me here, which is where I've been ever since.' Molly smiled and puffed out her chest. 'I'm sixteen now.'

'You've done well for yourself considering the circumstances,' Eliza said earnestly. 'What happened to Mr Wildblood? He must have died because Mrs Wildblood is wearing widow's weeds.'

'He was a lovely man, but he became poorly, just like my granny, and he passed away five years ago. Everyone was sad, especially Miss Lavinia.'

'And Mrs Wildblood has a broken heart.'

Molly pulled a face. 'It's not for me to say, but I'd be surprised to find she has a heart like the rest of us. Anyway, I need to hurry back to the kitchen in case Cook has put me on the clock. You should get what you need and pretend that you know what you're doing, or Cook will have it in for you. Follow me, but not too close.' She backed away, leaving Eliza to do as she had suggested.

Armed with the mixture of salt and vinegar, Eliza opened the front door and gasped as the cold air took her breath away. However, she had her instructions, and she was not going to give up at the first hurdle. She applied the paste to the brass, but in the bitter cold her fingers became stiff,

and each movement was painful. She washed off the residue and polished the door handle and lion's-head knocker until her fingers bled. The wind made her eyes water and the fumes from the vinegar made them sting. She bent down to wring out the cloth she had used, but the now-cold water made her gasp, and she did not see a cab come to a halt at the kerb, nor did she hear footsteps approaching. A male voice made her turn with a start.

‘You’re new here, aren’t you?’

Eliza blinked back the tears that filled her eyes. ‘I beg your pardon, sir.’ She found herself looking up into the face of a military man, wearing the well-worn uniform of a cavalry officer. His blue eyes shone with good humour from a clean-cut face, tanned by years of exposure to the elements. He swept off his brown fur busby to reveal a head of golden curls that were in sharp contrast to his firm jaw and patrician nose.

Eliza took a step backwards, at a loss for words.

‘Might I come in? I am a member of the family, Miss er – what is your name?’

Eliza was conscious of the blood rushing to her cheeks, and she held the door wide open.

‘I’m sorry, sir. I’m new here, as you say. This is my first day.’

He put down his battered valise and held out his hand. ‘My name is Luke Wildblood. Mrs Wildblood is my aunt.’

Eliza shook his hand shyly. ‘Eliza Brown, sir.’

He held her hand a little longer than necessary, frowning as he saw the fresh blood oozing from her fingertips. ‘I’m sure my aunt would not approve of a servant shedding blood in her service. I suggest you get that seen to, Eliza Brown.’

She snatched her hand away and bobbed a curtsey. ‘Yes, Captain.’

‘You know my rank?’ He hesitated in the hallway, giving her a searching look. ‘You are familiar with army uniform?’

‘We had a lot of soldiers in the audience at the circus, sir.’

‘I’m even more intrigued, Miss Brown. Are you saying you were in a circus?’

Eliza closed the front door, avoiding meeting his gaze. ‘I don’t think I’m supposed to speak to you, sir. I am new to being in service, but there are rules for everything here and I keep breaking them unintentionally.’

Luke threw back his head and laughed. ‘I can’t wait to hear your story, but I won’t keep you. I suggest you get back to the kitchen and say nothing

about meeting me on the doorstep. I can find my way to my aunt's drawing room unaided. We'll pretend that I slipped in unnoticed.'

'Too late,' Eliza said in a low voice as Dora came hurrying towards them.

'May I take your cape and busby, Captain Wildblood?' Dora shot a sideways glance at Eliza. 'You don't belong above stairs, Brown.'

Eliza bowed her head and headed for the back stairs, leaving Dora to deal with the captain's luggage. She took care to put away all the cleaning material and emptied the bucket of dirty water into the drain outside, before returning to the kitchen, where she met a sea of suspicious faces.

Dora pointed to her, scowling. 'She tried to take my place, Mrs Slade. I never heard the doorbell, but she was standing in the hall as large as life, chatting to Captain Wildblood as if she was his friend. She don't know her place.'

'What a cheek,' Cook said, bristling. 'Servants must not be familiar with their betters, Circus.'

Mrs Slade glowered at Eliza. 'Is this true? Were you speaking out of turn to the captain?'

'No, ma'am,' Eliza protested. 'At least I only answered his questions. I didn't want to be rude.'

'You never speak to the family above stairs. You may answer a direct question, but otherwise you are invisible. You keep your head down and you never look them in the eye. Do you understand?' Mrs Slade's voice rose to another level.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'There should be a punishment, Mrs Slade,' Cook said spitefully.

'That's only fair,' Hetty added, grinning.

'I don't need you to tell me what to do, Hetty Grimes.' Mrs Slade sniffed and folded her arms across her chest. 'But Mrs Duckworth is right. Brown, you will spend the rest of the day clearing the snow from the back yard.'

'Her hands are bleeding, Mrs Slade,' Molly said warily.

'I dare say this is her first honest day's work. Her hands will bleed a lot more before I'm done with her.' Mrs Slade turned to Eliza. 'You heard what I said. You know where the brooms are kept now so get on with it.'

Eliza backed out of the door. Her hands were sore, and her arms ached, but she was not going to let them see that she was suffering in any way. She went to find the broom and let herself out into the back yard where the snow had piled up in drifts. It was too deep and hard frozen for a mere

sweeping brush to make much headway, but there did not seem to be a shovel handy, and Eliza was not going to admit defeat so soon. She worked as diligently as she could and was soon sweating freely, despite the bitter cold. Although it was not quite mid-afternoon, shadows were forming in the yard, and the flickering candlelight from the windows made odd patterns on the hard-packed snow. Eliza was beginning to feel light-headed with fatigue when someone wrested the broom from her stiff hands.

‘We don’t treat raw recruits in the army quite as harshly as this.’ Luke tossed the broom across the yard. ‘Come inside, Eliza. You’re in danger of getting frostbite.’

She shook her head. ‘I can’t, sir. I have to clear the yard.’

‘Nonsense. It would take half a dozen men with spades to shift this lot and not a slip of a girl like you. My aunt is strict, but she is a fair woman. She would not allow this sort of cruelty to occur in her home.’

‘Please don’t say anything, sir,’ Eliza said nervously. ‘It will only get me into more trouble.’

Luke paused in the open doorway, gazing down at her with a frown. ‘I didn’t take you for someone who was easily scared, Eliza Brown.’

‘It’s not just me, sir. I have my twin sister to consider. She is companion to Miss Lavinia.’

‘Come inside and shut the door. I haven’t been upstairs to see my cousin yet, but first I think I need to speak to my aunt’s esteemed housekeeper. There must be some rules other than those handed out by Cook.’

‘You know Mrs Duckworth, sir?’ Eliza met his straight look with a lift of her chin. ‘I mean, she isn’t the sort of person who likes to be told what to do.’

Luke laughed. ‘I do know Mrs Duckworth, only too well. She is a coward and a bully. I might have been away in the Crimea for some time, but I doubt if she’s changed much since I used to stay here as a boy.’

Eliza had seen enough of Mrs Duckworth to know that her life would not be worth living if the captain were to stand up for her, and she was about to protest when Molly came hurrying towards them. She came to a sudden halt when she saw Captain Wildblood and she bobbed a curtsey.

‘Excuse me, Captain. I was sent to fetch Eliza in from the yard.’

‘I should think so, too,’ Luke said conversationally. ‘Please give my compliments to Cook and tell her I am looking forward to my first decent meal since I left for the Crimean Peninsula.’

Molly blushed and giggled. 'Yes, Captain.' She grabbed Eliza by the hand. 'Come with me. We're on the clock.'

Cook glared pointedly at the clock face when Molly and Eliza hurried into the kitchen, but it appeared that Molly had been in a similar situation many times. She stepped forward, fixing Cook with an apologetic smile.

'We took a bit longer because Captain Wildblood stopped us. He gave me a message for you, Cook.'

Mrs Duckworth's lips trembled. 'The captain remembers me?'

'He sent his compliments to you personally, Cook. He said he hasn't had a decent meal since he left for the war in Crimea and he's looking forward to dinner here.'

Cook threw up her hands. 'Lawks! Who would have thought it?' She took a deep breath. 'Molly, go to the cold room. There's a brace of pheasants waiting to be plucked. Hetty, start peeling potatoes and carrots.' She turned to Eliza, scowling. 'I don't suppose you know how to prepare Brussels sprouts.'

'I do, Cook.' Eliza did not waste time in explaining that she had learned to cook simple dishes out of necessity when they were between engagements and living on a pittance.

'Well, get on with it then. We'll prepare a meal fit for a hero returned from war. Mr Luke was always madam's favourite. We'll do him proud.'

Everything that Eliza touched seemed to make her sore hands worse. Preparing Brussels sprouts was painful, and her fingers continued to bleed, which was something she had to hide from Cook, or a good scolding would ensue, followed by a hefty wallop with the soup ladle if she so much as winced. However, Cook seemed to be in a much better mood than earlier that day, despite her ill temper when she considered that Eliza was working too slowly. Eliza was kept so busy that she had no time to run upstairs to check on Angelica. She could only hope that her sister was having a better experience upstairs with Miss Lavinia. Working in the kitchen was most definitely the worst job that Eliza had ever undertaken, and there had been some difficult times in the circus due to injury or clashes of temperament. However, all that was in the past and in retrospect the memories were probably rosier than the reality.

It was not until after dinner had been served and all the dishes, pots and pans were washed, scoured and put away that the servants ate. Mrs Duckworth and Mrs Slade dined together, and the kitchen and parlour staff

sat, according to the hierarchy, in the servants' hall. Of course, this meant that Eliza was last again and had to eat the leftovers. However, by this time she was so hungry and exhausted that she would have eaten almost anything. There was, however, a generous portion of sprouts as these seemed to be the least popular of the vegetables.

Dora had taken the supper tray up to Lavinia's room, which she did with very bad grace. She could be heard grumbling as she took the back stairs and her heavy tread served to underscore her reluctance. Eliza observed this in silence, and when it came to retrieving the tray, she seized the opportunity and offered to go upstairs in Dora's stead. Dora shot her a suspicious look, but she did not argue, and Cook was loitering over coffee in Mrs Slade's office. Eliza did not hesitate, and she raced upstairs, forcing herself to ignore the aches and pains in her limbs. She was hot and breathless by the time she reached Lavinia's suite of rooms, and she burst in without knocking, but she came to a standstill when she saw who was seated at Lavinia's bedside.

'Oh!' Eliza's hand flew to cover her mouth. 'I'm sorry, Captain.'

Luke rose to his feet, smiling. 'It's all right, Miss Brown. You weren't to know that I was visiting my cousin.'

'Can't you stay a little longer, Cousin Luke?' Lavinia pleaded. 'Just another five minutes.'

'I have been here for a good half-hour, Vinnie,' Luke said, patting her hand as it rested on the coverlet. 'I will be in trouble for exhausting you with my tales of derring-do.'

Eliza glanced at Angelica, who had perched on the window seat and was gazing at Luke Wildblood with unconcealed adoration. However, Luke seemed oblivious to the effect he was having on her, and he leaned over to drop a kiss on Lavinia's forehead.

'Good night, my dear. I'll come up and see you tomorrow. That's a promise.' He turned to walk towards the door, pausing briefly to give Eliza a questioning look. 'How are your hands, Miss Brown?'

Eliza clasped them behind her. 'They are better, sir.'

'I don't believe you.' With a swift movement Luke reached around her to take one of her hands in his. He examined it in the light of a nearby oil lamp. 'As I suspected. You need to allow these cuts and abrasions to heal.'

'I don't suppose she can, Cousin Luke,' Lavinia said hastily. 'You know what it's like below stairs when Cook takes a dislike to someone.' She gave

Eliza an apologetic smile. 'No insult intended, Eliza. I like you and Angelica very much and I want you both to stay.'

'I've done my best.' Eliza snatched her hand free.

'That's good enough for me, Vinnie.' Luke was suddenly serious. 'I can't interfere with the running order below stairs, but my aunt can.'

'Please, sir, don't say anything.' Eliza was close to panicking at the thought of what Cook might do if her authority was questioned. 'I can take care of myself.'

Luke's lips curved into a wry smile. 'I dare say you can fight off the lions in the circus ring. For all I know you were a trapeze artist or a fire eater.'

Angelica giggled. 'That's so funny.'

'None of those, sir,' Eliza said firmly. 'My sister and I were assistants to the Great Magicus.'

'He was our father,' Angelica added sadly.

'Was?' Luke looked from one to the other. 'He is no more?'

Lavinia sat upright in bed, her cheeks flushed and her eyes shining. 'He threw them out, Cousin Luke. The wretched man told them that they were not his daughters after all. He went to the children's home and bought two children to take the place of Angelica and Eliza.'

'A heartless individual.' Luke frowned. 'I would like to meet this person. I'd have a few choice words to say to him.'

'No, sir!' Eliza and Angelica spoke in unison.

'It wouldn't do any good,' Eliza added hurriedly. 'We grew too big to be Little Annie, sir. Please forget we told you anything.'

'Mama seems to think highly of Mr Magicus,' Lavinia said slowly. 'I think she knows him quite well or she would not have agreed to take the girls on, so please don't make trouble, Cousin Luke.'

'Don't worry, Vinnie,' he said gently. 'I won't do anything to make life difficult for any of you. But if I can get tickets, how would you like to go to the circus?'

'That's cruel. You know I can't walk, and I'm not allowed to go out, anyway. There was trouble when you took me to Gunter's.' Lavinia's eyes filled with tears, and her bottom lip trembled ominously.

Angelica launched herself from the window seat to sit on the bed and she put her arm around Lavinia's shoulders.

'You've upset her now, sir.'

Eliza shook her head, frowning at Angelica. 'It's not our place to interfere, Angel.'

'I like that name.' Lavinia wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her flannelette nightgown. 'I will call you Angel from now on.' She fixed Luke with a steady gaze. 'I want to go to the circus, Cousin Luke. Do you promise to take me and Angel and Eliza, too?'

Luke laughed. 'Vinnie, you are turning into a brat. Yes, I promise I will do my utmost to get tickets, and I will use all my charm to persuade your mama to allow you to go out for one evening.'

'There is snow outside,' Lavinia said warily. 'How would I manage?'

'I will find a sleigh with a reindeer to pull it, if necessary. Don't worry about details, Vinnie. I will take care of everything.' Luke turned towards the door, but a gentle tap on the wooden panels preceded it opening just enough for Molly to peer into the room.

'Cook knows that you came up here, Eliza. You're on the clock and so am I.'

Eliza snatched up the tray of used crockery. 'I'm coming, Molly.' She edged past Luke. 'Please don't say anything to anyone, sir. I will be all right.' She did not wait for his answer as she hurried after Molly.

Mrs Duckworth was seated in her chair by the range with her feet up on the brass rail and a clay pipe clenched between her teeth.

'What sort of time do you call this, Circus? You've been upstairs in Miss Lavinia's room for a good twenty minutes.'

'I'm sorry, Cook,' Eliza said humbly.

Mrs Duckworth puffed smoke out of the corner of her mouth. 'If you think you can get away with loafing around upstairs with your sister, you can think again, miss.'

Dora sidled up to her. 'I saw Captain Wildblood heading for Miss Lavinia's room earlier, Cook. I think Circus has her eye on the captain.'

Mrs Duckworth wrenched the pipe from her mouth and smashed the stem on the table. 'That clinches it. There are consequences for bad behaviour and not knowing your place. Tonight, you sleep on the kitchen floor, Circus. Let's see how chirpy you are in the morning after a night on the cold flagstones.' Mrs Duckworth held up the broken pipe. 'Look what you made me do, Circus. You're not going to last long here. I can tell you that for nothing.' She heaved herself to her feet and stamped out of the kitchen, issuing a string of instructions to Dora and Molly as she went.

‘That was mean, Dora,’ Molly said as the door closed on Cook. ‘You didn’t have to mention the captain’s name.’

Dora tossed her head. ‘It’s clear that Circus thinks she’s a cut above us. She needed taking down a peg or two. Anyway, for that you can finish up in here, Molly Grant. I’m going to my bed.’ She shot a malicious glance in Eliza’s direction. ‘Let’s see how you are in the morning, Miss High and Mighty.’

The door slammed behind Dora, leaving Eliza and Molly facing each other.

‘I’m truly sorry,’ Molly said gently. ‘Dora is just jealous, and Cook is . . . well, she’s just being herself. You’ll get used to her ways when you’ve been here for a while.’

Eliza pulled a face. ‘At the rate I’m going I don’t think I’ll be here for long. I can’t seem to do anything right.’

‘You appear to have the captain on your side, Eliza. I know that Mrs Wildblood thinks a lot of him, so if he speaks up for you it doesn’t matter what Cook says, or even Mrs Slade.’ Molly glanced around the kitchen with a critical eye. ‘Everything is shipshape so I’m going to my bed. If you can sleep in the chair by the range, you should be all right. I’ll fetch a blanket from the linen cupboard, but for heaven’s sake make sure you put it away before Hetty comes down to get the fire going.’

‘You’re very kind, Molly,’ Eliza said earnestly. ‘I would leave this house tonight but for my sister. I can’t leave Angel on her own. She needs me.’

Despite the blanket that Molly had provided, it was impossible to keep warm, let alone sleep in the wooden chair by the range. The fire had been banked up so that it gave out only a little heat and after two hours Eliza decided to risk Cook’s wrath by going to Angelica’s room. She put the blanket away before going upstairs, taking care not to make a sound.

Angelica had a single bed in a small room off the main bedroom where Lavinia slept. Eliza tiptoed across the floor and let herself into her sister’s room. As she had feared, Angelica was sobbing quietly into her pillow, and Eliza slipped under the covers, wrapping her arms around her sister.

‘I hoped you’d come, Lizzie,’ Angelica whispered.

‘We’re in this together, as always,’ Eliza said in a low voice. ‘Try to get some sleep, Angel. Maybe tomorrow things will look a bit brighter.’

Eliza could tell that Angelica had fallen asleep by her rhythmic breathing, and she closed her eyes, comforted by the warmth and closeness of her twin sister. They had never been parted, and she was determined that nothing would ever come between them.

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Chapter Five

Eliza awakened from a deep sleep with cramp in her left arm. She had no way of telling what time it was, but she knew she must get up and hurry downstairs so that she was in the kitchen when Hetty arrived to start her daily routine. She slid out of bed, rubbing the afflicted limb with her right hand. Luckily, she had not disturbed Angelica and now she must leave through Lavinia's room without waking her. Having accomplished that, Eliza was on her way downstairs to the kitchen when she smelled smoke. She stopped, sniffing the air. At first, she feared that the house was on fire, but soon realised it was tobacco smoke she could smell. However, it was not the cheap baccy that Cook smoked in her clay pipe; this was the aroma of an expensive cigar, and it was coming from the drawing room. Eliza was going to continue on her way, but she worried that a cigar might not have been extinguished properly and could start a fire.

She left the servants' staircase and made her way towards the main part of the house, feeling her way in the darkness. She opened the drawing-room door and saw the unmistakable figure of Luke Wildblood, silhouetted against one of the tall windows, which was open just wide enough for some of the smoke of his cigar to escape into the early morning gloom. She was about to back away and close the door, but he turned to face her.

'Are you another person who finds it hard to sleep, Eliza Brown?'

'How did you know it was me, sir?'

'I can see in the dark.' There was a smile in his voice although she could not see his face clearly. 'I'm lying, of course. It's plain logic, Brown. My aunt would not be up and about before daylight. Lavinia is too weak to make it down several flights of stairs and it's too early for the rest of the servants. So, the question is, why are you roaming the house at this hour?'

Eliza sensed that he would see through any excuse she might fabricate. 'I slept upstairs with my sister, sir. She and I have never been parted before.'

'That seems reasonable enough. But it doesn't explain why you are up so early.' He took a half-hunter watch from his pocket and examined it closely

in the light from his cigar. 'It is half past four in the morning. Too early for even the housemaid to begin her duties. What is your excuse, Brown?'

'I didn't know the time, sir. I was told to sleep in the kitchen, so I must be back there before Hetty comes down to get the fire going.'

'You were compelled to sleep downstairs?'

'Yes, sir.'

'No doubt you fell foul of Cook's strict rules?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I take it that you don't want me to take issue on your behalf with the redoubtable Mrs Duckworth?'

'No, sir. It would make matters worse. I will be sure to keep to the time today.'

'Ah, yes. I've heard of Cook's obsession with timekeeping. She would make a good drill sergeant.'

'Might I ask what keeps you from a good night's sleep, Captain?' Eliza framed the question without thinking, and she held her breath, half expecting a severe put-down.

'A personal matter, Brown. One of the perils of being away in the war for so long.'

'I'm sorry, sir. I wish I could help.'

'Thank you, but it is my problem, and I suggest you get back to your cell before anyone discovers that you escaped.' Luke turned back to the window, putting an end to the conversation.

Eliza backed out of the room and made her way downstairs to the kitchen. She could not help wondering what problem could have been severe enough to keep the captain from his bed. However, the rules that servants must abide by were quite different from those by which she had lived in her old life. Circus people were open and friendly, but they also had boundaries when it came to behaviour. It was just a question of getting used to the new set of rules by which she must abide. Eliza sank down in Cook's chair by the range and closed her eyes.

Suddenly and without warning, she was flung to the floor, and she landed on the hard flagstones, gasping for breath.

'Had a good night did you, Circus?' Hetty leaned over her, grinning from ear to ear. 'Fast asleep, you was, and snoring like a pig. I didn't hear Cook give you permission to snooze in her chair.'

Eliza scrambled to her feet. 'I don't have to put up with your nonsense, Hetty Grimes. Touch me again and you'll find out that circus folk know how to protect themselves.'

'I'm so frightened,' Hetty sneered, but she backed away all the same.

Eliza righted the chair and sat down again. 'You'd best do your job, or you'll be the next one to go on Cook's clock. I dare say she likes to have her morning cup of tea on time, and the fire is almost out.'

'You'd best riddle the embers then,' Hetty said crossly. 'I ain't your slave, Circus.'

'And I'm not a scullery maid, so you just get on with your work. I haven't officially begun my day.' Eliza pointed to the clock. 'You can't argue with the numbers there.'

Eliza sat back and watched with a sense of satisfaction while Hetty reluctantly began her first task of the morning.

'Are you just going to sit there and watch me slave away?' Hetty demanded. She had encouraged the fire into life, and the kettle was bubbling away on the hob.

'I'm new here, in case you'd forgotten,' Eliza countered sharply. 'I don't know what my duties are.'

'Well, you can take the coal upstairs to Miss Lavinia's room and light the fire. Then you can come down and fetch her morning cup of hot chocolate.'

'I can do that,' Eliza said firmly. 'Show me where everything is and I'll do the rest.' She had the satisfaction of seeing Hetty's bemused expression. It was as if she had expected an argument and that Eliza's cooperation was something of a disappointment.

Eliza hefted the coal scuttle upstairs to Lavinia's room. She cleared the ashes from the grate before laying the kindling and soon had flames creating glow fairies in the soot on the fireback. Lavinia and Angelica had not awakened so far, and Eliza returned to the kitchen to fetch the hot chocolate. She doubted if Angelica would be included in this treat, and she was right. It was hard enough to persuade Hetty that Angelica needed any kind of sustenance, but in the end, Eliza won that particular battle, and she took a cup of hot chocolate upstairs for Lavinia and a cup of tea for Angelica.

The day had begun with petty arguments and that was how it continued. Eliza felt like a tightrope walker, balancing with difficulty and in danger of

falling off if she lost concentration for a single second. Cook continued to be challenging and difficult, but Molly was always there with an encouraging smile and the willingness to help if Eliza was at a loss. The one good thing that came out of the lack of cooperation from most of the kitchen staff was that none of them wanted to trail up four flights of stairs with trays of food or drinks for Miss Lavinia and her companion. This was a task that Eliza did willingly, and it enabled her to speak briefly to her sister, even though she was on the clock and had to race back to the kitchen. In fact, she managed so well that Cook had nothing to complain about and that night Eliza was allowed to sleep in one of the attic rooms, which to her relief, she was to share with Molly.

It was a small space beneath the eaves with a sloping roof and one tiny window, but Molly had kept it clean, and she proudly showed Eliza an empty drawer in a small chest, which she had emptied especially for Eliza. There was a washstand in the corner of the room, but most of the space was taken up with two narrow beds with straw-filled palliasses and patchwork coverlets. Molly proudly admitted to making these to while away the long winter evenings. Eliza slept well that night and was awakened by Molly moving about their small room as she dressed.

‘What time is it?’ Eliza asked anxiously as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. ‘You should have roused me, Molly.’

‘Don’t worry, we’ve plenty of time. I just wake up early.’ Molly sat on the floor to put on her boots. ‘I’m sorry I woke you, Eliza.’

‘Please call me Lizzie. I feel as if I’ve done something wrong when anybody uses my full name.’

Molly laughed. ‘All right, Lizzie.’ She scrambled to her feet. ‘As a matter of fact, I get up early most mornings because Tommy, my friend, delivers the bread in good time for breakfast.’

‘You have a gentleman friend?’ Eliza asked eagerly.

‘Well, not so much a gent, but Tommy is good fun. We go out on my afternoon off. Sometimes to the park or occasionally we take a rowing boat out on the river. He enjoys rowing and I like sitting back and letting someone else do all the hard work.’ Molly gazed into a scrap of broken mirror that was propped up on the top of the chest of drawers. She patted her hair into place before hurrying from the room.

Eliza knew that if she huddled beneath the covers, she would fall asleep again and she dared not be late going downstairs, so she rose from her bed.

It was bitterly cold beneath the roof, and she shivered as she poured cold water from the flower-patterned jug on the washstand into the matching bowl. It was not a pleasant experience, but Eliza had often undergone far worse during the times that the circus was on the move from town to town.

She could hear movement from the other rooms, which suggested that the servants were getting ready for the day. This put a stop to her plan to visit Angelica before the rest of the household stirred. Instead, she tucked her hair into the white mobcap that went with her severe uniform and made her way downstairs to the kitchen. As she opened the door, she could hear Molly giggling at the servants' entrance and the deep tones of her friend Tommy.

'You're up early again, Circus,' Hetty said sharply. 'Here, make yourself useful. The captain has rung his bell, so I suppose he wants his shaving water. I don't know what's got into this household. It's still dark outside, the family should be asleep.' She filled a jug with hot water from the kettle. 'Off you go. I'll let you do it as Molly is out there flirting with the baker's boy.'

Eliza was in no position to argue, and she set off towards the back stairs, carrying the hot water carefully so that she did not spill a drop. She knocked on the captain's door and waited for him to answer before opening it and entering.

Luke was standing in front of a wall mirror, his torso naked and his face covered in shaving soap. He held a dangerous-looking razor in his right hand.

'Thank you. Put the jug on the washstand, if you please.'

Eliza was used to seeing the male circus performers and the support workmen wearing just their trousers, but somehow this was different, and she turned her head away. She was tempted to speak, if only to wish him a good morning, but she managed to hold her tongue for fear of overstepping the boundary between master and servant. She did as he asked and backed away.

'Thank you, Molly.' Luke glanced over his shoulder. 'Eliza? You don't usually wait on me.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' Eliza said hastily. 'Molly was dealing with the baker's boy.'

'Ah, yes. I understand. Nice young fellow, Tommy Rowlands. Anyway, good morning, Eliza.'

‘Good morning, Captain.’ Eliza was about to leave the room when he called her back.

‘A minute of your time, unless you are on the clock, Eliza.’

She smiled. ‘Not yet, sir.’

Luke washed his shaving brush in the hot water. ‘I haven’t forgotten my promise to my cousin and to you and your sister. I’ve booked tickets for the circus for Christmas Eve.’

Eliza clapped her hands but was immediately ashamed of herself for being so childish. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I gave Lavinia the good news last evening, and she told me that it is your and Angelica’s birthdays on Christmas Eve. Is that correct?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then we must celebrate. As you will have noticed there is very little evidence of the festive season apparent in this house, but I intend to alter that – for Lavinia, at least.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Eliza said vaguely. She had no idea what the captain was intending but whatever it was might brighten up this gloomy residence.

‘I am going to purchase a Christmas tree for my cousin, and I want you to accompany me as I need a second opinion, never having purchased one before.’

‘Yes, sir. Of course, but I doubt if Cook will allow me to go with you.’

‘Leave Mrs Duckworth to me, Eliza.’ Luke glanced over his shoulder as he wiped the remains of the foam off his face. ‘Don’t look so worried. It’s Christmas Eve on Wednesday, so Lavinia informed me. I had almost forgotten, but we will make up for it today. Go back to the kitchen and leave the rest to me.’

Eliza returned to the kitchen to find Molly and Hetty in the middle of a fierce argument.

‘If you waste any more time spooning with that feller, I’ll tell Cook,’ Hetty said angrily. ‘You should have been here to take the hot water up to the captain.’

Molly tossed her head. ‘You’re just a scullery maid, Hetty. You can’t tell me what to do.’

‘Maybe not, but Cook has got your measure, and she will tell Mrs Slade and then you will be out on your ear, girl.’

Eliza stepped in between them. ‘The captain has his hot water, so no harm done. I took it to him.’

Hetty turned on Eliza, her small face contorted with malice. 'I'm sure that was no hardship, Circus. You've set your cap at the captain from the moment you walked into the house.'

'That is ridiculous,' Eliza said coldly. 'You are just out to make trouble. I won't listen to your nonsense.'

'Neither will I,' Molly added crossly. 'Anyway, it's your job to make up the fires since we had to get rid of the last housemaid.'

'Why was that?' Eliza asked. 'What did she do?'

Molly shrugged. 'Nothing. She was a nice girl and very willing.' Molly lowered her voice. 'I overheard Mrs Wildblood saying she had to economise, which is why it seems odd that she's taken you and your sister on.'

'Stop whispering. It's rude,' Hetty said as she slammed out of the kitchen.

'She thinks she's too good to clean out the grates and light fires.' Molly grinned mischievously. 'I keep hoping she'll be next to get the sack. She's a mean-faced little madam. She loves causing trouble.'

'I gathered that.' Eliza glanced at the wall clock. 'What should I be doing now, Molly? I don't want Cook to catch me idling around.'

'Mrs Wildblood likes her hot chocolate first thing in the morning, and take up a cup of tea for Miss Warren. She'll be fussing round madam as usual. I can't abide that woman. She puts on airs and graces because she's a lady's maid. She thinks she's better than all of us.'

'I can do that,' Eliza said hastily.

'I'll lay the table in the dining room for the captain's breakfast. Miss Lavinia and your sister will have theirs upstairs as usual, and you can see to that next.' Molly whisked out of the room, leaving the door to swing shut behind her.

Eliza prepared the hot chocolate and took it upstairs to Mrs Wildblood's room. She was about to knock on the door when she realised that it had been left ajar and Mrs Wildblood was speaking to someone.

'It's a sorry state of affairs, Warren. It's only a matter of time, but I don't want the rest of the servants to find out. Not yet, anyway.'

'You can count on my discretion, ma'am.'

'I need to tell my nephew first,' Mrs Wildblood added, sighing. 'Poor Luke. I'm afraid that's not all I have to pass on to him. I suppose you've heard the gossip, Warren.'

‘I’m afraid so, ma’am. Although I don’t think it’s common knowledge below stairs.’

‘That at least is a blessing.’

Eliza shifted from one foot to the other, causing the cup to rattle on its saucer.

‘I think there’s someone at the door, ma’am.’

The sound of footsteps was followed by the door being wrenched open, and Eliza found herself gazing into Miss Warren’s pinched features.

‘I’ve brought madam’s hot chocolate,’ Eliza said quickly. ‘And a cup of tea for you, Miss Warren.’

Miss Warren snatched the tray from her. ‘Were you eavesdropping, miss?’

‘No, certainly not,’ Eliza protested.

‘Get back below stairs,’ Miss Warren said coldly. ‘If what had passed between Mrs Wildblood and me becomes common knowledge we will know from whence it came.’ She closed the door with her booted foot, leaving Eliza little choice but to return to the kitchen, where she found Cook hacking slices off a smoked ham.

‘Miss Lavinia’s gruel is ready, Circus. You may take it up to her. And there’s some bread and butter for your sister.’

Eliza glanced at the ham. ‘Might she have a small slice of that, Cook?’

‘What? Are you trying to take over in the kitchen, Circus? Just remember your place or you’ll go without breakfast altogether until you apologise for your behaviour.’

Eliza opened her mouth to protest, but a warning look from Molly made her keep her peace and she picked up the tray.

‘You’re on the clock, Circus,’ Cook said spitefully. ‘No stopping to gossip with your sister.’

Eliza nodded and walked out of the kitchen with as much dignity as she could muster. As she mounted the back stairs she wondered if Pa had known what life in service would be like for her and Angelica. After what she had overheard Mrs Wildblood discussing with Miss Warren, Eliza was beginning to realise that there was no guarantee of security in their positions. It was also strange that Mrs Wildblood had taken on her and Angelica when she was clearly in financial difficulties. Eliza quickened her pace.

She hadn’t got long, but she was desperate to pass

on the news that the captain would be taking them to the circus on Christmas Eve. It was the only bright spot in the gloom of their predicament.

Lavinia clapped her hands. 'I knew Luke would not let us down. He is the best cousin that anyone could have.'

'He's wonderful,' Angelica said, blushing. 'He treats me like an equal, Lizzie. And he's so handsome and dashing. A real hero.'

Eliza placed the tray on a table close to Lavinia's bed. 'Yes, I agree. But remember that we are not his equals, Angel. We are servants now. The captain is far above us.'

'We are all the same really,' Lavinia said fiercely. 'I don't hold with all that nonsense.'

'I'm afraid it's the way of the world, Miss Lavinia.' Eliza gave Angelica a brief hug. 'I have to go now. Cook has me on the clock and I'll be in for it if I take too long.' She hurried from the room and took the stairs at a breakneck speed. However, when she reached the kitchen she heard Captain Wildblood's unmistakable deep tones and Cook's sharp responses.

Eliza entered the room nervously and was met by a steely stare from Cook, but Luke turned to her, smiling.

'Mrs Duckworth has just given permission for you to accompany me to Covent Garden market to purchase a Christmas tree.'

Eliza nodded mutely. She was afraid to speak in case she said the wrong thing, and she could see that Cook had agreed simply to please Captain Wildblood. Eliza had a feeling that she would pay for the honour later, and she could feel Hetty and Dora eyeing her with overt animosity. What would happen when the staff below stairs discovered that the captain was treating Eliza and Angelica to the circus as well as Lavinia was something that Eliza preferred not to dwell upon.

'Well, don't stand there like a simpleton,' Cook said sharply. 'The captain is waiting for you, Brown.'

'Best wrap up warmly, Brown.' Luke nodded to Cook as he left the kitchen with Eliza hurrying after him. He stopped by the row of pegs in the passageway where the servants hung their outdoor garments.

'I'll wait for you in the entrance hall, Brown.' He strode off towards the staircase, leaving Eliza to put on her bonnet, cloak and mittens.

She wasted no time and joined him just as he opened the front door. Large, lacy snowflakes were drifting down from a solid pewter sky as Luke stepped outside onto the pavement.

‘Wait there. I’ll hail a cab.’

Eliza did not argue. She was learning quickly that it was easier to obey Luke’s commands than not. Added to that, it was bitterly cold, but fortunately a cab came along after a few minutes and she found herself seated inside in close proximity to Luke, which was oddly disturbing.

He glanced down at her as the cab drew away from the kerb. ‘I hope I haven’t caused you too much trouble with the other servants, Eliza.’

She shot him a sideways glance. ‘No, sir. Nothing that I cannot deal with.’

‘What I cannot understand is why your adoptive father thought that being in service was a better life for you and your sister.’ Luke gave her a steady look, eyebrows raised.

‘I – I don’t know, sir. I mean, it was all so sudden. Angelica and I were left without any choice in the matter.’

‘That is what I find so extraordinary. Mr Brown must have felt some sort of affection for you two girls, having raised you from infants.’

‘If you don’t mind, sir, I would rather not talk about it,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘What is done is done as far as I am concerned.’

‘I admire your fortitude.’ Luke turned his head away to look out of the window.

‘I don’t want to speak out of turn, sir,’ Eliza began tentatively, but once started she could not stop. ‘I overheard something I should not have been party to, Captain. Your aunt was speaking to Miss Warren, and I’m afraid she might be thinking of cutting down on staff, although she didn’t say as much. But me and my sister were the last to join, which means we could be the ones to face the sack.’

‘It’s the first I’ve heard of it, Eliza,’ Luke said slowly. ‘But then I’ve been away for a long time, and anything could have occurred during my absence. However, my aunt hasn’t mentioned any financial difficulties to me.’

‘I know it’s none of my business, Captain. But Angel and I could be homeless if what I overheard is true.’

‘Leave it with me,’ Luke said hastily. ‘I need to have a serious talk with my aunt. My own situation is a little uncertain at the moment, hence my return to London.’

‘I don’t understand, sir.’ Eliza eyed him warily. ‘Are *you* homeless?’

Luke laughed. ‘Not exactly, although very nearly, if I am being honest. I returned to my estate on the Isle of Portland to find my cousin Gregory Fox has moved in and has taken over. He must have hoped that I would be killed in action.’

Eliza gasped in horror. ‘But that’s terrible. He can’t do that.’

‘He can and he did, Eliza. I came to London to consult my solicitor about evicting him legally, since he refuses to leave my property. I’m staying at present with an old army colleague, but he is leaving for India after Christmas, and I cannot impose any longer on his family.’

‘You might stay with your aunt,’ Eliza suggested cautiously.

‘I appreciate your concern, but there is another complication. I have yet to break the news of a pending lawsuit to someone who is very dear to me.’

‘Whoever it is will want what is best for you, sir.’

‘I am not sure that Lady Marianne Nesbit will think that way, Eliza. She did me the honour of agreeing to be my wife before I left for the Crimea.’

This announcement came as a shock to Eliza, although that someone as eligible as the captain was spoken for should not have come as a surprise. She struggled to think of a suitable response.

‘You haven’t seen her since your return?’ Eliza said slowly.

‘No. I need to show her that I am worthy of her, Eliza. She is not only the daughter of an earl, but she is probably the most beautiful woman in England. Marianne could have any man she wanted, but she chose me. I cannot go to her now as a homeless and possibly penniless soldier with nothing other than a good name to recommend me.’

‘That is ridiculous, sir,’ Eliza said angrily, all thoughts of keeping her place forgotten. ‘If she loves you, she will accept you for who you are, not for your fortune or a castle in the country.’

‘I should have you as my advocate in court, Eliza Brown,’ Luke said with a wry smile. ‘However, you will meet my fiancée on Christmas Eve as I’ve a mind to invite her to join us for an evening at the circus.’

Eliza felt as if her heart had missed a beat. ‘Oh, no, sir. I think that’s a very bad idea. A very bad idea indeed.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘I mean, not all ladies are fond of circuses, sir. There are lions and a sword swallower, and . . .’ Eliza thought hard. ‘And the clowns look rather frightening. I recall seeing ladies faint at the sight of them. Surely you don’t

wish to upset Lady Marianne, especially as you haven't seen her for such a long time?'

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Chapter Six

‘Don’t worry about my fiancée, Brown. She is the most accommodating young lady imaginable. I’m sure she will love the circus.’

Eliza frowned. ‘And yet you are worried as to how she will take the news that your stately home has been taken over by your cousin.’

‘That is entirely different,’ Luke said firmly. ‘An evening’s entertainment is one thing, but a change in future expectations might not be acceptable to her.’

‘It really has nothing to do with me, sir. I should not have said anything. Sometimes I speak before I think.’

They lapsed into silence until the cab drew up outside Covent Garden market. After that it was a question of selecting a suitable tree, which they did after much discussion and laughter. Luke said that he imagined it in the kitchen, decorated with wooden spoons and soup ladles, while Eliza decided that it should be in Mrs Wildblood’s drawing room, hung with brightly coloured glass balls and festooned with tinsel. This conversation ended in a small shop in Oxford Street where Luke purchased enough decorations for at least two trees. He confessed to having a liking for such a vulgar display, which Eliza gladly seconded. They returned to Bessborough Gardens in high spirits. However, the sight of a carriage and pair standing outside the house made Luke mutter something unintelligible beneath his breath.

‘What is it?’ Eliza asked anxiously, but she had spotted the cartouche on the carriage door emblazoned with a coat of arms, and it was not hard to guess the name of the wealthy visitor.

‘Marianne, and no doubt her wretched chaperone,’ Luke said in a low voice as he alighted from the cab, taking the tree with him. He helped Eliza to the pavement before reaching in to pick up the box of decorations.

‘I’ll go down to the servants’ entrance,’ Eliza said hastily.

Luke shook his head. ‘No, you will come in through the front door, and we will take the tree and ornaments upstairs to Lavinia’s room. My visitors can wait a little longer.’

Eliza thought that this was not a very lover-like attitude to his fiancée, but she was in no position to argue. Instead, she followed him into the house, in full knowledge that this breach in etiquette would be reported to the kitchen instantly. Dora shot her a tight-lipped look, but said nothing as she took Luke's hat, gloves and greatcoat. However, she tossed her head and walked away without relieving Eliza of her cloak and bonnet. Luke strode on ahead, apparently impervious to the undercurrent of hostility towards Eliza. She climbed the stairs, resigned to the fact that Cook would put her on the clock and the punishment for being too familiar with her betters would be severe.

The look of delight on Lavinia's face when Luke presented her with the pine-scented fir tree, and Eliza produced the box of shimmering glass baubles, was worth any scolding that Eliza might expect below stairs. Angelica was equally thrilled, and she sat on the bed with Lavinia, sorting through the decorations with cries of delight as they examined each one in detail.

'I must get back to work,' Eliza said, backing towards the doorway, but before she had a chance to leave, the door opened and a young woman glided into the room. Eliza was immediately struck by her beauty and elegant attire. Beneath a stylish fur hat, the young woman's corn-coloured hair was coiffed in an elaborate style with curls outlining her oval face, and her dazzling blue eyes were framed by thick lashes. Judging by Luke's embarrassed expression Eliza knew that this could only be his fiancée, Lady Marianne.

'The housemaid told me you had come up here, Luke,' Lady Marianne said calmly.

'I'm sorry, Marianne.' Luke stood to attention, eyeing her warily. 'I should have come to see you first, but . . .'

Lady Marianne smiled, looking even more beautiful, and Eliza tried not to hate her, although without much success.

'That's all right, Luke. I can see that you were thinking of poor Vinnie.' Marianne moved to Lavinia's bedside. 'How are you, my dear? I must say you are looking better than when I was last here.'

'I am well, thank you, my lady.' Lavinia's pale cheeks flamed with colour. 'I have an Angel who looks after me now.'

Lady Marianne raised her delicately winged eyebrows as she gazed at Angelica. 'So, you are an angel, Miss Brown? Mrs Wildblood told me

something of your history while we waited for Luke to return.’ She glanced over her shoulder at Eliza. ‘And you must be the other Miss Brown. I know I am not seeing double.’

Eliza knew better than to say anything and it was Luke who filled the awkward silence.

‘I was coming to see you this afternoon, Marianne,’ he said hastily. ‘I’ve been rather busy with visits to my solicitor.’

‘As well as taking a servant to buy a Christmas tree,’ Lady Marianne added with a hint of ice in her voice, but then she smiled again. ‘I understand, of course, Luke. However, now you must make it up to me. I demand your full attention for the rest of the day.’

Eliza slipped out of the room and hurried downstairs. The idyllic morning had been ruined by a young woman who knew exactly how to get her own way without even raising her voice. Eliza returned to the kitchen to be met by a frosty stare from Cook.

‘You’ve had your fun, Circus,’ Cook said icily. ‘Now you can clean the privy in the back yard. The night-soil men left it in a state when they emptied the cesspit.’

Eliza sensed that this was a test of her resilience as well as a punishment and she merely nodded. ‘Yes, Cook.’ She went to fetch the bucket and mop from the utility cupboard.

‘They saved it up for you, Circus,’ Hetty said with a spiteful grin. ‘The scrub woman was supposed to do it, but Cook sent her on her way. That’s what you get for forgetting your place. You’re a servant now, just like the rest of us.’

‘Please get out of my way,’ Eliza said, controlling her temper with difficulty. ‘I have work to do.’

‘The captain won’t be so friendly when you smell of cess.’ Hetty stood aside as Eliza pressed forward.

Eliza had occasionally had to help clean up after the animals at the circus, although not very often as it was their trainers who were responsible for them. However, none of her experiences had prepared her for the task in hand, which took all afternoon. She was not particularly squeamish, but the night-soil men had been careless, and it was hard work. Eliza rather hoped that she was on the clock as it would show Cook exactly what sort of mess had been left for her to clear away. She worked tirelessly, traipsing to and fro with buckets of water from the pump, which involved wading through

the slush left by the melting snow. By the time she had finished it was dark and bitterly cold as she trudged back to the house. It was only when the warmth of the narrow passageway enveloped her that she realised how chilled she was, and the stench of the privy clung to her clothes. The effect of this was evident when she walked into the kitchen where the preparation for dinner was in full swing.

Cook stopped chopping herbs and Dora came to a standstill in the doorway, clutching a tray of chinaware. Molly gasped and covered her nose and mouth with her hand and Hetty fled into the scullery.

‘You took long enough,’ Cook said crossly. ‘You stink, Circus. Get out of my kitchen.’

‘I need warm water, Cook.’ Eliza was past caring about any future punishments. The aroma of roasting meat made her realise that she had not eaten since breakfast, and she swayed on her feet.

‘Don’t faint near me,’ Dora said urgently as she backed out of the door.

‘Take off them filthy clothes and put them in the wash house.’ Cook pointed the knife she was using at Eliza. ‘Molly, help her before she falls down. Blooming circus folk. They got no backbone.’

Molly moved swiftly to Eliza’s side. ‘Here, let me help.’

‘I’m not undressing in here in front of everyone,’ Eliza said faintly.

‘Then I’ll come with you to the wash house.’ Molly propelled her out of the kitchen and back the way Eliza had just come. She opened the door and gasped as the cold evening air hit her. ‘You should have borrowed some old clothes, Lizzie. I’m afraid your gown will be ruined by boiling in the copper.’

‘I d-didn’t th-think,’ Eliza said through chattering teeth. ‘I didn’t know what a terrible and disgusting mess I would find.’

Molly shivered as she thrust open the door to the wash house. It was dark inside, making it difficult to see the tiny buttons that fastened the bodice of Eliza’s second-best gown. She had put it on so that she would not disgrace the captain when he took her to Covent Garden, but now she wished she had worn her oldest skirt and patched blouse. She was so cold that she barely felt the difference when stripped of her gown and petticoats.

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to go back to the house half naked,’ Molly said urgently. ‘I haven’t even got a shawl to put round you.’

‘Don’t worry.’ Eliza took a deep breath. ‘Let’s get out of here. I think that was a rat I saw out of the corner of my eye.’

They raced out of the building and made their way across the slushy cobbled yard. It was not until they were safely indoors again that Eliza realised how exposed she was, and once again the lack of sustenance made her feel so dizzy that she fell against the wall.

‘You need food,’ Molly said nervously. ‘Please don’t faint, Eliza. I don’t think I could carry you any distance.’

‘I’ll be all right. Just get me to the back stairs and I can manage from there.’ Eliza leaned against the wall, closing her eyes until the faint feeling passed.

‘All right. Lean on me.’ Molly slipped her arm around Eliza’s shoulders and together they made their way to the back staircase, where they parted company. Molly rushed back to the kitchen at the sound of Cook’s voice bellowing her name, and Eliza made her way slowly and painfully upstairs. The feeling was coming back to her numbed hands and feet, and each step made her stifle a cry of pain. She stopped briefly on the landing below the servants’ sleeping quarters, but to her horror and before she had a chance to make a run for it, she came face to face with Luke and Lady Marianne.

‘Brown! What happened to you?’ Luke demanded. ‘Are you hurt?’

Lady Marianne rushed forward, shrugging off her lace shawl and she wrapped it around Eliza’s shoulders.

‘What is that terrible smell, Brown?’ Lady Marianne took a step away from Eliza, covering her nose and mouth with her hand.

‘I’m sorry,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘Please excuse me.’ She went to take the shawl off, but Lady Marianne shook her head.

‘No, keep it. I certainly won’t wear it again.’

‘The servants can wash it for you, Marianne,’ Luke suggested hopefully. ‘It’s a very pretty shawl.’

‘I wouldn’t hear of it. Anyway, I have plenty more.’ Lady Marianne waved her hands dismissively at Eliza. ‘Go to your room and have a good wash. You are not fit company for anyone at the moment, Brown.’

‘I’m sorry, my lady.’ Eliza hugged the shawl to her and walked away, trying to appear dignified, which was virtually impossible when she was in her stays and pantalettes. However, once out of sight she raced up the remaining stairs to her room beneath the eaves, only to find that the jug on the washstand was empty. She could not ask for hot water from the kitchen and that left only one option. She stripped off the rest of her garments and

put on a wrap, tying it tightly around her waist before snatching up a towel and heading once again for the staircase.

Somehow, more by good luck than judgement, Eliza managed to get outside into the back yard where she took off her wrap and hung it where it would remain dry, before going to the pump and working the handle. Cold water gushed out and she stifled a scream as it hit her warm body, but she knew she must be thorough, and she washed her hair with a sliver of hard coarse soap. By this time, she was chilled to the marrow, but she had done her best and she dried herself as best she could. Her teeth were chattering uncontrollably as she put on her wrap again and headed back into the house.

Molly met her at the foot of the stairs. 'You never went outside to the pump, Lizzie?'

'I didn't have much choice,' Eliza managed to blurt out as she shivered convulsively.

'You poor soul, you'll catch your death of cold if you stand there like that. Come into the dining room where there's a fire. Dinner hasn't been announced yet and you'll have a chance to warm up while I finish laying the table.'

'I ought to go upstairs and dress, Molly.'

'Nonsense. I know what I'm doing, and Cook is too busy fussing round because Lady Marianne will be dining on her culinary efforts to bother about the likes of you and me.' Molly took Eliza by the shoulders and guided her to the dining room.

Eliza shuddered with pleasure as the warmth of the fire caressed her bare skin beneath the flimsy cotton wrap. Steam rose from her wet hair, and her frozen limbs began to come back to life. Molly thrust a cut-crystal glass into Eliza's hand.

'Sit down and drink this. It's brandy and it'll help you to warm up.'

Eliza sank down in front of the fire. She raised the glass to her lips and swallowed a mouthful of the brandy, but the fiery spirit hit her empty stomach with such force that she gasped.

'Sip it, Lizzie,' Molly said, laughing. 'You're not supposed to swig it down in one.'

Eliza was beginning to feel extremely light-headed, and she laughed, even though there was nothing remotely funny in what Molly had just said. She took another sip and to her surprise the glass was empty. She tried to

stand but her limbs refused to obey her, and she staggered towards the table with the glass still clutched in her hand.

‘I feel very strange,’ Eliza said thickly. ‘The room is spinning around, Molly.’

Molly rushed forward to retrieve the glass before Eliza sent it crashing to the floor, but as she did so the door opened, and Luke walked into the dining room. He came to a sudden halt as he saw Eliza valiantly trying to cover her nakedness with the thin cotton wrap.

‘What the devil?’ he said slowly. ‘Are you drunk, Eliza Brown?’

Eliza smiled happily. ‘I think I should sit down, sir.’ Molly made an effort to catch her before she fell, but Eliza crumpled in a graceful heap.

‘She had to wash in the yard, sir,’ Molly said hastily. ‘I gave her a tot of brandy. It were my fault, but please don’t tell Cook.’

Luke moved forward and scooped a giggling Eliza up in his arms.

‘I’ll take you to your room, Brown, but only if you promise to keep quiet. Heaven help both of us if Mrs Slade is on the prowl.’ Luke turned to Molly. ‘Don’t breathe a word of this to Mrs Duckworth.’

‘She’ll want to know where Lizzie is, Captain.’ Molly opened the door for him to pass with Eliza in his arms. ‘Maybe I should take her upstairs, sir.’

‘Just tell Cook that Brown collapsed from the cold and you put her to bed. I’ve dealt with drunken junior officers often enough to know how to handle a slip of a girl.’

‘What did you come into the dining room for, sir?’ Molly asked urgently. ‘I’ll be announcing that dinner is served very soon.’

‘Take the decanter of dry sherry into the drawing room. That’s what I came for in the first place. Lady Marianne is not partial to whatever is in the decanter already there.’

Eliza took a deep breath. ‘I can walk, Captain. I’m a bit tiddly but I don’t need to be carried. Please put me down.’

‘Stop struggling, Brown. Let’s not risk any more embarrassing encounters this evening. You are not appropriately attired in the first instance, and I’m not sure if you could walk a straight line either.’ Luke tightened his hold on her and Eliza subsided, although she grumbled beneath her breath. However, if she were to be completely honest, being held in the arms of a strong man was a much more pleasant experience than she could have imagined. She rested her head against his shoulder and,

overcome by the unaccustomed alcohol and sheer exhaustion, she closed her eyes.

The sound of movement in the room awakened Eliza from a deep sleep and she opened her eyes. Her head ached and she felt as if every muscle in her body was on fire. She squinted as her eyes became accustomed to the candlelight.

‘Molly?’

‘I was just going to wake you, Lizzie. You slept like the dead, and no wonder.’

Eliza raised herself on her elbow. ‘What time is it?’

‘It’s time to get up unless you want Cook to put you on the clock. She was very angry with you last evening when you didn’t turn up.’

Eliza sat up in bed, her hand clutching her head. ‘I remember now. I drank a glass of brandy, and then . . .’ She broke off, covering her mouth with her hand as she realised that she was wearing her flannel nightgown. ‘Who put me to bed? I remember the captain picking me up and then nothing.’

‘Don’t worry. He simply covered you up and asked me to see to you when I finished dinner service. I put you in your nightie.’

‘I’m so embarrassed,’ Eliza said in a low voice. ‘I don’t think I can face him again after all that.’

‘I’m sure he’s seen far worse, Lizzie.’ Molly yanked the coverlet off her. ‘Get up and come downstairs to start work. You’ll need to get on Cook’s good side unless you want to suffer more of her displeasure.’

Eliza swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. ‘I’ll tell you something for nothing, Molly. I’m never going to touch a drop of brandy again, as long as I live.’

‘I must take some of the blame for giving it to you in the first place, but you was frozen stiff and might have caught your death of cold. However, you didn’t have to swallow it down in a couple of swigs.’ Molly tossed Eliza’s clothes onto the bed. ‘I’ll see you downstairs in five minutes.’

‘You can start in the scullery,’ Cook said with ominous calm. ‘Wash those pots and pans and have them shining so I can see my face in them.’

Hetty sniggered behind her hand as Eliza walked into the steamy room and headed for the stone sink.

‘You’re lucky to get away with it, Circus. You was needed last evening and you was nowhere to be seen.’

‘Mind your own business, Hetty.’ Eliza headed for the stone sink and rolled up her sleeves. She knew that Hetty was right, and things could have been a lot worse, but she also knew better than to start an argument. She had been expecting a severe dressing-down from Cook and she could only be grateful for the reprieve.

She had just finished drying the last pan when Dora put her head around the door.

‘Here, Circus. You can take the breakfast tray up to Miss Lavinia’s room since you’re so keen to see your sister.’

Eliza dried her hands. ‘All right, Dora. I don’t mind the stairs.’ She was tempted to add something to the effect that Dora must be getting old if she found the stairs too much for her, but a row with Dora would not go down well with Cook. Eliza decided that she would be careful not to draw attention to herself in any way. Working in service was as difficult as walking on the high wire, and probably just as dangerous. She took the tray and went upstairs, knowing that she was on the clock, but at least it gave her a chance to speak briefly to Angelica.

‘I hate to see you turning into a drudge,’ Angelica said sadly. ‘I live a life of luxury compared to you and it’s not fair. I wish I could do more.’

Eliza placed the tray on a table close to Lavinia’s bed, taking care not to wake her.

‘Don’t worry about me, Angel. I can cope with them below stairs.’

‘It’s Christmas Eve tomorrow,’ Angelica said eagerly. ‘We’re going home – that is, at least we’re visiting the circus. Maybe I could persuade Pa to let us come back.’

‘You could try, but I don’t hold out much hope. But don’t worry, Angel. I’ll think of some way for us to escape.’

Lavinia opened her eyes and stared at Eliza, blinking sleepily. ‘Aren’t you happy here, Eliza? I’ll have a word with my mother if the other servants are being unkind to you.’

Eliza and Angelica exchanged anxious glances, and Eliza shook her head.

‘Thank you, Miss Lavinia, but that won’t be necessary. I can look after myself. Anyway, I’d better go downstairs, or I will be in trouble.’

Angelica followed her to the door. ‘You are all right, aren’t you, Lizzie? I would speak to the captain if you are unhappy. He’s such a gentleman.’

‘And far above us, Angel,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘Don’t imagine that his charm and good manners mean anything else. I must go now. I’ll bring your luncheon up at midday.’

Eliza hurried from the room before Angelica could argue. She suspected that Angel had feelings for the captain, and that was another reason for working out a way to leave Mrs Wildblood’s employment. How they might manage this was another question, but Eliza was determined to protect her sister at all costs.

Somehow Eliza managed to get through the rest of the day without incurring the wrath of Mrs Duckworth, although every time she took a tray upstairs Eliza knew that Cook had her eyes fixed firmly on the clock. She became expert at sliding down the banisters where possible and arriving back in the kitchen with seconds to spare. Besides which, Cook was too busy to take much notice of Eliza. Although Mrs Wildblood did not seem to bother about festivities, the captain would be there for a while longer and there was Christmas dinner to prepare. The kitchen smelled of hot mince pies and steaming puddings. It transpired that Captain Wildblood loved Christmas pudding, and in her desire to please him Cook had everyone frantically shelling almonds and blanching them, as well as chopping dates, weighing out dried fruit and crystallising orange and lemon peel. All the while Cook grumbled because this should have been done months previously and the pudding would not have time to mature, but she blamed it on the Russians and the Crimean War. Who would have known that it would finish when it did and the captain would return in time for Christmas? It was a question that she kept repeating and to which no one had an answer.

Christmas Eve dawned fine and frosty with just a powdering of snow on the grass in the gardens and what looked like icing on the bare branches of the trees. Eliza and Angelica wished each other happy birthday. Lavinia was in a very good humour when she remembered that today was the treat for which she had been waiting. They would be attending the matinée performance of the circus.

Mrs Wildblood was anxious about Lavinia being taken out in the cold and mixing with the *hoi polloi*, where she might catch any number of ailments. She actually climbed the stairs to her daughter’s room in an attempt to dissuade her from such folly. Eliza happened to be in the room at

the time, having come to retrieve the breakfast tray. For a while it looked as if Mrs Wildblood had persuaded Lavinia to stay at home, but Luke walked into the room at exactly the right moment, and Eliza was impressed by the way he managed to charm his aunt into agreeing to Lavinia's trip to the circus.

'We will be travelling in comfort in the Nesbits' barouche, Aunt Margery,' Luke said, smiling urbanely. 'Not only that, but Brown and her sister will be there to make sure that Lavinia is looked after properly. I will bring her home as soon as the show ends.'

Mrs Wildblood appeared undecided but another plea from Lavinia had her nodding slowly. 'Very well. I'll allow it this time, Lavinia, but if you fall ill don't blame me.' She turned on her heel and marched out of the room.

'That's settled then,' Luke said calmly. 'If you're ready by one o'clock, Vinnie, Marianne's coachman will be waiting to drive us to Vauxhall Gardens. Maybe Eliza will introduce you to some of the performers.'

Lavinia flushed prettily. 'Thank you so much, Luke. I am so excited, I can't wait.'

'I'll leave now and see you later.' Luke walked towards the doorway. 'A word, if you have time, Brown?'

Eliza followed him outside onto the landing. 'Yes, sir?'

'I hope Mrs Duckworth didn't give you too much aggravation, Eliza. After all, it was her savage punishment for an imagined misdemeanour that caused your collapse.'

'I wondered why she didn't say anything,' Eliza said slowly. 'Did you speak to her?'

Luke smiled. 'I might have had a few words with Cook. Just a friendly warning, you must understand.'

'Thank you, sir. I'm very grateful. I was expecting much worse.'

'You shouldn't have to put up with such treatment.' Luke met her gaze with a concerned frown. 'I won't allow bullying even though I am not master of this house. Besides which, you are worth more than the work set down for you. I would like to meet your father and have a man-to-man discussion with him.'

Eliza laid her hand on his sleeve. 'Please don't, sir. He is not the sort of man to cross.'

'Neither am I, Eliza. I can assure you of that.'

‘You will only make matters worse if you challenge his authority, sir.’

‘He cannot harm you now, Eliza. Anyway, I have an idea whereby I can help you and your sister to a more convivial way of life. I can’t say what it is at the moment, but I hope to be able to put a proposition to you very soon.’ Luke strode off, heading for the staircase, leaving Eliza staring after him, mystified.

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Chapter Seven

Everything went much more smoothly than Eliza had imagined. Lavinia was so excited at the prospect of travelling to Vauxhall Gardens that she cooperated eagerly with Luke's instructions. He carried her down several flights of stairs and out onto the pavement where Lady Marianne waited in her elegant and luxurious carriage. When everyone was settled with blankets wrapped around them, Luke sat on the box with the coachman, and they set off for the gardens.

He had apparently planned it so that they arrived well before the rest of the audience and they were met by none other than Mr Ward, the ringmaster, who despite his injuries had returned to take up his position rather than idle away his time at home.

'Eliza and Angelica, I am so pleased to see you both.' Victor Ward beamed at them. 'I want you to know that I was not party to your sudden departure from the circus. In fact, when I heard of what Magicus had done I was quite disgusted.'

Eliza could tell that his distress was genuine, and it surprised her. She had always treated the ringmaster with respect, but from a distance. Now it seemed that he might have been able to prevent their abrupt dismissal had he been in charge at the time.

'We didn't want to leave, Mr Ward,' Eliza said firmly. 'But we are too big for the cabinet.'

Ward frowned. 'Your father could have had one made that was larger. There is no excuse, Eliza.' He shot a sideways glance at Luke. 'But I see that you are both well cared for now, so perhaps it was time for you to grow up.'

Lady Marianne coughed politely behind her gloved hand. 'Your sentiments do you credit, sir. But it is rather chilly, and we were promised a backstage tour before the show started.'

'Of course, I beg your pardon, my lady. I was informed of your visit, and we are all honoured to entertain you.'

‘Excellent,’ Luke said heartily. ‘Now, sir, if you would care to lead on, I will carry my cousin.’

‘There is no need, Captain. When you informed me of the young lady’s infirmity, I took the liberty of hiring a Bath chair for her convenience.’ Ward signalled to one of the stagehands, who emerged from the Rotunda pushing the chair.

Lavinia uttered a cry of delight. ‘Oh, look. I have my own little carriage. Help me, Luke. I must try it out.’

‘You will travel like a princess.’ Luke smiled as he lifted her onto the thickly padded seat of the Bath chair and covered her lap and knees with a rug.

‘I can push her, sir,’ Eliza said hastily.

‘I am her companion. It’s my job.’ Angelica edged Eliza out of the way. ‘You may take a turn if I get tired, Lizzie.’

‘Or you can sit in the chair with me, Lizzie,’ Lavinia added with a mischievous smile. ‘This is so exciting. Thank you, Luke.’

‘I suggest we move on,’ Ward said firmly. ‘The show starts in half an hour, and you will need to take your seats fairly soon.’ He turned to Eliza with a wry smile. ‘We will begin with Don Diego and his amazing horses. I seem to remember you had a fondness for Mr Grey.’

Eliza felt the blood rush to her cheeks, and she shook her head. ‘We were just friends, Mr Ward. But I do love the horses and I’m sure that, being a cavalry officer, Captain Wildblood will be interested in them, too.’

Luke proffered his arm to Lady Marianne. ‘Of course. I consider myself a good horseman. I look forward to meeting Don Diego.’

When they reached the small paddock where the horses were being prepared for their performance, Lady Marianne won Eliza’s approval by walking fearlessly up to one of the grey Andalusian horses that seemed to be slightly restive. She approached slowly, talking to the animal in soothing tones and stroked its head so gently that the horse whinnied and nuzzled her shoulder.

Gilbert Grey strolled over to greet Eliza first. ‘This is a pleasant surprise, Lizzie. I thought you had abandoned us.’ His blue eyes held her glance with a look that expressed more than words.

‘It wasn’t my choice, Gilbert,’ Eliza said with a defiant lift of her chin. Their last romantic encounter had ended in a bitter argument when he had proposed marriage so suddenly that it had taken her breath away. Her

response might have been different had Gilbert not wanted to leave the circus and travel abroad, which would have meant Eliza leaving Angelica behind. They had always been a double act and Angelica would have lost her livelihood. Eliza had suspected that their father would not be sympathetic when his act was in danger of collapsing. Had she known that she and Angelica would soon be cast aside for two orphans she might have acted differently. Perhaps Gilbert could have been persuaded to allow Angelica to accompany them, although that was hard to believe. Gilbert was used to getting his own way, and with him there were no half-measures. Knowing this, Eliza had put her own feelings aside and refused his offer, which had not gone down well.

‘And who is this?’ Gilbert demanded, glaring at Luke.

‘I’m sorry,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘Where are my manners? May I introduce you to Captain Wildblood, whose aunt has employed both me and my sister.’ She turned to Luke, curving her lips into a tremulous smile. ‘This is Gilbert Grey, or Don Diego, which is his professional name, and these are his horses.’ She indicated the animals with a wave of her hand.

‘Andalusians,’ Luke said, nodding. ‘Fine horses, sir. I look forward to seeing them perform.’

‘This one is delightful, Luke.’ Marianne kissed the horse’s muzzle. ‘I think I might consider purchasing him.’

Gilbert shook his head. ‘That is a very valuable animal, ma’am. He’s not for sale at any price.’

‘There is a price for everything, if you have the money.’ Marianne treated him to a dazzling smile.

‘I think we should move on, my lady,’ Mr Ward said hurriedly. ‘Cecil is waiting to introduce you to Bella, our brilliant tightrope walker, and the high-wire artistes. But if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.’ He turned away and beckoned to Cecil, who came forward, wearing his stage costume with a cape flung over his shoulders.

He marched up to Eliza and gave her a hug before dropping a kiss on Angelica’s cheek. ‘Welcome home, ladies. We’ve missed you.’

‘Are you going to show us a trick?’ Lavinia asked eagerly. ‘Please do, sir.’

‘What would you have me do, young lady?’ Cecil smiled down at her, but before she had a chance to answer he reached out and took a coloured ball

from her ear, causing her to giggle helplessly. He repeated this until he had three balls, which he juggled in front of her.

She clapped her hands. 'You are so clever, sir. More, please.'

Cecil smiled benevolently. 'I'm sure you'd rather meet the beautiful Bella, our young lady of the flying trapeze, miss. We have to move on because the show starts soon.'

'Thank you, sir. We will do as you suggest. Your help is much appreciated.' Luke shook Cecil's hand. 'I can't wait to see the whole performance.'

'We've saved the best seats in the house for your party, sir,' Cecil said, smiling.

'Where is Magicus?' Eliza asked in a low voice as they moved on. 'Does he know we are here?'

Cecil pulled a face. 'I dare say he does, Lizzie. But you know him of old. He wouldn't admit he's done wrong by you and Angel, not even if you put him on the rack and pulled him limb from limb.'

'Yes, I do know him, only too well. How are the new twins doing? They seemed so small and scared when I last saw them.'

'Mary Sutton is taking care of them. She's a good woman and Charlie has taken them under his wing, too. We all do our bit, as we did with you and Angel.'

Eliza took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. 'Yes, you did, Cecil. You and the others were a wonderful family. We miss you all.'

'Aren't you happy in the big house, Lizzie? The captain seems a decent enough fellow.'

'He is, and I'm grateful to him. We're all right, but being in service isn't what I would have chosen.'

'Have you asked Mr Ward to find something for you and Angelica that wouldn't upset your pa?'

'Not yet, although I don't hold out much hope. It would make things very difficult with Magicus. Besides which, Angel and I were only Pa's assistants. We just did as we were told.'

Cecil nodded. 'That is true, Lizzie. I wish I could help you, but I'm afraid there's nothing I can do.' He turned back to address the whole group. 'My lady, sir, I think we should show you to your seats now. The show will start in about ten minutes.'

‘How disappointing,’ Lady Marianne said, sighing. ‘I was looking forward to meeting the rest of the acts.’

‘Maybe afterwards, Marianne.’ Luke proffered his arm. ‘We don’t want to miss any of the performance.’

‘We most certainly do not.’ Lavinia tugged at Angelica’s hand. ‘What are we waiting for, Angel?’

Angelica obliged by giving the Bath chair a hefty push over the hummocky grass, and everyone followed behind them. Eliza found herself walking beside Gilbert, who had left one of his stable boys in charge of the horses.

‘You should have accepted my offer when I made it, Lizzie,’ Gilbert said in a low voice. ‘You can’t tell me that you are enjoying being a chambermaid.’

Eliza shot him a sideways glance. ‘You sound as if you’re enjoying my fall from grace, Gil.’

‘No, indeed I am not.’ Gilbert’s lips twisted into a wry smile. ‘Well, maybe a little. You hurt my feelings, Lizzie.’

‘I think I hurt your pride more than anything,’ Eliza said coldly. ‘You knew I couldn’t abandon my sister, and I didn’t see you rushing to help us when the man we were brought up to think of as our father decided that we were no longer of any use to him.’

‘Magicus is a bitter old man, but I am young and ambitious. One day I will have a whole equestrian show to my name. I offered you a share in that future and you turned it down.’

Cecil came to a halt outside the Rotunda. ‘Follow me, if you please.’

Eliza was about to respond to Gilbert, but when she turned her head, she realised that he had returned to his horses. She sighed. That was what life would have been like had she given in and agreed to marry him. His animals would always come first. There was nothing to do other than to follow Cecil and take up their ringside seats.

The performance started. As it was Christmas Eve there was added sparkle and a sense of occasion to all the acts. Costumes were decorated with tinsel and virtually all the performers, with the exception of the Great Magicus, made it plain that the evening belonged to Lavinia and her friends. Lavinia laughed and clapped, obviously enjoying every minute of the show. For Eliza it was bittersweet, but she knew that this part of her life was over, and when the finale ended Bella appeared from the dressing area

with her arms full of pink hothouse roses. To the sounds of a drum roll, she presented a bouquet to Lavinia and one each for Angelica, Eliza and Lady Marianne. Tumultuous applause ended the show, and the audience began to disperse.

Angelica was about to push Lavinia's chair to the exit, but Luke stepped forward and lifted Lavinia in his arms.

'We have to leave the chair, Angel. I'll carry Vinnie. She's a featherweight, but you can take her flowers until we reach the carriage.'

'We can't go home so early,' Lavinia said, pouting. 'Luke, it's been wonderful, but I don't want to spend the rest of Christmas Eve in my room.'

Lady Marianne moved to their side. 'It isn't over yet, my dear. Luke has a surprise for all three of you. A little bird told me that it is your birthdays, Angelica and Eliza. We felt there should be some sort of celebration.'

Lavinia clapped her hands, dropping her flowers in the process, which were rescued by Angelica.

'What is the surprise?' Eliza asked eagerly.

'It won't be a surprise if we tell you,' Luke said, laughing. 'You'll find out in good time.'

'We ought to stop and thank Mr Ward for his hospitality.' Eliza did not add that she wanted to ask the ringmaster if there were any openings for herself and Angelica.

'No need. I've thought of that.' Luke set off towards the road. 'The performers are enjoying cakes and cider, although not too much as they have an evening performance to get through.'

'That was so thoughtful of you, Captain,' Eliza said earnestly.

'I can't take the credit for it, I'm afraid.' Luke nodded in Lady Marianne's direction. 'It was Marianne who suggested it.'

'That was kind of her.' Eliza made an effort to sound sincere, but she was getting a little tired of Lady Marianne and her seemingly endless philanthropic gestures. She took a deep breath. 'Captain Wildblood, I really would like a few words with Mr Ward, in private.'

Luke gave her a searching look. 'Do you want him to take you back in the troupe?'

'Well, it's all that Angelica and I ever knew, sir. I'm very grateful to you for your kindness but it is not easy below stairs.'

'Eliza, I want you to trust me. I know what you have gone through, and I admire your courage, but for that reason I hope we can find a way to make

things better for you.'

'I don't understand, sir.' Eliza had to quicken her pace to keep up with him. Already, the lights of the circus were fading into the encroaching darkness.

'I can't discuss it now, but I will have to return to Crow Castle in a few days.'

'Crow Castle?' Eliza eyed him curiously. 'That sounds eerie.'

'It's only a name, chosen when it was erected in the last century. It's a relatively modern building, designed to look like a medieval castle overlooking Hope Cove and the Channel.'

'It sounds very romantic,' Eliza said thoughtfully. 'But you said your cousin had taken it over.'

'Yes, that's right. I can't make definite plans until I have evicted Gregory, but the law is on my side. He assumed that I would die on the battlefield, but he's going to get a nasty surprise when he discovers that I am very much alive.'

Lady Marianne moved to his side. 'Did I hear you mention Gregory's name, Luke?'

'I was just saying that I need to have a serious conversation with him.'

'I heard that he had taken over the old castle on some faraway island,' Lady Marianne said, smiling. 'Gregory always does the unexpected.'

'You always said you didn't like him, Marianne.' Luke eyed her suspiciously. 'Why the change of heart?'

'We got to know each other a little better while you were abroad, Luke. Perhaps I was a bit unfair to him in the past. He can be very entertaining company.'

'He will have to find himself another place to live, but that is between him and me.' Luke managed a smile, although Eliza could see that he was uncomfortable with the topic of conversation. 'That's enough of my problems,' he added hastily. 'Let's enjoy the rest of the day.'

Lavinia's surprise was tea at Gunter's with delicious pastries and as much ice cream as she could eat. Then, just when Eliza thought the party might be coming to an end, one of the waiting staff brought an iced birthday cake to the table.

'It's not my birthday,' Lavinia said, frowning.

Luke reached out to pat her hand. 'No, Vinnie, but it is Eliza and Angelica's birthday. Without them I doubt if we would have had such a good time at the circus, so this is by way of thanks.'

'Thank you,' Eliza said softly. 'I don't know what else to say.'

'Me neither,' Angelica added, eyeing the magnificent cake. 'I've never seen anything like that in my whole life.'

'Cake is Her Majesty the Queen's favourite food,' Lady Marianne said as she cut slices and laid them carefully on dainty side plates. 'This is a present from Lavinia to you, Angelica and Eliza, since you have no family of your own.'

Lavinia forked a large piece of cake into her mouth. 'Delicious. Maybe Cook could learn to bake something similar.'

Angelica sampled her piece. 'You're right, Miss Lavinia. This is so light it melts in my mouth.'

'You have Marianne to thank,' Luke added, smiling. 'I would not have thought of providing something so splendid, but when I mentioned it was both your birthdays, nothing would dissuade her from ordering the best cake they could provide.'

'It's the latest fashion,' Lady Marianne said, handing him his portion. 'One day I think everyone will have a cake to mark their special day. Anyway, let's enjoy this, not forgetting that tomorrow is Christmas Day and I dare say there will be more surprises.'

'I've had the best time ever,' Lavinia said ecstatically. 'Thanks to all of you.'

Luke finished his cake and stood up. 'I don't want to overtire you, Vinnie. I'm going out to summon your carriage, Marianne.'

'Really? Do we have to go so soon?' Lavinia's lips trembled.

'There's always tomorrow,' Lady Marianne gave her an encouraging smile. 'I happen to know that there are some lovely gifts for you, Lavinia.'

Eliza began piling their plates up as if she had to clear the table, but a steely glance from Lady Marianne made her stop immediately.

'You are not a servant here, Eliza. You are a guest, so please behave like one.'

Eliza rose to her feet. 'I'm sorry, my lady. I forgot.'

'From what I gathered today, I think you were very fortunate to have found a position in such a genteel household, Eliza. You, too, Angelica. I trust that you will both behave with the proper amount of gratitude and

humility.' Lady Marianne passed a table napkin to Lavinia. 'You have jam on your lips, Lavinia. And you, Eliza, do sit down and wait for Captain Wildblood to return. Don't hover as if you are about to clear the table.'

Eliza sank down on her seat. Her previous feeling of elation had worn off, and she could feel the bonds of servitude wrapping themselves around her yet again.

It was early evening when they arrived back at Bessborough Gardens. Luke carried Lavinia into the house with Lady Marianne and Angelica close behind them. Eliza was about to head for the back stairs when Dora appeared, looking oddly flustered with her cap askew and her hands clasped nervously in front of her.

'If you please, Captain, the mistress wishes you to go straight to the drawing room.'

Luke hesitated at the foot of the stairs. 'I'll go when I've settled Miss Lavinia in her room.'

'Please, sir. Mrs Wildblood was very insistent. All the servants are to wait below stairs until we are summoned.'

Lady Marianne placed her hand on Luke's arm. 'Perhaps you had better do as your aunt requests, Luke.'

He shook his head. 'Lavinia's needs come first. I'll join you all as soon as I can.'

'Take me in to see Mama, Cousin Luke,' Lavinia said imperiously. 'I want to know what is going on. I'm tired of being treated like an invalid.'

Luke hesitated and then he nodded. 'All right. But don't blame me if you feel too tired to get out of bed tomorrow, Vinnie.'

'I'd better go home,' Lady Marianne said hastily.

'No, Marianne. We're affianced, and I need you by my side if there is yet another family emergency. It's probably something and nothing. You know what my aunt is like.' He took the stairs two at a time despite the fact that he was still carrying Lavinia, which left Lady Marianne little option other than to follow them.

Eliza and Angelica exchanged anxious glances. 'What do we do now?' Angelica asked nervously.

Dora sniffed. 'Who knows? Best come downstairs and wait with the rest of us. I got a feeling we're all going to be out on the street before the New Year.' She flounced off towards the back stairs.

‘We’d best do as she suggests,’ Eliza said slowly. ‘Something is up, Angel. I don’t like the sound of this.’

‘The captain will see that we’re all right, Lizzie.’ Angelica hurried off in Dora’s wake, leaving Eliza standing in the entrance hall, wondering what would happen next.

She did not have to wait long to find out. The rest of the servants were standing around in the kitchen while Cook did her best to prevent the dinner from being ruined. She shot a meaningful look in Eliza’s direction, but she refrained from making any of her usual sarcastic comments. Eventually, after what seemed like hours, but according to the clock face it was only ten minutes later, the drawing-room bell jangled on its spring and everyone trooped out of the kitchen in single file.

When Eliza and Angelica entered the drawing room, following in the wake of the more senior servants, they found Mrs Wildblood seated in her throne-like chair with the faithful Miss Warren standing beside her, clutching her hanky to her eyes.

Luke cleared his throat. ‘There is clearly something wrong, Aunt. Would you rather speak to me first, in private?’

Mrs Wildblood shuddered visibly and rose to her feet. ‘No, thank you, Luke. This is my problem, not yours. At least not overtly, although it does affect the whole family.’

‘Can I fetch you a glass of water, ma’am?’ Mrs Slade stepped forward, eyeing Mrs Wildblood with a worried frown. ‘Maybe you should sit down, if I may be so bold.’

‘I have called you all here to tell you that I have received some very bad news. I wanted you all to hear it from my lips so that the story does not get twisted. The details don’t concern you, but the outcome is that I am going to have to let you all go. You will be paid until the end of the week, but tomorrow you need to pack your bags and be out of the house on Boxing Day.’

There was a moment of silence with everyone gazing at Mrs Wildblood in shock. Luke was the first to speak.

‘Aunt Margery, is there no other way? Where are these poor people to go in the middle of winter?’

‘What will happen to me, Mama?’ Lavinia cried anxiously. ‘Why didn’t you tell me this might happen?’

‘We will talk in a minute, Lavinia.’ Mrs Wildblood took a deep breath, holding her head high. ‘You may all get back to work. But I would like to thank you for your dedicated service. I will naturally give each of you a glowing testimonial and I’m sure you will find alternative employment. You may go.’

‘I want Angel to stay with me,’ Lavinia said boldly. ‘Please, Mama. I cannot manage without her.’

‘Don’t be silly, Lavinia. The girl has only been with you for a few days. You cannot have become reliant on her in such a short time.’

Eliza hesitated as the rest of the servants trooped out of the drawing room. She did not know whether to stay for Angelica’s sake or to follow Mrs Slade, who was the last to leave.

‘I think I should go now,’ Lady Marianne said hastily. ‘This is obviously a difficult time for you, ma’am. I will wait until you come to me, Luke.’

He lifted his hand as if to stop her, but then dropped it to his side, shaking his head. ‘Perhaps you are right, Marianne. I will come and see you tomorrow morning. We will speak then. I’ll see you out, my dear.’

‘There is no need. Stay with Lavinia and your aunt.’ Lady Marianne nodded to Mrs Wildblood and blew a kiss to Lavinia as she left the room.

‘Well, Aunt? What has brought this about so suddenly?’ Luke demanded coldly. ‘Surely you could have allowed the Christmas festivities to proceed before turning everyone out onto the streets?’

Mrs Wildblood pointed a shaking finger at Eliza. ‘Why are you still here?’

‘Mama, you’ve ruined everything.’ Lavinia choked on a sob. ‘We had a wonderful time at the circus and then tea at Gunter’s. It’s the twins’ birthday today. If Miss Warren can stay to hear you out, then so can they.’

Luke nodded, his expression grim. ‘Vinnie is right, ma’am. I think you owe us all an explanation.’

Chapter Eight

Margery Wildblood gripped the arms of her chair with both hands, her knuckles showing white through her pale skin.

‘I am bankrupt, Luke. When Arthur died, he left many debts, which I have done my best to settle, but unfortunately I am no businesswoman. I took advice from a stockbroker, which turned out to be a huge mistake, and to put it in a nutshell, I have lost everything. The house is being repossessed on Monday, and everything in it will be sold at auction. So, you see my apparent cruel treatment of the servants was a matter of expediency.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner, Aunt?’ Luke shook his head. ‘I might have been able to help you.’

‘Can you pay off my creditors, Luke?’ Mrs Wildblood managed a shadow of a smile.

‘I cannot, at this moment in time, but I might have been able to persuade them to hold off until you had found a way to raise the necessary monies. My hands are tied until I get Gregory Fox out of my home, but surely you could have sold the house before matters got to this stage?’

Mrs Wildblood turned to Miss Warren, who was weeping into her handkerchief. ‘For heaven’s sake, stop snivelling, Warren. I can’t think with that noise in my ear.’

‘I’m sorry, ma’am. But what will we do? I have nowhere to go at such short notice, and it seems that you are in a similar situation.’

‘Just a minute,’ Luke said firmly. ‘No one is going to be homeless. I was planning to return to the island very soon anyway. Even if I cannot evict Gregory immediately, there is the dower house on the estate, which is commodious enough to take all of us. I suggest that you, Miss Warren, should set about packing everything my aunt needs, and yourself, too. Angelica and Eliza will take care of Lavinia, and I will make the arrangements to transport us all to Dorset.’

‘But, Luke, I am not your responsibility,’ Mrs Wildblood protested weakly.

‘Nonsense, Aunt. We are a family and that is that. Unless you have a better idea, we should do as I suggest. Besides which, the sea and country air will be good for Vinnie. You want the best for her, do you not?’

‘Of course I do, Luke.’ Mrs Wildblood dashed tears from her eyes with a lace-trimmed hanky.

‘Wait a minute,’ Lavinia cried passionately. ‘What about me? Do I not have anything to say about my future? Am I always to be treated like a child?’

Lady Wildblood frowned ominously. ‘If you behave like one then that is how you will be treated, Lavinia.’

‘What is it, Vinnie?’ Luke asked gently. ‘Wouldn’t you like to live by the sea?’

‘Yes, I would,’ Lavinia said reluctantly. ‘But you haven’t agreed to taking Angel with us, and that must include Eliza. What I’m saying is that if Angel can’t come with me, I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Of course, Vinnie. I understand perfectly.’ Luke laid his hand on her shoulder. ‘I just assumed that she and Eliza would accompany us.’ He turned to Eliza and Angelica, who had been following the conversation in silence.

‘Are you both willing to accompany us? I’m not promising a life of luxury or excitement like living and working in the circus, but I can offer you a decent home.’

Eliza glanced at Angelica, but there was no need to put the question into words. She could see the answer in her sister’s eyes, and she nodded.

‘We will go with you gladly.’ Eliza did not add that they had very little choice in the matter. The prospect of being alone and unemployed in London, especially in the middle of winter, was too frightening to even contemplate.

Lavinia clapped her hands. ‘That’s all I wanted to know. When do we leave, Cousin Luke?’

Luke turned to Mrs Wildblood. ‘How soon do you think you can get the servants to pack up the belongings you intend to bring with you, Aunt? I’ll need to hire a carter. Do you think we could get away on Saturday?’

Mrs Wildblood sighed. ‘Saturday should be fine. But now, take Lavinia to her room, please, Luke.’ Mrs Wildblood turned her attention to Angelica. ‘You may go with them, and you, Eliza, I would advise you to go to your

room. The atmosphere below stairs will be somewhat fraught with this bad news.'

Luke picked up Lavinia, and Angelica held the door open. Eliza took Mrs Wildblood's advice by going to her room. However, she could not settle, knowing that Molly would soon join her, and she was the only one of the servants who had treated her as a friend. Eliza did not have long to wait.

When Molly entered the room Eliza sprang up from her bed. 'Molly, I'm sorry, I couldn't warn you about what was going to happen.'

Molly smiled wearily. 'Don't worry, Lizzie. I think we all knew what she would say. Since old Mr Wildblood passed away we have all noticed that things were getting tight and economies have had to be made, even if we didn't understand the whole of it.'

'I thought you might be upset.' Eliza sank back onto her bed.

'I would have been if Tommy hadn't popped the question earlier in the day. He's been promoted to work in the baker's shop and there's rooms above it where we can live. I would have given in my notice anyway.'

'That is such a relief. Congratulations, anyway. I'm so happy for you,' Eliza said, smiling.

'I'm so excited. I never thought Tommy would be able to support a family, even though he's a hardworking chap, but the baker must have realised that.' Molly sat down to take off her shoes and stockings. 'What about you and Angel? Are you going with the family?'

'Yes, we are. I never thought I'd be living in a castle on an island, but that's where we're headed, apparently.'

Molly giggled. 'And I never thought I'd be a respectable married woman at the start of the New Year, or at least after the banns are read. I'm going to live with Tommy's widowed mother until the wedding.'

Eliza lay down and pulled the coverlet up to her chin. 'I'm glad for you, Molly.'

'And I'm happy that you and your sister will be taken care of. You've had a rotten time here, Lizzie. You didn't deserve the punishments that Cook set for you, but you were lucky to have Captain Wildblood on your side. He's a real gent.'

Eliza closed her eyes. 'Yes, he is. But it's going to be a very odd Christmas. Heaven knows what will happen tomorrow.'

When Eliza and Molly went downstairs early next morning they found the kitchen in a mess, and Cook was in an even sorrier state. She had obviously fallen asleep in her chair by the range, although the fire must have gone out in the early hours. Her mobcap was over her eyes, and she was snoring loudly. An empty gin bottle, an upturned glass and a broken clay pipe nestling in a pile of ash bore testament to how she had come to such a pass.

Hetty was attempting to clear the ashes from the fire basket, but Cook's ample body was in the way.

'Give us a hand, Molly,' Hetty said tearfully. 'I'll get it in the neck if she wakes up and finds I haven't lit the fire. It took me longer than usual to get the one going in Mrs Wildblood's bedroom, and I've yet to sort out the dining room and drawing room.'

Molly rolled up her sleeves. 'Move over, Hetty. You'd better clear up all this mess. I'll see to the fire.'

'What can I do?' Eliza asked anxiously.

'Set a tray for Miss Lavinia's breakfast, and one for a pot of chocolate for Mrs Wildblood and tea for Miss Warren. We'll do the rest, but the most important thing is to get the fire going.'

'Cook isn't going to be very happy when she wakes up,' Hetty said nervously. 'She'll have a terrible headache.'

Eliza could see that Molly was struggling as she tried to clear the cinders with Cook in the way and seemingly dead to the world.

'This is ridiculous,' Eliza said angrily. 'I've seen dozens of drunks and she's no different. I'll wake her up and we can get her upstairs to her bed.'

'She's no lightweight,' Molly said slowly. 'Wouldn't it be better to leave her to sleep?'

Eliza made her way around the table and gave Cook a shake. 'Mrs Duckworth, wake up.'

Cook groaned and tried to brush Eliza's hands away.

'No, you don't.' Eliza shook her again, this time a lot harder. 'Wake up, Cook. Look at the time.'

Cook opened one eye and stared blearily at the clock. 'What's the matter?'

'You, Cook,' Eliza said bitterly. 'You are the problem. You've ruled this kitchen for years, making people's lives more difficult than they needed to be. Now you've lost that power, so I suggest you get up off that chair and take yourself to bed. Sleep it off.'

Cook yawned and clasped her hands to her head.

‘Don’t speak so loudly. Move the lamp away – the light hurts my eyes.’

‘Merry Christmas, Cook,’ Eliza said icily. ‘You’ve just made things even worse than they were. You need to go to bed now.’ She grabbed Cook by the arm and attempted to heave her from the chair. ‘Help me, Molly.’

Reluctantly, and ignoring Cook’s loud protests, Molly took the other arm and with a mighty heave they managed to drag her to her feet. Cook staggered and clutched the table for support.

‘I got to sit down. It’s the middle of the night.’

‘Look at the clock that you’re so fond of using to punish us, Cook. It’s six o’clock in the morning and we need to start the day’s work.’ Eliza went to open the kitchen door. ‘You’re in no state to do anything and, to be honest, no one cares what you do. Just get out of our way.’

‘I’ll have you all sacked for this,’ Cook said thickly.

Eliza laughed. ‘Too late for that, Cook. You’ll know the truth when your memory returns. I hope you’ve got someone who will take you into their home.’

Hetty gasped and clutched her hands to her breast as if expecting some awful retribution to come down on their heads, but Cook shuffled out of the kitchen, muttering unintelligible words beneath her breath.

‘Well, I never!’ Molly said, giggling. ‘I didn’t think I’d ever see the day when Cook was sent to her room in disgrace.’

‘You got the better of her, Circus,’ Hetty grinned. ‘I can’t wait to tell Dora.’

‘We’ve still got work to do today,’ Eliza reminded her firmly. ‘And it’s Lizzie, not Circus. I’m not putting up with that now.’ She turned her back on Hetty and began assembling the trays as Molly had suggested.

‘It looks as if you and I will be cooking Christmas dinner.’ Molly struck a match and lit the kindling. She straightened up, smiling. ‘I can’t believe that we’ll be out of this house so soon.’

‘Neither can I,’ Eliza said earnestly. ‘But I can’t say I’m sorry. It feels as if there’s a curse on this house, and we’ll all be better off away from here.’

‘It’s going to be a very odd sort of Christmas.’ Molly sighed. ‘It’s lucky we did most of the food preparation yesterday before we knew what was going on.’

Hetty collapsed onto a chair. ‘It’s all right for you, but I haven’t got a feller wanting to marry me.’

‘Maybe Mrs Slade can help you find another place.’ Eliza remembered how she had felt when Magicus had told them they were no longer of any use to him. Despite Hetty’s constant spiteful jibes, Eliza could not help feeling sorry for her.

‘Lizzie is right,’ Molly added gently. ‘Mrs Slade isn’t too bad on her own. It’s when she gets with Cook that they both turn nasty, and Cook isn’t going to bother anyone for the rest of the day. I’ll make another pot of tea, and you take it to Mrs Slade. She’ll be in a much better mood for drinking that.’

‘Ta, Molly.’ Hetty wiped her eyes on her sleeve. ‘You’re a good sort. I’ll speak to her later and hope for the best.’

‘If she can’t help, maybe Lady Marianne could put a word in for you.’ Eliza took a tablet of chocolate from the larder and began grating it ready to add to water when it came to the boil. ‘Lady Marianne must have many servants herself, but if she can’t take you on, she might know someone who can.’

‘Why would you want to help me?’ Hetty demanded suspiciously. ‘We ain’t friends.’

‘No, but we’re all in the same fix, it’s just that my sister and I have been luckier than you. But that doesn’t mean you have to give up, Hetty.’

‘Why are you being nice to me?’ Hetty asked, ‘I done nothing but provoke you since you come here.’

Molly added lumps of coal to the fire as the flames took hold. ‘That’s because Lizzie is a nice person, and she doesn’t hold grudges, like some people.’

‘I suppose you mean me.’ Hetty frowned and her lips trembled.

‘If the cap fits, wear it.’ Molly pushed past her and made her way to the scullery. ‘Stop moaning, Hetty. It’s Christmas Day, let’s make the best of it.’

‘My sentiments exactly.’ Eliza took the grated chocolate to the range and stirred it into the water as it came to the boil. She added cinnamon, a little flour and a lump of sugar before rolling the wooden chocolate mill between her hands to make a froth. ‘Pass me the chocolate pot, please, Hetty. I’ll make a pot of tea for Miss Warren and one for Mrs Slade. We’ve all got to work together today if we’re to survive.’

‘I’ll do the rest of the fires,’ Hetty said sulkily. ‘Anyone would think I was a maid of all work. I’m supposed to be the scullery maid.’ She picked up a bucket filled with coal and kindling and stomped out of the kitchen.

With the morning trays returned to the scullery, it was time to start preparing breakfast. Eliza and Molly worked well together and Hetty managed to get through the washing up without too much grumbling. Dora waited on table, but she was unusually quiet, which Eliza counted as a blessing. It was enough to have to listen to Hetty's complaints without Dora adding to them. However, breakfast was eventually served, but it was only Luke who came to the dining table. The rest of the food was taken upstairs to Mrs Wildblood's room, and another laden tray went to Lavinia and Angelica.

After hours of what seemed like endless hard work, luncheon was served, although it was far from a festive meal. Eliza decided that cooks and their helpers earned their money, and it was easier to be a performer in the circus than to work in a kitchen. Cook had not put in an appearance, which left everything to Eliza and Molly, with a little help from Hetty, and a few scornful words from Dora. The prospect of being out of work was obviously having an effect below stairs.

Mrs Wildblood was very gracious and thanked everyone at the end of the meal, speaking warmly and adding that there would be no need to provide dinner that evening.

'Captain Wildblood and I have been invited to dine with Lady Marianne's family, so it will only be necessary for you to take a tray to Miss Lavinia's room. You may all have the evening off after that.'

Eliza, who had taken in the dessert, nodded in acknowledgement. If she were to be honest, she did not think she had the energy needed to prepare and serve another such meal. She returned to the kitchen with the good news and found Molly slumped in Cook's chair with a glass of sherry in her hand.

'I've poured one for you, Lizzie,' she said, smiling. 'Hetty can have hers when she's finished washing the dishes. I seem to remember that last year, when she had a couple of sips of wine, she went to sleep with her head on the table. We had to clear up around her.'

Hetty poked her head around the scullery door. 'Hey, that's not fair, Molly. I was tired after all the hard work I'd done.'

Eliza took a sip of the sweet wine. 'I would rather perform a dozen magic acts in the circus ring than spend my days slaving in the kitchen. Take that

as a compliment, Hetty. Let's hope your next position will be in a house with many more servants to make life easier.'

Hetty grabbed the glass of sherry set aside for her and downed it in one gulp.

'I don't care if I break all the crockery. I'm leaving first thing in the morning. I don't see why I should stay and help pack up everything when I'm going to be thrown out on the street.'

'Where will you go?' Eliza eyed her curiously.

'I got a cousin living in Clapham. I'll go and stay with her while I look for another position. She's a widow with six little 'uns, so she'll be glad of the help.' Hetty glanced at the sherry bottle. 'Another one of those would be of benefit.'

Molly shrugged. 'Go on then, Hetty. But drink it when you've finished washing the glasses and best china.'

'I'll give you a hand, Hetty,' Eliza said reluctantly. 'We're all in the same predicament so we should be good to each other.'

Hetty shot her a sideways glance. 'I still don't like you, Circus. But if you insist I ain't going to stop you.'

They worked together until everything was washed, dried and put away. Molly scrubbed the pine table and mopped the floor. They shared the rest of the sherry, which was only enough for half a glass, but they wished each other Merry Christmas before they went to their rooms. Eliza went upstairs to Lavinia's bedroom where she found Angelica attempting to sort through drawers packed with virtually new garments.

'I'm sure I don't need all those chemises and undergarments. Put them in the charity box, Angel.' Lavinia lay back against a pile of pillows. 'All this is so upsetting and exhausting.'

'We'll do everything for you,' Eliza said hurriedly. 'Please don't worry.'

'I don't want to live in a draughty old castle. It's probably haunted.' Lavinia sighed and reached for a glass of water on her bedside table.

'Haunted?' Angelica paled visibly. 'Surely not.'

'Have you been there before, Miss Lavinia?' Eliza gave her a searching look. 'Or has someone been telling you frightening stories?'

'No,' Lavinia admitted reluctantly. 'But old castles are always haunted in novels.'

'I dare say the authors make up such tales.' Eliza began taking shoes from one of the cupboards and packing them into a valise.

‘I don’t need all that footwear,’ Lavinia said peevishly. ‘I can’t walk, so why do I need shoes?’

‘You might be able to wear them when you get stronger.’ Angelica looked to her sister for help.

‘Of course you will,’ Eliza added firmly. ‘All that sea air and good food will have you back on your feet in no time at all.’

‘If you say so.’ Lavinia closed her eyes. ‘Anyway, I’m glad that you are both coming with us. I don’t think I could bear life on a small island if I did not have you for company.’

‘I think Miss Lavinia needs to rest, Angel,’ Eliza said softly. ‘Let’s leave all this until the morning. It won’t take long if we work together and we have all tomorrow to finish packing.’

‘Are we really going to live on an island?’ Angelica closed the valise. ‘In a castle, too. I can hardly believe it, but I do miss the circus. Going there yesterday and seeing everyone again made it so hard to leave.’

‘I feel that too,’ Eliza said sadly. ‘But they will start travelling in the New Year. Who knows, they might perform somewhere close enough for us to visit them?’

‘Do you really think so, Lizzie?’

Eliza gave Angelica a hug. ‘It’s a definite possibility. The main thing is that we are together, Angel. I will look after you.’

‘And I will make sure that you are all right.’

Eliza released her gently. ‘I suggest you make Miss Lavinia comfortable and then you try to get some sleep. We’re going to need all our energy to get everything packed and ready for the move on Saturday. We must think of it as an adventure, something to tell our grandchildren.’

Angelica giggled self-consciously. ‘I think the captain likes me, Lizzie. He’s always so kind and he doesn’t treat me like a servant.’

Eliza frowned. ‘Don’t forget that he’s gentry, Angel. We are circus people, and we have no idea who our parents were. Besides which, Captain Wildblood is going to marry Lady Marianne.’

‘Well, she’s not coming with us to Dorset. He might forget her.’

‘And even if he did, he would still look for a wife from his own class, Angel. Please don’t get your hopes up simply because he’s a kind and well-mannered gentleman.’

The stubborn look that Eliza knew only too well crossed Angelica’s pretty face. ‘I can dream, can’t I? Sometimes dreams do come true.’ She

kissed Eliza on the cheek. 'Good night, dear Lizzie.'

Boxing Day was spent in a flurry of activity as Eliza and Angelica helped the other servants to pack up the most cherished of Mrs Wildblood's possessions and everything that would make Lavinia's life more comfortable. Luke was nowhere to be seen, but Eliza had little time to think about Captain Wildblood, or her sister's infatuation with him. There were crates and boxes to be filled with household items, bedding, books and paintings, all of which Mrs Wildblood declared she could not live without. Hetty stayed until midday and then she left for Clapham. Cook hardly spoke to anyone and she was little help, choosing instead to sit by the fire and smoke her pipe in between preparing simple meals. Eliza found this behaviour much easier to deal with than the person who normally inhabited Mrs Duckworth's plump body, and Molly agreed wholeheartedly. Mrs Slade, however, worked tirelessly and by evening she had everything organised in a way that would make it easy for the carter to load his wagon next morning.

Mid-afternoon, Mrs Wildblood summoned everyone to the drawing room, where she handed out their wages, plus a little bonus in thanks for their extra work. She spoke to each of them in person, thanking Mrs Duckworth sincerely for her excellent meals and wishing her well for the future. Eliza was astonished to see Cook leave the room clutching her hanky to her eyes, and even Mrs Slade had to wipe away a tear when it came to her turn.

When Eliza and Molly returned to the kitchen, they found Cook dressed in her outdoor clothes and with a large portmanteau on the table.

'Where are you going, Cook?' Molly eyed her warily.

'I know when my time is up, so I'm leaving now. My nephew is coming for me.' Cook made a show of putting on her gloves with the air of a martyr.

'Is he here already?' Eliza asked anxiously. 'Surely you aren't going to stand outside in the cold?'

'I've given fifteen years of my life to this family,' Cook said, sighing. 'This is how I'm repaid.'

'We're all in the same boat, Mrs Duckworth.' Molly picked up the heavy case. 'Let me help you.'

'You're eager to get rid of me,' Cook said bitterly. 'I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't going to live in the castle with Circus and her

sister.'

'That's not fair.' Eliza could see that Molly was upset by this unwarranted attack. 'Molly has done nothing but try to comfort you, Mrs Duckworth. I can take your spiteful treatment, but she doesn't deserve it.'

At that moment there was knocking on the back door, and Cook snatched her bag from Molly.

'That will be Ted. He's always on time. I won't say I wish you well because I think you both got off very lightly. Young people always do.' Cook stamped out of the kitchen, leaving Eliza and Molly staring at each other in disbelief.

Molly sighed. 'It's a pity we drank all the cooking sherry yesterday, Lizzie. I could really do with a tot now.'

Eliza gave her a hug. 'I know how you feel, Molly. I do wish you were coming with us to Dorset, but I know you'll be very happy with Tommy.'

'Thank you, Lizzie. I hope all goes well for you in the haunted castle, I really do.'

Chapter Nine

Eliza might have had reservations about living in a haunted castle, as Molly had predicted, but next day there was too much to do to even think about where they would end up. Eventually the pantechnicon was packed with all Mrs Wildblood's favourite items of furniture, the best dinner service and the pieces of family silver that had not been sold to pay off previous debts. With most of their luggage sent on ahead, Luke hailed two hackney carriages to take them all to Waterloo station, where they boarded a train bound for Dorchester. At first Lavinia and Angelica were excited, but an hour after they settled down to enjoy the journey, boredom seemed to creep in. Their giggles ceased and their chatter faded gradually into silence. After another hour they leaned back against the padded first-class seat and fell asleep. Mrs Wildblood sat rigidly upright and stared out of the window, saying nothing, while Luke attempted to engage Eliza in conversation. Her responses were guarded, but the rhythmic rumble of the engine and the clickety-clack of the iron wheels on the track was oddly soothing and she began to relax. The winter landscape that flashed past was a mixture of dramatic contrasts of bare dark trees reaching their branches up to a leaden sky and the stark white expanse of snowy fields.

'A penny for them,' Luke said, smiling.

Eliza turned to him with a start. 'I'm sorry. I was miles away.'

'That is obvious. I hope they were pleasant thoughts.'

It was Eliza's turn to smile. 'I'm a bit confused, to be honest, sir.'

'About what in particular?' Luke leaned forward, his expression earnest. 'Are you worried about coming with us to Dorset?'

'I suppose I am, in a way. I can't imagine what living in a castle will be like, or indeed what part my sister and I are to play in your new household.' Eliza met his gaze with a straight look.

'It's I who should apologise, Eliza. I should have spoken to you both before we left London. But I can assure you there is nothing to fear. We won't be living in Crow Castle to begin with anyway. I will have to persuade my cousin to move out before we can move in.'

‘So where will we stay? And when will we get there? I have no idea how far away it is, in fact I know very little of the island. We never performed there.’ Eliza sighed, shaking her head. ‘Perhaps I ought to have asked you all this before we agreed to accompany you.’

‘It has all been a bit of a rush, especially with Christmas upon us, but I expect we will get to the estate some time tomorrow. It’s hard to be exact, but I sent word on ahead and the dower house should be prepared and ready to welcome us. The rest will follow as and when it happens.’

‘But the train is due to arrive in Dorchester late afternoon. Is it far from there?’

‘We will travel on to stay in Weymouth overnight. First thing in the morning we’ll go to the jetty and board a boat that will take us across Smallmouth Bay. When we land on the island there will be another couple of carriages to take us to the Wildblood estate.’

‘It sounds very well organised,’ Eliza said slowly. ‘But what I really want to know is, what will my duties be? Am I to work in the kitchen or above stairs? It’s easy for Angel because she knows that her first concern is Miss Lavinia.’

Luke frowned. ‘You have spotted the weakness in my plan, Eliza. I confess I had not thought that far ahead. The dower house has not been in use for several years. I believe it has been opened for cleaning once or twice a year, but no one has lived there since my late grandmother.’

‘Is it a large house? Would you need many servants?’ Eliza glanced at Mrs Wildblood, but she seemed to have fallen asleep. ‘I don’t mean to be impertinent, but can you afford to hire the number of staff to which your aunt is accustomed? I mean, she will have to get used to being without a lady’s maid since Miss Warren opted to go and live with her brother and his family.’

Luke shook his head. ‘I’m sure there will be enough to hire a young girl for my aunt to train as her personal maid, and the rate of pay for servants on the island will be far lower than it is in London. I will know better when I have sorted out financial matters with Gregory.’ He leaned back in his seat. ‘Perhaps I should put you in charge of running the household. Could you manage such a task?’

‘I did all sorts of jobs in the circus, sir,’ Eliza laughed, ‘none of them suitable for a dower house, but I would be willing to try. I can even cook, if required.’

Luke reached out to pat her hand, but he pulled back hastily, as if he had gone too far. 'Thank you, that's all I wanted to know. From tomorrow onwards you will be the new housekeeper at the dower house.'

Mrs Wildblood opened her eyes. 'What is that, Luke? What did you just say?'

'Don't worry, Aunt Margery. I was just discussing housekeeping matters with Eliza. She's agreed to manage domestic matters for the time being. There's no need for you to worry.'

'I suppose you know what you're doing, Luke.' Mrs Wildblood sighed and closed her eyes. Her feathered hat tilted to one side as she leaned into the corner of the seat.

'I think she approves,' Luke said, smiling.

The rest of the journey was long and tiring but it went without any undue hitches. They arrived at the Royal Hotel in Weymouth in time for dinner that evening, but they were all exhausted and retired to bed soon after they had finished their meal. Eliza would have liked to walk along the seafront and breathe in the salty air, but Angelica opted to go to their room. She said that she did not want to be left on her own in a hotel, even though it was relatively quiet out of season. It seemed to Eliza that some of Lavinia's timidity had rubbed off on Angel, especially when she considered the many and varied experiences they had shared when they were travelling with the circus. However, she did not choose to argue and upset her sister. There would be plenty of time to enjoy the benefits of sea air when they were living on the island. Eliza went to bed and had no difficulty in falling asleep.

The journey continued next day after breakfast, entailing a carriage ride to the jetty where they boarded a vessel to take them across Smallmouth Bay to the landing stage on Portland, where they disembarked. However, the carriages that would take them on the last lap of the journey turned out to be little more than two farm carts pulled by sturdy shire horses. Mrs Wildblood protested feebly, but she was quickly overruled by Luke, who was polite but firm. In the end she allowed him to lift her onto one of the carts, together with Lavinia and Angelica. Eliza and Luke travelled in the second cart with their baggage. It was bitterly cold, but if there had been snow on the island it had melted away, leaving the road slippery with mud. Even so, the horses plodded on without mishap. The two carters supplied

heavy horse blankets for the passengers to wrap around themselves, which might have been dirty and smelly but were necessary when rain started to pour from a leaden sky.

Eliza barely covered her head, not wanting to miss anything of interest, although when they started off, they were in a mainly commercial area with cranes, the merchants' railway and stone works. As the road wound its way to the higher part of the island there were farms and fields dotted with sheep, with the odd windmill working overtime in the stiff breeze. Some of the roads were little more than tracks, and the jolting, together with the blustery conditions, made conversation virtually impossible. Eliza was content to sit, holding on grimly when the cart clung precariously to the steep slope as they travelled in silence. Eventually they reached what seemed to be a high point on the island and the imposing castellated stone walls of what looked to Eliza like a storybook castle protected on one side by woodland and framed by a magnificent view of the sea.

A man emerged from a small cottage and hurried to open the gates. They had arrived at last, but the carter drove past the main building and came to a halt in front of a more modest dwelling. Even so, it was a handsome property constructed of the same grey Portland stone. Luke was the first to leap to the ground. He held out his arms to assist Eliza to alight and then he walked swiftly to the front door and hammered on the brass knocker.

'Luke, come here this instant and help me down.' Mrs Wildblood's voice rang out, causing a parliament of rooks to emerge from the trees with a great flapping of wings and cawing protests.

'Just a minute, Aunt,' Luke said with a touch of impatience in his tone. 'I need to let Mrs Pearce know that we've arrived. Then I'll see to you and the girls.' He turned to address the small woman enveloped in a large pinafore who had opened the door. 'Mrs Pearce, it's good of you to come at such short notice. I trust all is well.'

'Aye, sir. The fires are all lit and there's not too much chimney smoke in the bedrooms. I've got a stew simmering on the range. I expect the ladies will be hungry.'

'Thank you, Mrs Pearce. I'll help them to alight if you will tell the carters where to leave the luggage. We'll sort it out later.'

'Hurry up, Luke. We're freezing out here.' Mrs Wildblood raised her voice an octave. 'And Lavinia is delicate. You know that. She might have

caught her death of cold. I thought we were at least to have travelled in proper carriages.'

'I'm coming.' Luke strode over to the cart and lifted his aunt to the ground. He turned to Eliza. 'Take her indoors, if you please, Eliza. I'll bring Vinnie and your sister.'

Eliza tentatively proffered her arm, but Mrs Wildblood shook her head.

'I am perfectly capable of walking into the house, Brown.' Mrs Wildblood marched on ahead, limping slightly but with her head held high, leaving Eliza little option other than to follow her.

It was pleasantly warm inside the spacious entrance hall, where a log fire burned cheerfully beneath an ornate stone mantelpiece. Eliza wondered if everything on the island was made of the local stone, but if it was good enough for St Paul's Cathedral and many other buildings in London, it must have very special properties. She had seen several quarries on the way here, which might make a very interesting excursion when the weather improved.

'Are you going to help me take off my cloak and bonnet, Brown? Or do I have to manage on my own? I am beginning to regret leaving Warren behind. She was a misery, but she knew her job, which it seems you do not.'

Eliza undid the frogging on the front of the heavy velvet cloak and slipped it off Mrs Wildblood's shoulders.

'I'm not a lady's maid, ma'am.'

'That is patently obvious.' Mrs Wildblood peeled off her gloves and slapped them into Eliza's hand, before untying her bonnet strings and adding that to Eliza's burden.

Mrs Pearce pursed her lips. 'I expect madam would like to go to the drawing room before she has her dinner.'

Mrs Wildblood rolled her eyes. 'Dinner is an evening meal. We haven't had luncheon yet.'

'It's five o'clock, missis. Country folk eat their dinner at five and my son will be back from the quarry very soon, so I can't hang around here much longer. Follow me and I'll show you where to go.' Mrs Pearce turned to give Eliza a cheeky wink. She did not wait to see if Mrs Wildblood was following and she marched off, crossing the floor with small, quick steps. Eliza was not sure what she should do next – whether she was expected to accompany Mrs Wildblood or if her duties would include serving the food in the kitchen. She was saved from making a decision by Luke entering with Lavinia in his arms and Angelica at his side.

‘I’ll take Lavinia straight to her room. She’s chilled to the marrow and she’s exhausted.’

‘I’m cold, too,’ Angelica added plaintively. ‘Lizzie, could you be a dear and bring us some hot tea, and maybe something to eat. I’m starving.’

Luke nodded. ‘That sounds like a good idea. Mrs Pearce said she has made some stew for us.’

‘I’ll go to the kitchen and see what I can do.’ Eliza left them and made her way to the kitchen, following her nose as she sniffed the tempting savoury aroma of cooking.

Mrs Pearce looked up without surprise when Eliza entered the room.

‘I dare say the poorly young lady would like a bowl of stew, miss.’

‘You read my mind, ma’am,’ Eliza said, smiling. ‘Two bowls, if you please. My twin sister is Miss Lavinia’s companion, and she is very hungry.’

‘Just so, miss. There’s freshly baked bread on the board, if you would be kind enough to cut some slices and butter them.’

‘It smells so good, ma’am. Is that what we will have for dinner?’

‘Aye, it is. Underground mutton makes a good stew, even if some folk despise the furry things.’

Eliza stared at her in surprise. ‘Are you talking about r—’

Mrs Pearce shook her head vehemently. ‘Don’t say that word to anyone on the island. It’s said to bring terrible bad luck, miss. They say that in the past, the creatures burrowed and caused rock falls in the quarries, killing the miners. I cook them because they’re free and plentiful. I ain’t particularly superstitious but be careful what you say to others.’ She ladled stew into two bowls and placed them on a tray. ‘It’s the first room at the top of the stairs.’

Eliza put some bread and butter on a plate and added it to the tray together with some cutlery. ‘Don’t worry, Mrs Pearce. I’ll find my way.’

‘I expect madam could do with a cup of tea.’ Mrs Pearce reached for a large brown teapot. ‘I’ll do the honours, Miss . . . er, I don’t know your name.’

‘It’s Lizzie, Mrs Pearce. And yes, I’m sure Mrs Wildblood would love a nice hot cup of tea.’ Eliza set off for the entrance hall and the wide staircase that curved up to a galleried landing. At least there was someone here who seemed to be kind and thoughtful. She could only hope that Mrs Pearce would stay on as cook, which would be a huge relief after suffering the

ministrations of Mrs Duckworth. She was one person that Eliza was not going to miss.

The room allocated to Lavinia was large and comfortable, although rather shabby compared to the bedchamber she had been used to in London. Eliza put the tray of food down on a table close to Lavinia, who was seated in a well-worn velvet armchair by the window.

‘It’s getting dark already, but I could see the sea until a few minutes ago. I can hear the waves lapping on the shore,’ Lavinia said excitedly.

‘You’ll be able to see it all tomorrow,’ Luke smiled as he covered her knees with a blanket taken from the bed. ‘If it’s a nice day, I might be able to take you round the estate in the pony and trap. We’ll see how you feel tomorrow.’

‘I love it here already,’ Angelica said enthusiastically. ‘Will you try some of this delicious-smelling stew, Lavinia?’

‘It’s Miss Lavinia to us, Angel. I don’t think Mrs Wildblood would like you being so forward.’ Eliza eyed Luke warily, wondering if he had noticed her sister’s casual use of Lavinia’s name.

‘My aunt isn’t here, Lizzie,’ Luke said, smiling. ‘If Lavinia doesn’t mind then I most certainly have no objections. I’m just glad that you girls get on so well.’

Lavinia spooned stew into her mouth. ‘This is really good, but I don’t recognise the flavour. It’s not lamb or beef and most definitely not pork. It doesn’t taste like chicken.’

Angelica tried some for herself and she giggled. ‘I know what this is. Lizzie and I have eaten rabbit many times when we were touring with the circus.’

Lizzie laughed. ‘Mrs Pearce has just told me about the superstition on the island. You mustn’t say the word “rabbit” because apparently the animals burrowed and caused rock falls, killing local miners. Isn’t that so, Captain?’

‘It is indeed. Be aware, Angelica. Otherwise, you will upset the local people, and we don’t want that. Anyway, you are settled now, Vinnie. I don’t think you’ve suffered any adverse effects from getting so cold.’

‘I’m perfectly fine, Luke,’ Lavinia said firmly. ‘Now go away and leave Angel and me to enjoy the unmentionable in the stew. I haven’t felt so hungry for a very long time.’

Luke left the room with Eliza following him. He stopped outside on the landing and turned to her.

‘If Lavinia should develop a fever or if she complains of feeling unwell, I want you to inform me immediately, and I’ll send for the doctor. Vinnie has always been delicate.’

‘What is wrong with her, sir?’ Eliza asked before she could stop herself. It was obviously something that was not spoken about in the Wildblood family.

‘Vinnie suffered from scarlet fever when she was younger. It left her with a weakness, and my aunt is convinced that it affected Vinnie’s heart, which is why she is treated like an invalid.’

‘But you don’t agree with her?’ Eliza sensed the reservation behind his answer.

‘I think Vinnie could do more, if allowed. Perhaps one of the good things to come out of their having to leave London will be a healthier way of living. The air is so fresh and clean here, not like the filthy fog that descends upon London every winter, and the noxious smells from the river and the overflowing drains.’

‘Yes, sir. I certainly hope so.’

‘Now, we’ve looked after the two young ladies. I suggest we go downstairs and partake of Mrs Pearce’s underground mutton stew,’ Luke said, smiling.

‘You know that name for the unmentionable creature?’

‘That, amongst others. I grew up on the island until I went to boarding school. I don’t think there’s a nook or cranny that I didn’t know well as a child. I look forward to revisiting them when I have dealt with my cousin and regained my rightful home.’ Luke’s expression darkened and he walked on ahead, leaving Eliza to follow at a respectful distance.

Their ways parted when Luke entered the dining room and Eliza returned to the kitchen. She knew that was how it would always be. She had a growing fondness for him that she must repress at all costs. For one thing, he was already engaged, and for another he was gentry, and she was a common girl who did not even know her true identity. It was like the bitterest of medicines, but one that she must swallow if she was to recover and carry on with her life.

‘Well, Miss Brown, did Miss Lavinia like the stew?’ Mrs Pearce looked up from ladling the rabbit stew into a large blue and white china tureen.

‘Yes, she loved it, Mrs Pearce, and so did my sister. I can’t wait to try it for myself.’

Mrs Pearce puffed out her chest and her cheeks flushed with pleasure. 'My Ned says I make the best stew on the island, no matter what meat I use.' She put the lid on the tureen. 'There now, that's ready for the table. You take the plates into the dining room and the cutlery as well as the bread and butter. Then you tell madam that dinner is served and when they're seated at the table you take in the tureen. Are you accustomed to waiting at table?'

'Not really, Mrs Pearce. But I think I can manage as it's only one course.' Eliza took the soup bowls from a large dresser that occupied a whole length of wall. 'Do you know if there are more people coming to help us?'

'I only found out yesterday that this house was to be opened and aired. I had to get my sister to help me with the fires and making up the rooms. It's been a bit of a dash, but we managed. I think you'll have to ask the master about hiring more help. I'm off now to get Ned's supper or he'll grumble. He's just like my late husband: always has to have his dinner on the table when he gets home from work. I'll be back in the morning.'

'Good night, Mrs Pearce.' Eliza watched her go with some regret, and she could not help wondering what plans Luke had for employing the number of servants that would be needed to run a house of this size. There was nothing for it but to start what felt like an onerous task, but Eliza knew what she must do, and she took the tray of plates, bread, butter and cutlery to the dining room where she laid two places at the large mahogany table. Mrs Pearce had thoughtfully lit a fire and candles burned brightly on the mantelshelf and the table. That done, Eliza went to the drawing room to announce that dinner was served.

'About time,' Mrs Wildblood said irritably. 'I know it's early by London standards, Luke, but I am very hungry.' She glanced at Eliza. 'Are you the only servant I am currently employing?'

Luke had been sitting by the fire, but he rose to his feet and went to stand by his aunt. 'You know that is the case, Aunt. I have arranged for Mrs Pearce to find some suitable women in the village to come for interviews in the morning, but you know we have to be careful financially, at least until I sort out matters with Gregory.'

'Yes, of course I realise that.' Mrs Wildblood allowed him to help her to her feet. 'I suppose you will be serving dinner as well, Brown?'

Eliza bobbed a curtsy, unsure how she was supposed to act in her new role. 'Yes, ma'am.'

‘Well, go and fetch the food, whatever it is.’ Mrs Wildblood leaned on Luke’s arm. ‘I expect it will be dreadful, but I am so hungry I could eat almost anything.’

Luke laughed. ‘By island standards that is just what we are about to have.’

‘I don’t know what you mean by that, Luke.’ Mrs Wildblood sighed. ‘I don’t know how I am going to manage with life in this out-of-the-way place. I miss London already.’

Eliza hurried from the room. There was nothing she could do other than serve the food and hope it met Mrs Wildblood’s exacting standards. She went to the kitchen to fetch the tureen.

The stew was delicious and even Mrs Wildblood had nothing bad to say about it when Eliza was summoned by the bell to clear the table.

‘What is for dessert, Brown?’ Mrs Wildblood demanded tiredly.

Eliza glanced at Luke, shaking her head and he took the hint immediately.

‘I don’t think Mrs Pearce had time to prepare anything, Aunt. She must have worked very hard today to accomplish so much.’

‘I don’t suppose there is any fruit or perhaps a morsel of cheese?’ Mrs Wildblood’s bottom lip trembled as if she was about to cry.

‘I’m sorry, ma’am,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘I will make sure that the larder is stocked up tomorrow with as many of your favourites as possible.’

Luke sent her a grateful smile. ‘There you are, Aunt. Don’t forget that Eliza is as new here as you are. It will take time to get the house to the standard you require, especially allowing for a limited budget.’

Mrs Wildblood rose from her seat, waving her hand at him dismissively. ‘Stop saying that, Luke. I’m well aware of my dire circumstances and I don’t need you to keep reminding me.’ She turned to Eliza, frowning. ‘Leave the dishes, Brown. You may accompany me to my room and help me to get ready for bed. I can only hope the sheets are aired.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Eliza went to hold the door open, then followed Mrs Wildblood upstairs to her bedroom, where she helped her to prepare for bed. Fortunately for Eliza, Mrs Wildblood was too exhausted and heartsick for everything she had lost to complain too much, and she was as biddable as a small child. Eliza heaved a sigh of relief when she extinguished the last

candle and left the room. She closed the door softly before going to Lavinia's room, where she collected the tray.

Lavinia was already in her nightgown, and Angelica was braiding her hair. They were chatting and giggling, which seemed to exclude Eliza. Although she was glad for her sister to have found a friend rather than a sickly patient, their obvious pleasure in each other's company made Eliza feel very much alone in a strange house. As she carried the tray downstairs she remembered life in the circus, with all the ups and downs of travelling the roads and never having a proper home, although there had been genuine comradeship. Almost without exception, the circus people were true to each other. They had been a family, and the differences of opinion and squabbles had always been quickly resolved because they depended upon one another to keep the show going.

She returned to the kitchen and to her astonishment she found Luke at the stone sink, washing the dishes. Everything was laid out neatly with the precision of a military man.

'Sir, you should not be doing that. It's my job,' Eliza protested.

He glanced at her over his shoulder. 'It's not your job as yet, Eliza. We'll see who turns up tomorrow, but I genuinely hope there will be some willing helpers.'

'Even so, it's not your place to do kitchen work, Captain.'

'I was part of the campaign in the Crimea, and even officers have to do their bit in camp on occasions. There is not much I haven't seen or done, Eliza. And you have tried your best in difficult circumstances. Tomorrow, after we've chosen the people who will serve us best, I am going to Crow Castle to face my cousin. You will accompany me.'

'Why me, Captain?'

'Because you will be able to speak to Mrs Tapper, who is housekeeper there. She has worked for my family for many years. She will be able to help you when it comes to ordering provisions and handling servants. She knows everything there is to know about working and living on the island, and I will need all the assistance you can give me, Eliza.'

Chapter Ten

Crow Castle rose out of the morning mist with the sun just breaking through, and the grey Portland stone sparkled, reminding Eliza of the sequin-covered costumes worn by Bella the tightrope walker. The trees that surrounded the castle on three sides were mainly hardy Scots pines and sturdy oaks. Red-berried hawthorn and dark green holly bushes formed a border to a sloping sward of grass, and the cliff dropped away to the sandy cove. Despite the biting cold of late December, Eliza was enchanted by the sight before her, which seemed like something out of a fairy tale.

Luke drew the trap to a halt and sprang nimbly to the ground. He handed the reins to a young boy who had emerged from the stable block before proffering a hand to assist Eliza to alight.

‘I can manage on my own, Captain,’ Eliza said stiffly. ‘I’m used to taking care of myself.’

Luke smiled. ‘Ah, yes. I was forgetting your years of living with the circus. You must have done a lot of travelling.’

Eliza fell into step beside him. ‘We were always on the move. It was exciting but I used to wonder what it would be like to have a proper home.’ She shot him a sideways glance. ‘You said this is where you grew up. No wonder you want to take it back from your cousin.’

‘It will be an interesting meeting this morning,’ Luke said with a wry twist to his lips. ‘But that need not concern you, Eliza. I’ll take you to Mrs Tapper’s office before I seek out Gregory.’

Eliza nodded. ‘I understand.’ She quickened her pace in order to keep up with Luke, but she could feel the tension building in him as he strode towards the front entrance. It was patently obvious that he was not looking forward to the confrontation with his cousin. Gazing in awe at the imposing building she could understand what was at stake.

A tall, thin man dressed entirely in black, with knee breeches and a tail coat, opened the door. His expression was neutral as he acknowledged Luke.

‘Good morning, sir.’

‘Is my cousin at home, Frost?’

‘If you would step inside, Captain Wildblood, I will inform the master that you wish to see him.’ Frost glanced at Eliza, but he made no comment.

‘Thank you, Frost, but first I am going to take Miss Brown to see Mrs Tapper. I know the way to her office.’

Frost acknowledged this with a curt nod. ‘Precisely, Captain.’ He strolled off in one direction while Luke led Eliza towards the back of the building.

She could not but be impressed by the style and elegance of the furnishings in the castle, although it was obvious that they were old and some of the upholstery on the dainty chairs was faded and frayed. Even so, there was a comfortable, almost homely atmosphere.

‘This isn’t how I imagined the interior would be,’ Eliza said in wonder. ‘I was expecting stone walls and arrow slits.’

‘It’s not a real castle,’ Luke said casually. ‘I suppose you would call it a folly. It was built by my great-grandfather at the end of the last century. He was a wealthy merchant and he earned a title for his philanthropic deeds, but we are considered to be upstarts by the local gentry.’

‘That doesn’t seem very fair.’ Eliza frowned.

‘I think it upsets my aunt, but it doesn’t worry me in the least.’

They had now left the wide corridors lined with hand-painted wallpaper, which Eliza guessed must have cost a small fortune when it was purchased many years ago. Now they were in the servants’ part of the house with a more practical décor. Luke strode on, coming to a halt by a half-glazed door. He knocked and entered, beckoning to Eliza to follow him.

‘Mrs Tapper, it’s good to see you again.’

‘Good morning, sir. I heard that you were back. I can’t tell you how pleased I am to see you.’ Mrs Tapper took off her spectacles and rose to her feet. She smoothed her already immaculate grey hair with a quick movement of her hand. She smiled, but her calculating gaze was directed to Eliza.

‘And I you, Mrs Tapper,’ Luke said easily. ‘But I’ll get straight to the point. I’ve brought my aunt and my invalid cousin to stay at the dower house – for now, anyway. This young lady is Miss Eliza Brown, and I am putting her in charge of the household, but she will need some help and advice from someone with your years of experience and expertise.’

Mrs Tapper blushed. ‘Oh, sir, you flatter me, but of course I will be only too pleased to pass on any information that the young lady requires.’

‘I knew I could rely on you, Mrs Tapper. Now I must go and find my cousin. We need to have a serious conversation.’

‘Are you going to move back to the castle, Captain?’ Mrs Tapper asked eagerly.

‘I most certainly am.’ Luke turned to Eliza, who had been standing quietly by the door. ‘I leave you in good hands. I’ll take you back to the dower house when my business here is concluded.’ He left the room without giving her a chance to reply.

Mrs Tapper resumed her seat. ‘Please sit down and tell me how I can help you, Miss Brown.’ Her tone was friendly, although Eliza thought she detected a hint of scepticism in Mrs Tapper’s grey eyes.

‘Thank you, ma’am.’ Eliza pulled up a chair and sat down. ‘I find myself completely out of my depth, so to speak. I’ve spent almost all my life working in a circus, or at least since I was old enough to go into the ring with my twin sister.’

Mrs Tapper’s eyes widened in surprise. ‘A circus, Miss Brown. How come you are now employed as the captain’s housekeeper?’

‘It’s a long story, Mrs Tapper, but Angelica and I ended up working for Mrs Wildblood in her London home. Then, suddenly everything changed almost overnight. I believe it was due to financial affairs, but that’s none of my business. Anyway, we have come to live in the dower house with no servants except Mrs Pearce, who was there last evening and will be returning this morning. I left before I had a chance to speak to her.’

‘So, you need to hire staff. Is that what you’re saying?’

‘It is, but I have no experience in such a thing. I’m not even sure what my position is in the household.’

‘You are a good-looking young woman, Miss Brown. And Captain Wildblood seems to have taken to you.’

The inference was clear, and Eliza felt the blood rush to her cheeks. ‘Oh, no, ma’am. You are mistaken. Captain Wildblood is engaged to a titled lady. He has merely asked me to help him to get his house in order.’

‘In that case I can probably help. You will need a cook, of course, if Mrs Pearce will agree to work for you. How many servants did Mrs Wildblood ask you to take on?’

‘She didn’t say, Mrs Tapper. I think the poor lady is in a state of shock, having left her home and giving up so many of her treasured possessions.’

Bearing in mind that we must economise, how many staff do you think we could manage with?’

‘Well, I can’t imagine a lady like Mrs Wildblood looking after herself. Did she bring her personal maid from London?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘You seem to be a reasonably well-presented young person. Could you undertake that position?’

‘I don’t think I have the necessary qualifications or the patience, ma’am.’

‘Then it seems that you have had the task of keeping house thrust upon you. Supposing that Mrs Pearce is willing to take on the position of cook, I think you could manage with a kitchen maid and a parlour maid, as well as cleaning women, who might come in daily.’

‘That still sounds quite expensive, Mrs Tapper.’ Eliza could see that the housekeeper did not agree with her. ‘Although I am sure you are right,’ she added hastily.

Mrs Tapper nodded. ‘You will find that I am always right, Miss Brown. Anyway, servants work for lower wages here than in London. Leave it with me. I have several women from the village in mind who might be able to help, at least for the time being.’ She sat back in her chair, frowning. ‘With regard to a lady’s maid, I think I have a solution to the problem that might suit Mrs Wildblood.’

‘I hope so, ma’am. It would be a great relief to me.’

A glimmer of a smile lit Mrs Tapper’s eyes momentarily. ‘There is a very genteel lady living in the village who used to be the personal maid to Captain Wildblood’s late mother. Miss Harrington retired to look after her aged father, who has since passed away. She might be glad of the chance to work again.’

‘That sounds excellent, Mrs Tapper.’ Eliza tried not to sound too relieved. ‘Do you think she might be willing to start soon?’

‘There’s only one way to find out, Miss Brown. I will send one of the servants to Miss Harrington’s cottage, and they can also visit the other women I have in mind. I’ll instruct them to call on you as soon as possible.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Tapper. I’m very much obliged. This is all so new to me.’

‘You’ll soon learn, Miss Brown. Now, I have work to do. If you would like to make your way back to the dower house, or do you wish to wait for the captain to finish his business here?’

‘I think I’ll return to the house, ma’am. I fancy a walk.’

‘As you wish.’ Mrs Tapper bent her head over the ledger she had open on her desk and Eliza realised that she had been dismissed. She left the office, but once in the corridor she could not remember which way she had come in order to return to the entrance hall. She started off in one direction, but she soon realised that she had taken a wrong turn. She found herself in a large conservatory at the rear of the house. It was stiflingly hot, and the air was heavy with moisture from the many potted palms and exotic plants, some of which towered above her. She was about to leave when she heard the captain’s unmistakable voice, and he did not sound happy.

‘Look, Gregory, I know we are cousins, but you carry the relationship too far. This is my home and it’s time for you to leave.’

‘I thought you were dead, old boy. You were reported missing in action, at one point, so what was I supposed to do? I’ve been taking care of the castle, and I’ve grown to love it here.’

Eliza craned her neck to get a view of the man who had just spoken, who must be the relative that the captain had mentioned. Despite a frond of palm leaves she could see that Gregory Fox was tall, about the same height as Luke, but he had dark hair, a neat moustache and beard. She could imagine him standing on board ship, brandishing a cutlass as he shouted orders to his pirate crew.

‘I would be more surprised if you found living here not to your taste,’ Luke said coldly. ‘But this is my family home. My father was the eldest son, and he inherited the castle. You cannot deny that.’

‘I’m well aware of the rule of primogeniture, Luke. However, one might argue that I was born before you, in which case I could have a valid claim on the property.’

‘That’s nonsense and you know it,’ Luke said angrily. ‘You came down the female line. The castle belongs to me, and I want you to leave. I’ll give you a week to make arrangements, but after that I will take the case to a solicitor and have you evicted.’

‘Come now, Cousin. I’m sure we can come to an amicable arrangement. There is enough room in Crow Castle for all of us.’

‘Not the way you choose to live. I’ve heard of the wild house parties you have thrown. I saw enough death and disaster in the Crimea and all I want is a peaceful existence in the home where I was raised. You should go to London and hire a house where you can live the life you prefer.’

‘But I’ve tried that already, Luke. The trouble is that I ran out of money, and you are well provided for. I can live here free, and the income from the home farm is enough to pay the servants’ wages.’

‘Not just that, so I’ve heard.’ Luke’s tone sharpened. ‘I’ve also been informed of illegal plunder of shipwrecks. Our fathers would be turning in their graves if they knew.’

‘Then it’s as well they are long gone,’ Gregory said casually. ‘Articles that are washed up on shore are fair game, if you ask me. Although I admit nothing.’

Eliza moved a little closer in order to hear more clearly as Gregory lowered his voice, but she caught the edge of a large ornamental pot containing an exotic plant and only just saved it from crashing to the tiled floor. Both Luke and Gregory turned to see what had caused the sudden movement.

‘Eliza? Is that you?’ Luke’s tone was not encouraging.

Reluctantly Eliza stepped forward. ‘I’m sorry, Captain. I came looking for you and I heard your voice.’

‘Who is this attractive young lady, Luke?’ Gregory stepped forward. ‘Have you been deceiving Lady Marianne?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Gregory,’ Luke said impatiently. ‘Eliza and her twin sister have accompanied Aunt Margery, Lavinia and me from London.’

Gregory threw up his hands. ‘It’s none of my business, Luke. You can flirt with whom you choose, and good luck to you.’

Eliza could see that Luke was growing angrier by the minute, and she stepped forward.

‘You are mistaken, sir. I am to be Mrs Wildblood’s housekeeper until a suitable replacement is found. My sister was taken on as companion to Miss Lavinia.’

‘You are very forward for a servant.’ Gregory held her gaze with a cynical smile. ‘Forgive me if I do not entirely believe you.’

‘Eliza is telling the truth.’ Luke placed himself between her and his cousin. ‘She does not want anything to do with you, Gregory Fox, and neither do I. In fact, I’m giving you notice to move out of the castle by the end of the week.’

‘And what will you do if I disobey you, Luke?’ Gregory’s smile froze on his lips. ‘You are not in the army now, Captain.’

‘I am not, or I won’t be when my commission is sold. I intend to devote myself to looking after the estate and the home farm. You have no place here, Gregory.’

‘You were fond of my mother, Luke. What would she say if she knew you were throwing out her only son?’ Gregory sighed, shaking his head.

‘Aunt Ellen would be disgusted if she could see you now,’ Luke said angrily. ‘So would your father. Uncle Henry was a very upright man, as I remember, and he left you well cared for in his will.’

Gregory shrugged. ‘I know he did, Luke. And I, the reprobate that I am, squandered the money on drink, gambling and pretty women.’ He turned to Eliza with an engaging smile. ‘I am a bad lot, Miss Eliza. You had best steer clear of me.’

Eliza was about to respond but Luke gave her a gentle push towards the door.

‘That’s enough of that. Eliza is not a child. She will see through your machinations.’

Eliza backed away. ‘I think I should return to the dower house, sir.’

‘Go on ahead, Eliza. I have a few more words to say to my cousin that are not fit for your ears.’

‘Yes, run away, Eliza,’ Gregory echoed, grinning. ‘I’m a bad fellow, as my cousin pointed out, but I can appreciate beauty and I’m not afraid to say so.’

Eliza turned her back on him, hoping he had not seen her red cheeks. Gregory Fox was undoubtedly everything that Luke had accused him of, but even so, she could see why women were attracted to him. However, she had more important things on her mind, and she set off to walk back to the dower house.

Mrs Pearce was in the kitchen, red-faced with beads of perspiration on her forehead as she kneaded bread dough.

‘Where were you, miss? I came here to find nothing had been done. I’ve had to light all the fires as well as prepare breakfast for the ladies.’

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Pearce. I had to go to the castle with Captain Wildblood. I met Mrs Tapper, and she will be sending some women from the village to help us.’

‘I could have done with them a couple of hours ago,’ Mrs Pearce said crossly. ‘I’ve done most of the work, apart from cleaning the rooms, and

that's not my job anyway.'

'I do apologise, Mrs Pearce. What can I do to help?'

'Well, if you're not too grand to roll your sleeves up, you can go into the scullery and wash the dishes.'

'I can do that, of course. Let's hope we get some suitable applicants quickly.' Eliza hurried into the scullery and was confronted by a pile of crockery, cutlery and used saucepans. She donned an apron and rolled up her sleeves. It would not be the first time she had been faced with such a task, and she set to with a will, having first filled the sink with hot water from the tank in the range. All the while she kept thinking of the angry conversation between Luke and his cousin. Despite his self-admitted bad reputation, Gregory Fox seemed to have inherited some of the disquieting charm that emanated from Luke. Eliza came to the disturbing conclusion that he must be avoided at all costs. She had met enough men with similar seductive appeal during her time with the circus to be aware of the danger they posed to a young, unmarried woman. In her experience they were merely out for the fun of the chase and to fall in love with them would only lead to misery, or worse, the disgrace of being used and cast aside. Society was unforgiving when it came to women's morals, even though a man could get away with so much without being marked as a pariah. Eliza snatched up a kitchen towel and set about drying the pile of clean utensils.

She had almost finished when the back door flew open and a woman tripped over her long skirt and literally fell into the passage at the side of the scullery. Eliza went to her aid and helped her to her feet.

'Are you hurt?'

The woman's mobcap had come off to reveal a mop of fiery red hair. She shook it back from her face and giggled.

'Lawks, what you must think of me, miss. Are you the scullery maid?'

'No, I'm Miss Brown, the housekeeper,' Eliza said, trying not to laugh as the young woman attempted to untangle her shawl from her apron, which had somehow become caught up with her red flannel petticoat. She was struggling to free herself, but with a little help from Eliza she finally managed to stand up straight.

'I'm sorry, Miss Brown,' she said nervously. 'It's not a good start, is it?'

Mrs Pearce put her head around the door. 'Is that you causing trouble, Nancy Dean?'

'Yes, sorry, Mrs Pearce. I tripped over the sill.'

‘If there’s ever a disturbance you are usually at the bottom of it.’ Mrs Pearce stood arms akimbo. ‘I hope you haven’t come for a position here, my girl.’

Nancy eyed her warily. ‘What if I have, Mrs Pearce? I ain’t after your job.’

‘This here is the clumsiest girl on the island, and the noisiest,’ Mrs Pearce said grimly. ‘If you take her on, Miss Brown, we will be lucky to have any crockery that hasn’t lost a handle or been chipped by the end of the week.’

‘That ain’t fair, missis,’ Nancy protested. ‘I’m a good worker and I’m honest.’

Mrs Pearce retreated into the kitchen mumbling unintelligibly.

‘What can you do, Nancy?’ Eliza managed to keep a straight face, although she wanted to laugh.

‘Anything you ask, miss,’ Nancy said quickly. ‘I’m very willing. I admit I am a bit cack-handed at times, but you won’t find anyone to work harder than me.’

‘Maybe you ought to keep out of the kitchen then.’ Eliza frowned. ‘How about maid of all work? You would get up early and clean out the grates, light the fires and do the sweeping and dusting. Does that sound like something you could do without setting the house on fire or worse?’

Nancy put her head on one side, and a slow smile curved her generous lips. ‘You’re kidding me, miss.’

‘Perhaps, but you haven’t answered my question.’

‘I promise to do my best, Miss Brown. I can’t say fairer than that, but I am very loyal, and I will turn up early every morning. My pa works in one of the quarries and all of us have to be up at crack of dawn, if not before.’

‘All of you?’ Eliza could not help asking. If she were to be honest, this lively imperturbable girl interested her. Nancy Dean seemed to bring a patch of sunlight into a rather drab household.

‘Ten of us, miss. We all sleep top to toe in the front parlour. Pa would have to step over us if we wasn’t up before him.’

‘I see. Well, there is room here in the servants’ quarters if you want to live in. You would have to share with someone else, but at least you wouldn’t get trodden on in the morning.’

Nancy gave out a hoot of laughter but hastily covered her mouth with her hand. ‘I’m sorry, miss. They say I’m a bit loud, but I will try to be quieter.’

‘That’s all right, Nancy. Just mind your manners when Mrs Wildblood is about, and I should keep away from Mrs Pearce if I were you.’

‘Does that mean I can start today, miss?’

‘I don’t see why not. You’ll have to look for the cleaning utensils because I don’t know where they are kept.’

‘Leave it to me, miss. I’ll work so quiet and quick you won’t know I’m here.’ Nancy shrugged off her woollen shawl, but it caught on the door handle, and she had to untangle it before she set off. She hung it on a wall peg and set off along the corridor, opening and closing doors with such energy that she created a draught and a series of loud thuds.

Eliza was beginning to wonder if she had made a serious mistake when someone knocked on the front door and she went to answer it. To her amazement there was a long line of women queuing down the path with their shawls wound tightly around their heads and bodies as heavy rain threatened to drench them.

‘We’ve come about the jobs,’ the first woman said firmly.

‘You’d better all come in, or you’ll get soaked,’ Eliza said in desperation. ‘If you would like to wait in the hall, I’ll see you one at a time.’

They filed into the house obediently and formed a line.

‘If you would like to follow me, I will see you first,’ Eliza said to the woman who seemed to be the leader of the group. She did not wait for an answer as she entered the morning room and took a seat at a small table in the window.

‘Now perhaps you could give me your name and tell me what positions you have held in other households.’ Eliza had very little idea what questions she should ask, but most of it came from a common-sense perspective, and as the interviews progressed, she was able to discern more easily the sort of person she thought would work hard but also fit in with the other servants. In the end, having spoken to each in turn, Eliza decided to put the names of the most suitable women to Nancy, who seemed likely to be well versed in local gossip.

At last Eliza picked two of the women and reluctantly sent three others back to the village with the promise that if more work became available in the future, she would bear them in mind. She put fifteen-year-old Jessie Collins to work in the kitchen with Mrs Pearce. Then there was Agnes Flew, who, being a little older and with some experience as a parlour maid, was given the task of tidying the drawing room, which was in dire need of

attention. Without any further ado, Agnes had donned a pinafore and had found the cleaning materials. She set to work with such enthusiasm that Eliza could not help but be impressed. She hoped that this eagerness to please would last. She was about to go to the kitchen to see how Jessie was getting along with Mrs Pearce when there was another knock on the front door.

Eliza had forgotten about a lady's maid for Mrs Wildblood, but when she opened the door, she found herself facing a middle-aged woman wearing a black bonnet with a very bedraggled ostrich feather dripping water on her tight-fitting mantle. The umbrella clasped in her hand had blown inside out and had obviously seen better days.

'You must be Miss Harrington,' Eliza said slowly. 'Please come in. You look as though you're soaked to the skin.'

'I am a little damp,' Miss Harrington said primly. She abandoned the umbrella, leaning it against the outside wall as she stepped over the threshold. 'Good morning, Miss Brown.'

'Mrs Wildblood hasn't yet come downstairs,' Eliza said nervously. There was something daunting about Miss Harrington. It was almost as if she had come to interview Mrs Wildblood instead of the reverse.

'I would be working closely with madam should I choose to accept the position,' Miss Harrington said firmly. 'Therefore, it would be natural for me to see her in her boudoir.'

'Quite so.' Eliza was not about to argue. 'If you would care to take off your mantle we could perhaps hang it over a chair by the fire so that it dries more quickly.'

'Certainly not. I will attend Mrs Wildblood properly dressed. Lead on, please.'

There was little that Eliza could do other than to obey. She took Miss Harrington upstairs to Mrs Wildblood's bedchamber and knocked at the door, taking a faint sound as permission to enter.

'Mrs Wildblood, I've brought Miss Harrington to see you,' Eliza began nervously, but Miss Harrington sailed past her.

'Leave this to me, Miss Brown.'

Mrs Wildblood was still in bed with her nightcap slightly askew.

'Who is this? Can't you see I am not ready to receive a stranger in my room?'

Miss Harrington moved to the bedside. 'Of course not, madam. We will soon alter that situation. I am Cordelia Harrington, and I am your new maid.' She glanced around the room. 'I can see that you are in dire need of someone to care for you and your things, ma'am. When do I begin?'

Mrs Wildblood sent an urgent look in Eliza's direction. 'I haven't agreed to take you on as yet, Miss Harrington.'

'You won't find anyone better than I am, Mrs Wildblood. I was the late Mrs Wildblood's personal maid, so I know this house very well. I can give you my references, but I assure you they are excellent.' Miss Harrington began unbuttoning her mantle. 'I see you have had your breakfast,' she added, glancing at the tray on a nearby table. 'It is almost midday, Mrs Wildblood. It's time you were up and about. Reclining in bed for too long makes the muscles weak and dulls the mind. Up you get, madam.' She bustled over to the washstand and picked up the ewer. 'Perhaps Miss Brown would be kind enough to have this filled with warm water and returned immediately so that we can get you prepared for the day, which is already half over.'

Eliza looked to Mrs Wildblood for approval, but she was gazing at Miss Harrington as if transfixed. Eliza took the pitcher and hurried from the room, smothering a laugh. It was the first time she had seen Mrs Wildblood at a loss for words, and it was obvious that Miss Harrington was a force in her own right. Eliza took the main stairs but as she reached the bottom step the front door opened and Luke strode into the entrance hall on a gust of cold air.

He came to a halt staring at her. 'What is so funny, Eliza? And why are you clutching a rather large jug?'

'I've just seen Mrs Wildblood at a loss for words, sir. I'm not sure if I've hired a lady's maid or an army general, but Miss Harrington is someone to be reckoned with.'

Luke took off his greatcoat and tossed it onto a carved oak hall chair. 'I want to meet this person. If she's as indomitable as you say, I could use her to oust my cousin from the castle.'

'Is it going to be very difficult, Captain?'

'Let's just say that I have a problem, Eliza. And it doesn't want to go away. We might be living in the dower house for some time to come.'

Chapter Eleven

Later, when Eliza took a tray of food to Lavinia's room, which she chose to do herself so that she could spend some time with Angelica, she perched on the edge of the bed and regaled them both with the events that had taken place earlier.

Vinnie toyed with her food, frowning. 'I've only met Cousin Gregory a couple of times. I can't say I liked him, although he is rather dashing. Don't you agree, Eliza?'

Angelica giggled. 'Is he handsome, Lizzie? Would he be a good catch for one of us?'

'I'd say he is quite good looking,' Eliza said slowly. 'But I don't think he's a particularly nice person. And he most certainly wouldn't be interested in you or me, Angel. Penniless girls don't count, as far as he's concerned, unless it's for the sort of amorous encounter that we've always been warned against.'

Lavinia paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. 'What have you been warned against? No one tells me anything.'

'Some gentlemen are not really gentlemen at all,' Angelica said primly. 'Our task is to keep you safe from such people.'

'I keep telling you all that I'm not a child,' Lavinia pouted. 'I'm seventeen but I'll never grow up properly if people keep things from me.'

'She is right, Lizzie,' Angelica shook her head. 'But you won't always be confined to your room, Vinnie. You will get stronger and when the summer comes, we will go down to the beach and sit in the sun.'

'But that won't happen unless you eat your luncheon,' Eliza added sternly. 'Anyway, I have to get back to work, but you two could spend the afternoon trying to think up a way for Captain Wildblood to make his wretched cousin leave the castle, without having to resort to violence.' Eliza could tell from the conspiratorial glances that passed between Lavinia and Angelica that she had hit upon the right note, and she left them to finish their meal while they put their minds to work.

Eliza returned to the kitchen to find Mrs Pearce and Jessie standing together on one side of the table with Miss Harrington facing them and wagging her finger. Whatever had passed before seemed to linger in the air, creating tension that was palpable.

‘What’s the matter?’ Eliza demanded. She was already feeling overwhelmed by the events of that morning, and she was hungry. ‘What’s going on?’

Miss Harrington turned on her. ‘I simply requested that luncheon should be set out in the dining room for Mrs Wildblood, but it was met with excuses as to why the food is not yet prepared.’

Eliza could see that Mrs Pearce was seething with anger and that plates would be flying if she did not calm the situation.

‘Miss Harrington, we have only just moved here. Everyone is new and we have not yet worked out a daily routine. I think that we need patience and forbearance if we are to work together.’

‘Maybe, but I have to look after madam’s interests, and she is more than ready for her luncheon.’ Miss Harrington glared at Mrs Pearce, as if daring her to argue.

Mrs Pearce ripped off her apron and threw it on the table. ‘You are welcome to take over in the kitchen, Miss Harrington. Let’s see how you manage.’

‘You are the cook, ma’am,’ Miss Harrington said haughtily.

‘And an excellent cook she is,’ Eliza added hastily. ‘Please continue with the preparations for luncheon, Mrs Pearce. I’m sure that Miss Harrington meant no disrespect.’ Eliza turned to Miss Harrington with an attempt at a placating smile. ‘Let us leave Cook to get on with her work. I was thinking of making some alterations to Mrs Wildblood’s parlour. Perhaps you could advise me.’

‘I suppose I could, since we are obviously going to be hungry for another hour or so.’

‘Half an hour at most,’ Mrs Pearce called after them as they left the kitchen.

‘Dreadful woman,’ Miss Harrington said crossly as she followed Eliza to the morning parlour. ‘The underlings need to be kept in their place, Miss Brown. Far be it from me to tell you how to run your household, but there are protocols that need to be observed if there is ever to be harmony between the upper and lower servants.’

Eliza ushered her into the parlour. 'As you can see, this room is in dire need of redecoration, and some of the furniture is past its best.'

'I have excellent taste, Miss Brown. Perhaps I might be so bold as to draft out some ideas as to a different colour for the walls. I'm sure a good upholsterer could work wonders with that old sofa.'

'I don't doubt it, Miss Harrington.' Eliza backed towards the doorway. 'I'll leave you to think about what could be done and then I'm sure luncheon will be served.' She escaped from the parlour and was on her way to the dining room when she almost bumped into Luke.

'I'm sorry, Captain,' she said breathlessly.

'Who are you running away from?' Luke held her at arm's length. 'You look fraught, Eliza.'

'That's just it, sir. I don't think I am cut out to be in charge of servants. I'm a circus performer, when all is said and done. I have no experience of handling difficult cooks and even more difficult lady's maids.'

'I hope you aren't thinking of leaving, Eliza. I rely on you, especially with my problem cousin determined to stay in my home.' Luke smiled sympathetically. 'I do understand your difficulties, and I will help in any way I can.'

'It shouldn't be up to you, sir. I have to solve the problem myself, and I'm very grateful to you for taking Angel and me into your household.'

Luke's smile was genuine. 'We've helped each other, Eliza. I'm a soldier, and running an estate, even a relatively small one, is as alien to me as it is to you. We have that in common.'

At that moment Miss Harrington bore down on them.

'Excuse me, Captain Wildblood. Might I speak to Miss Brown?'

Luke raised an eyebrow, but he nodded assent and walked away.

'I'm not well-versed in etiquette, Miss Harrington,' Eliza said in a low voice, 'but that was rather disrespectful. Captain Wildblood is our employer.'

Miss Harrington tossed her head. 'It's said on the island that Mr Fox is the true owner of Crow Castle, and that the captain is all but bankrupt.'

Eliza shook her head. 'I don't think that is true.'

'What would you know? You've only been on the island for a couple of days. I think those of us who have lived here for a long time know more than a mere interloper.'

Eliza bit back a sharp retort. 'I'm sure that's true, Miss Harrington. So perhaps you could tell me a little more about Mr Fox. I met him briefly this morning, but he was in a rather heated argument with Captain Wildblood.'

'His mother, Mrs Fox was a delightful lady, and Mr Gregory inherited his charm from her, but after his father died I'm afraid Mr Gregory was overindulged. His exploits were the talk of the whole neighbourhood, and he was often in serious trouble, although his mother put that down to high spirits. He was sent down from university, and he lived in London until he came to Portland.'

'But he did not inherit the castle, Miss Harrington. Captain Wildblood is the legal heir.'

'As I heard it, the captain was listed as missing in action, Miss Brown. Mr Fox took over the running of the estate, and I don't wonder that he wants to remain there.'

'It's not for me to say, Miss Harrington,' Eliza said firmly. 'I don't think we should be discussing the family.'

Miss Harrington sniffed and drew herself up to her full height. 'Quite so. Perhaps you would go to the kitchen and find out if luncheon is ready.'

'I think you could do that yourself, Miss Harrington. You are Mrs Wildblood's personal maid, after all.' Eliza stood her ground. She had a feeling that if she gave in to Miss Harrington over something as small as this, she would find herself at a disadvantage when it came to more important matters. She waited until Miss Harrington was out of sight before going into the dining room to make sure that Agnes had set the table properly. Not for the first time, she wondered if she had done the right thing by accepting the position of housekeeper. She was tempted to tell Captain Wildblood that he should find someone more fitted to the task, but even after being here for such a short time, she felt the need to stand by him in his bid to evict the usurper from the castle.

When luncheon had been served and cleared away, Eliza decided that she needed to get out of the house to clear her head. It was cold outside, but sunny, and she wrapped up warmly. It was good to breathe in the fresh salty air and feel the breeze on her face as she walked down a steep flight of stone steps that led to the cove. The grassy cliffs sloped down to a pebbly beach, and beneath the azure sky the sea was an incredible blue. A stiff breeze whipped up white horses on the water, and the sound of waves

crashing on the rocks mingled with the mewing of gulls doing aerial acrobatics overhead. Eliza came to a halt, closing her eyes as she experienced a winter wonder of nature in all its forms, but she opened them suddenly as the jarring effect of deep male voices brought her abruptly back to the present. Instinctively she stepped behind a tall outcrop of rock, holding her breath as the sound of booted feet crunching on the pebbles drew closer.

‘I don’t know how long I will be able to remain in the castle, Dawkins.’

Eliza frowned; she was sure she recognised that voice. She had heard Gregory Fox earlier that morning and she was certain it was him, although some instinct warned her not to show herself.

‘We’ve got several more shipments to get out of the country, Fox. You agreed to our terms. If you back out now, you’ll regret your decision.’

‘Can’t you send them off from somewhere else along the coast?’ Gregory sounded anxious.

There was a tense moment of silence as they came to a halt, and Eliza stifled a sigh of relief.

‘You’re in this too deep to back out now, Fox. Besides which, the revenue men keep to the other end of the causeway now that the good old days of smuggling are over, and they don’t bother much what goes on this far out. However, there’s no point in taking unnecessary chances.’

‘Look, Dawkins, I can’t guarantee anything. I’ve cooperated with you thus far.’

‘For a generous fee, mate. Don’t forget that makes you a criminal, too.’

‘I’m aware of that, but my cousin is a soldier of the Queen. He won’t have anything to do with your illegal dealings.’

Eliza shrank back against the rocks as someone moved, scattering pebbles. She clenched her hands at her sides, hoping the men would remain where they were. She had heard too much to be able to pretend ignorance.

‘You’d best make sure he don’t move into the castle until our deal is done then, cully.’

‘All right, Dawkins. When is the last shipment coming?’

‘Not yet. That’s all I can say. You keep your soldier cousin out of the castle for his own sake. There’s too much money involved to risk anyone peaching on us to the authorities.’

‘Just keep away from here, Dawkins. The islanders are suspicious of strangers at the best of times.’

‘Don’t worry about me. I can be invisible if I choose. I only came to tell you there’ll be a ship in the bay tomorrow night, weather permitting. The goods are already here, stashed safely in one of the caves. You don’t need to know anything more than that, but you need to throw a party tomorrow night to cover any unusual activity. Make it a big one.’

‘You haven’t given me much time to arrange anything.’

‘That’s your problem, not mine. Just keep your interfering cousin out of the way. I’m off now, Fox. You won’t see me again until the next shipment.’

The footsteps retreated and Eliza began to breathe more naturally. She was tempted to take a peek, so that she might recognise the man Dawkins, but she dared not move until the sound of their footsteps faded away completely. When she felt sure it was safe, she stepped out of her hiding place, but now she had a real problem. Dawkins was obviously a dangerous man, and he must have equally criminal accomplices. The threat to Luke and to Gregory was real, although she had little sympathy for the latter. She retraced her steps, walking slowly back to the house. Her first instinct was to find Luke and tell him exactly what she had heard, but that might place him in imminent danger. Even before she reached the back entrance, she heard the sound of horses’ hoofs on the gravelled carriage sweep, and a familiar voice calling a ‘Halloo’ as if in the hunting field. She broke into a run and as she turned the corner of the house she saw Don Diego on his favourite grey Arabian stallion.

‘Gilbert.’ Eliza picked up her skirts and ran towards him.

He drew his horse to a halt and dismounted. ‘So, this is where you are, Lizzie. I’ve been searching for you. None of us had a proper address.’

Eliza rushed into his arms and gave him a hug. ‘I am so pleased to see you, Gilbert. Where are the others? Or did you come all this way on your own?’

He laughed, holding her at arm’s length. ‘I didn’t expect such a welcome. Maybe we should have parted a long time ago so that we could be reunited. Have you missed me?’ A teasing smile lit his blue eyes.

‘I have missed everyone,’ Eliza said, backing away. ‘Not just you, Gil. You made it plain that we were just good friends and that sits well with me.’

‘That wasn’t a welcome you would give just a friend, Lizzie. I think you missed me more than you would care to admit.’

Eliza beckoned to a stable boy, who was hovering in the distance, as if wondering whether to approach them.

‘The boy will take care of Solomon. You must come into the house and give me the news about everyone. Has the circus come to Dorset, or are you here on your own?’

Gilbert laughed. ‘One question at a time, but yes, we are all here.’

‘Come in, Gil.’ Eliza held the door open, and he stepped into the entrance hall, looking around with a nod of approval.

‘This isn’t half bad, Lizzie. No wonder you left the circus if this is what you were planning.’

‘It is a nice house,’ Eliza said cautiously. ‘But we are just waiting to move into the castle.’

Gilbert whistled through his teeth. ‘A castle? You have come up in the world, love.’

‘Why did Mr Ward bring the circus to Dorset? And why have you come to find me?’

‘You might find this hard to believe, but your pa, the Great Magician, decided that he needed you to assist him in his act and he persuaded Ward to bring us all to Weymouth for our first stop on our winter tour.’

‘Magician wants us to help him in his act?’ Eliza stared at Gilbert in amazement. ‘Surely not?’

‘Not Angelica, Lizzie. He just wants you, or so he says.’

‘Did he send you to find out if I would be interested?’

Gilbert shook his head. ‘No, Lizzie. I came of my own accord. I thought I’d check and see how you’re getting on, and I’d warn you what to expect.’

Eliza caught sight of Agnes, who was trying to look inconspicuous as she dusted a carved oak chest at the far end of the hall.

‘Agnes, please bring a tray of tea to the morning parlour.’

‘For two, miss?’

‘Yes, Agnes, for two.’ Eliza knew there would be questions to answer but she was not prepared to give Agnes and the rest of the servants anything to gossip about. She led the way to the morning parlour.

‘You’ve got servants?’ Gilbert said in a low voice. ‘How come, Lizzie?’

‘I *am* a servant, Gil. Or rather I’ve been given the position of housekeeper, which stretches my capabilities to the maximum.’ Eliza went to sit by the fire. ‘Please take a seat.’

‘Are you sure, Lizzie? I mean, I don’t want to get you into trouble with your employer.’

‘Don’t worry about that. As a matter of fact, I’m glad you came today. I need some advice.’

Gilbert slumped down on the sofa, grinning widely. ‘I am the man to help you. What’s wrong?’

Putting matters as briefly as possible, Eliza told him about Luke’s battle to evict his cousin from the castle and about the conversation she had overheard on the beach.

‘It sounds as if you’re dealing with a well-organised criminal gang,’ Gilbert said thoughtfully. ‘Whatever they intend to ship out of the country must be stolen goods of some kind. No doubt there’s a great deal of money riding on the operation.’

‘But what should I do, Gil? I’m afraid if I tell the captain he will confront them and that will put him in danger. His cousin Gregory is heavily involved, which is why he wants to stay in the castle.’

‘You say you overheard the man Dawkins telling Fox to have a party tomorrow night.’

Eliza nodded. ‘Yes, that’s what he said.’

‘You should really tell the captain, but I suggest you wait until the last minute.’

‘But it will be too late then, Gil.’

‘I have an idea, but I’m not going to tell you until I’m sure it will work. There’s just one thing I need you to promise, Lizzie?’

‘What is it?’

‘That you will at least listen to what your pa wants. No one can force you to come back to the circus, but you have been missed.’

Eliza looked around as Agnes clattered into the room carrying a tray of tea, which she thumped down on a table next to Eliza’s chair.

‘Will that be all, miss?’

Eliza could tell that Agnes was bursting with curiosity, but she managed to maintain a serious expression.

‘Thank you, Agnes. That is all.’

Agnes hesitated, eyeing them both hopefully, but eventually she had to give in and leave the room.

‘Close the door, please,’ Eliza called after her.

Agnes’s sigh was audible as she shut the door.

‘You see my problem, Gil,’ Eliza said as she picked up the teapot. ‘I don’t know how to train servants, let alone how to make them do their jobs

properly.'

'You seem to be coping very well, but do consider your pa's offer, Lizzie. It's not the same without you.'

Eliza added a dash of milk and a lump of sugar to a cup of tea and handed it to him.

'I seem to remember you have a sweet tooth, Gil.'

Gilbert laughed. 'I'm flattered.' He took a sip. 'Just how I like it.'

'I wish you would tell me what you have in mind,' Eliza said anxiously. 'I don't want to keep secrets from the captain. He's been very good to me and to Angelica.'

'It seems to me that the main thing is to keep what you know to yourself. If it gets out your criminals will alter their plans and that won't please them. They don't sound like the sort of people to cross, Lizzie. I haven't always been a model citizen. I know how those types work, and it's not pretty. Don't say a word to anyone, just leave it to me.'

Eliza was longing to ask him more, but she knew Gilbert well enough to take his advice and she refrained from questioning him further. They finished their tea, and he kept her amused with titbits of gossip about the people they both knew so well. It was with genuine regret that Eliza said goodbye to him when he rode off with a final wave of his hand. However, she had plenty to occupy her mind, and that included what she might say to Magicus if he offered her a part in his act. Gilbert could have been mistaken in thinking that Magicus had persuaded Ward to bring the circus to Weymouth solely on her account, but Gilbert was not the sort of person to exaggerate or embellish stories simply for effect. She could only hope that he would come up with a plan to stop Dawkins before it was too late.

Chapter Twelve

‘Surely not, Lizzie.’ Angelica stared at her in disbelief. ‘I can’t believe that the circus has come to Dorset or that Pa wants us to assist him in his act.’

Eliza exchanged worried glances with Lavinia, who seemed to have an almost uncanny grasp of the situation.

‘Not both of us, Angel. I told you just now that he wants me and not you. That is something I would never consider, but good has come out of it because Gil is going to help us.’

‘Have you told Luke about Dawkins and Cousin Gregory?’ Lavinia asked urgently. ‘Luke would be furious if he knew what they are planning.’

‘I believe he rode into town to see his solicitor.’ Eliza sank down on a chair at Lavinia’s bedside. ‘He does need to know what his cousin is up to.’

‘You must tell him the moment he gets home.’ Lavinia nodded emphatically. ‘If you don’t, I will, Lizzie. I thought it odd that Gregory refused to leave the castle, but now we know why.’

‘I will speak to the captain, of course, but I’m afraid he might do something rash. Dawkins didn’t sound like the sort of man anyone would want to cross.’

Angelica shivered. ‘Are we in danger, Lizzie?’

‘No, of course not. Just keep out of the way, Angel. You must stay with Lavinia and leave the rest to me. I trust Gil to come up with a solution and it’s best if we say nothing to any of the servants.’

‘Do you doubt their loyalty?’ Lavinia frowned.

‘We don’t really know any of them, and if word gets round, it will alert the criminals. They might call off the shipment or, worse still, it could mean that Gil and whoever comes with him are involved in a fight.’ Eliza jumped to her feet. ‘I can’t sit around doing nothing. I’m going downstairs to wait for the captain to come home.’

‘You’ll tell him everything, Lizzie,’ Angelica said urgently. ‘He’ll keep us safe.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘Nothing will happen to you or to Lavinia. Dawkins’s plan is for tomorrow evening when he told Gregory to

organise a big party to cover up his nefarious doings. Not a thing is going to happen before then, so just carry on as normal.'

Eliza left the room before either Angelica or Lavinia could ask any more questions for which she had no answer. She made her way downstairs and was met by Nancy in the hallway.

'Oh, miss. I got something for you.' Nancy thrust her hand in her apron pocket and pulled out a handful of dry leaves entangled with a scrap of paper. 'Oh, sorry, miss. I dropped it outside when the boy gave it me, and it blew away. It gave me a merry dance, but I caught it in the end.'

Eliza took the paper, shaking off the dried leaves and stalks of grass. 'Who gave this to you, Nancy?'

'Billy from the stables, miss. I don't know who gave it to him, but he said it was urgent.'

'All right, thank you, Nancy.' Eliza turned away to unfold the scrap of paper. The note was short and to the point.

I am taking the train to London but will be back late tomorrow. Please tell my aunt not to worry.

Luke

Eliza tucked it into her skirt pocket. There really was nothing she could do now other than to hope Gil and maybe some of the riggers would come to protect them from Dawkins and his men.

She passed Luke's message on to Mrs Wildblood, who rolled her eyes and sighed.

'I can only hope that Luke has gone to see a lawyer in London who will tell him how to evict Gregory legally and permanently. He was a horrid little boy, as I recall, and it seems that he hasn't changed one iota.' She thrust the crumpled note into Eliza's hand. 'Where is Harrington? Please find her, Eliza, and tell her to bring me some laudanum for my nerves. I don't think I'll ever become accustomed to living in the back of beyond.' She closed her eyes and lay back in her chair.

'Yes, ma'am.' Eliza went straight to the kitchen, where she found Miss Harrington arguing with Mrs Pearce.

'I'm sorry to interrupt,' Eliza said briskly, 'but Mrs Wildblood is feeling a little unwell. She asked for some laudanum, Miss Harrington. May I leave that with you?'

Miss Harrington sniffed and tossed her head.

'Of course. My first duty is to Mrs Wildblood.' She shot a venomous glance in Mrs Pearce's direction. 'But I still say that our food is only tepid

when it arrives, Cook. It's not good enough.' She stalked out of the kitchen leaving Mrs Pearce open-mouthed.

'Well, I never did!' she exclaimed loud enough for her words to carry. 'I've never been spoken to like that in all my born days.'

'I'm sure she didn't mean to sound rude, Mrs Pearce,' Eliza said hastily. 'Miss Harrington is just finding her feet here in a new position.'

'Finding her feet?' Mrs Pearce's voice rose an octave. 'I'll knock her off her perch if she doesn't treat me with the respect due. She can't put on airs with me. I know too much about her family. I could set the stones on fire if I had a mind to.'

'I'm sure you could.' Eliza tried not to laugh. 'But you are too good a person to cause Mrs Wildblood any such distress.'

Mrs Pearce sniffed. 'I am a good person, miss. I go to church every Sunday.'

'I don't doubt it, Mrs Pearce. But perhaps you could bear with Miss Harrington's little ways. I think we should give her a chance to settle in, don't you?'

'Huh!' Mrs Pearce rolled her eyes. 'I'll do it for your sake, miss. You're a decent person, but I can't say the same for Miss High and Mighty.' She smacked the rolling pin down on a mound of pastry. 'All I want is a peaceful life.'

Next day Eliza watched a procession of carters bringing supplies to the castle, followed in the afternoon by a succession of carriages and gigs filled with the guests that Gregory must have invited to the party that Dawkins had told him to throw. The people who alighted from the vehicles were loud and gaudily dressed. Eliza could imagine Mrs Wildblood's expression if she saw them strolling into what she considered to be her rightful home. She would not approve, and she would most certainly not be amused by their vulgar antics. Some of the gentlemen appeared to be drunk and yet the party had not even started.

Eliza refrained from mentioning any of this to her sister or to Lavinia. However, as the day wore on and the sounds of merriment from the castle grew louder, Eliza was growing ever more concerned. There was no way of knowing exactly when Luke would return, given the time it took to get to London and back, let alone doing business there. Gil had promised help, but so far no one had come to the dower house, and she was beginning to think

that he might have forgotten, or he had not found anyone willing to risk an altercation with criminals.

Eliza was so tense that she could neither eat nor concentrate on anything to do with running the household. She walked down to the cove late in the afternoon, but all was quiet, and she was beginning to think that she had misheard the arrangements that Dawkins and Gregory had made. However, just as she was about to return to the house, she caught sight of the sails of a large merchant ship. She knew then that she was not mistaken and she hurried back to the house. It was important not to frighten any of the family or the servants, but it was hard to keep calm. She kept going to the window overlooking the carriage sweep in the hope of seeing Luke returning home, but it was getting dark and Agnes was laying the table for dinner. Miss Harrington was with Mrs Wildblood in her bedroom, presumably helping her to change into a more suitable gown, and the servants were all going about their duties, totally unaware that there might be trouble ahead.

Mrs Wildblood ate her meal alone in the dining room while Lavinia and Angelica had their dinner upstairs. Eliza's appetite had completely deserted her, which seemed to upset Mrs Pearce, who did her best to persuade her to eat something, however small.

'I hope you aren't coming down with anything, Miss Brown,' Mrs Pearce said, shaking her head. 'I would think there was a young man involved if I didn't know better.'

Agnes looked up from the table where she had been eating her meal, and she grinned. 'We can't say that for sure, Mrs Pearce. Maybe Miss Brown has a secret love.'

'Get on with your food, Agnes Flew,' Mrs Pearce said firmly. 'It's none of our business.'

Eliza pushed her plate away, the food untouched. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Pearce. This looks delicious but I am not hungry. I might eat later, if you will keep this aside for me.' She rose from her seat and hurried from the kitchen before any of the servants had a chance to question her.

She had just reached the entrance hall, intending to go outside and get a breath of air, when the doorbell jangled on its spring. She went to open the door and could have cried with relief when Luke stepped inside, taking off his hat and gloves.

'Are you acting as parlourmaid now, Lizzie?'

She shook her head. 'No, sir. But thank goodness you are home. I need to speak to you urgently.' She took his hat and gloves while he shrugged off his greatcoat.

He tossed it onto a hall chair. 'You look all in. What's wrong?'

'Can we go where no one will hear us?' Eliza glanced over her shoulder, half expecting to see Miss Harrington eavesdropping, but there was no one about.

'Come into the study. We can talk in private.'

She picked up the lantern and followed him down the corridor to the small study at the back of the house.

Luke leaned against the desk, watching her closely.

'Well, what's happened? Are you worried about the noise from the castle? I see Gregory is up to his old tricks, throwing a wild party for his friends.'

'That's just it, sir,' Eliza said nervously. 'He was told to do so by a man called Dawkins. Do you know of him?'

Luke shook his head. 'I don't think so. Who is he?'

'I went for a walk on the beach yesterday, and I overheard Mr Fox talking to this Dawkins. They were making arrangements for a large cargo to be taken out to a ship moored in the bay under cover of darkness this evening.'

'Did they mention what sort of cargo, Lizzie?'

'No, sir. But Dawkins did say that the revenue men were operating mainly at the other end of the island making it safer to do business from the cove. It must be illicit goods or why would he say this and insist on your cousin throwing a party to act as cover?'

'And Fox agreed to this?'

'He didn't disagree,' Eliza said carefully. 'But I'm worried, Captain. I doubt if Dawkins is working alone and I fear for our safety.'

Luke's jawline hardened. 'I'm back now. No one will be in danger.'

'I asked for help from some of my circus friends,' Eliza said hastily. 'Gil came to see me. He said the troupe have set up in a field on the outskirts of Weymouth.'

'Gil?' Luke frowned. 'Who is he?'

'Gilbert Grey, or should I say Don Diego, the horseman. You met him in Vauxhall Gardens on Christmas Eve.'

'I remember a fine Arab stallion.'

Eliza smiled. 'Yes, Solomon is a wonderful animal. Anyway, Gil came to tell me that Magicus, the man I was brought up to think of as my father, has changed his mind. He wants me to assist him in his act, and he persuaded Mr Ward to start their winter tour in Dorset.'

Luke shrugged. 'That's up to you, Lizzie. Although I wouldn't put my trust in a man who treated you and your sister so badly.'

'You're right. It is my problem, and you have your own worries. What will you do now?'

'I am going to the castle to speak to my cousin and find out exactly what is going on.'

'Is that wise, Captain?' Eliza rose to her feet and caught him by the sleeve. 'Maybe it would be best to wait for Gil and the others to arrive.'

'Crow Castle is my home. I won't allow Gregory to turn it into a hotbed of thieves and criminal activity. No wonder he wanted to stay there so badly. Well, enough is enough. His party is over.'

'Let me come with you.'

Luke shook her hand away. 'Certainly not. You stay here and keep the others safe. Lock all the doors and don't let anyone in.'

They both turned with a start as someone hammered on the door knocker as well as tugging at the bell.

Luke strode out of the study, shooing Agnes unceremoniously out of the way as she attempted to open the door.

'Go back to the servants' hall,' Eliza said firmly, turning a startled Agnes around so that she faced the back stairs. 'Tell everyone to stay indoors and don't let anyone in.'

Agnes uttered a faint shriek and fled as Luke opened the front door.

Gil stood on the threshold. 'We've come to give you a hand, Captain.'

Eliza glanced over Luke's shoulder and smiled at the sight of so many familiar faces.

'You've brought a small army, Gil. Is Magicus with you?'

'No, Lizzie. He said he's too old for such goings-on, but the rest of us are here and ready to help you. We look after our own.' Gil eyed Luke warily. 'What do you want us to do, sir?'

'If you're prepared for what might turn out to entail fisticuffs, follow me.' Luke stepped outside, followed by Eliza. He turned to her, frowning. 'Please stay here. I don't want you to get hurt.'

Eliza drew herself up to her full height. 'I'm not afraid. I could help. Let me take some of the men down to the cove. That is where the cargo is going to be waiting.'

Cecil, the juggler, stepped forward. 'My bunions are playing up, Lizzie. But I'll go with you and keep you safe. I've brought my Indian clubs with me. A crack on the head with one of those will sort out the bad boys.'

'And I've brought my sword with me,' Gaston added. 'I can put it to good use if required.'

'I'll fetch my shawl,' Eliza said hurriedly.

'No, wait a moment.' Luke held up his hand. 'If the gang are on the beach, it will be dangerous. I'll speak to Gregory first. Ask your friends to stay here until I return, Lizzie. When I know more, I will be able to make an informed judgement.'

Eliza moved to the doorway and looked out. The light from the lantern revealed a surprising sight. 'I don't believe it. Leonardo has brought Waldo with him.'

'Waldo?' Luke shrugged on his coat. 'Who is he?'

Eliza laughed. 'He's a lion that Leonardo raised from a cub. He's old and tame as a pet dog, but no one at the castle will know that.' She was suddenly serious. 'I have an idea, Captain. I suggest that we go with you. They will think it's part of the entertainment while you speak to your cousin.'

'That sounds like a good plan, Captain,' Gil said firmly. 'We'll take them by surprise.'

Somewhat reluctantly, Luke nodded. 'All right, but we don't have much time to waste. It will be high tide very soon, which they will need to make use of if the cargo is as large as they made out.'

'I'm coming, too,' Eliza said firmly. 'I'll fetch a shawl and catch you up.'

Gil frowned. 'All right, if you insist, but go with Leo. Waldo will keep you safe. You were always his favourite.'

'I've missed him.' Eliza backed towards the servants' staircase. 'I've missed you all.'

She did not wait to hear Gil's response as she raced downstairs to pluck her shawl from a wall peg.



Leonardo and Waldo were at the back of the oddly assorted procession when Eliza rushed up to join them. They headed for the main entrance of the castle. There was no one to prevent them from entering. Sounds of music and merriment echoed off the stone walls. Eliza knew that she was supposed to stay back with Leonardo, but she could not contain her curiosity, and she pressed forward, edging past two of the burliest riggers and Cecil with his Indian clubs swinging from his hands as he marched. Gilbert was at the front with Luke, followed by Gaston with his sword raised above his head, and three of the clowns who had painted their faces and put on their wigs so that they looked quite fearsome. They grinned at her, and she returned the smile with genuine pleasure. All these people had been her friends since childhood and being with them again was like coming home, except that they had a serious mission to perform.

The drunken party guests were lolling on chairs or sprawled on cushions, and they cried out in surprise and pleasure at the sight of the circus folk, whom they obviously thought had come to entertain them.

Luke led the way to the main drawing room, which had tall windows overlooking the sea. Although it was dark outside the lights of the ship were clearly visible as it waited to receive its cargo. Eliza was shocked to see some of the women scantily dressed as they cavorted with their partners to the music of a small band. The air was thick with cigar smoke and the choking combination of cheap perfume and gentlemen's pomade. Eliza longed to throw open one or two of the windows to let in the fresh sea air, but she remained quietly behind Luke as he strode over to where Gregory was seated on a large sofa with a very tipsy young woman on his knee. He tipped her unceremoniously onto the floor as he stood up to face Luke.

'What the hell do you think you're doing, Luke? This is a private party.' Gregory stared in disbelief at the circus performers. 'Who are all these weird people?'

'You can send your guests home now, Gregory,' Luke said coldly. 'The party is over.'

'This is *my* home, cousin. You can't stroll in here with a band of freaks and tell me what I can and cannot do. Get them out of my home.'

'I've come to do the opposite. I have it on good faith that you are running an illegal operation. I don't know what cargo you are shipping, but it's bound to be something that the authorities will be very interested in tracing.'

‘You don’t have any proof of what you’re saying, and anyway, if as you insist this is your property, then you are as guilty as I.’

‘That won’t wash in a court of law, Gregory. You are not the legal owner of Crow Castle, and you do not have my permission to live here. I am evicting you now, together with your guests. What’s more, you are coming down to the cove with me to call off your friend Dawkins.’

‘How do you know about Dawkins?’ Gregory’s flushed face paled alarmingly. ‘No one knows about our connection.’ His wild gaze came to a halt when he spotted Eliza. ‘You are the only one who could have such knowledge. I’ve seen you snooping around the castle grounds.’

‘I work for Captain Wildblood,’ Eliza said boldly. ‘I am in charge of the servants at the dower house.’

Gregory reached out and grabbed Eliza by the arm, almost jerking her off her feet as he held her in a tight grip.

‘I don’t believe that for a moment. However, I’m a fair man. Get your circus out of here, Luke. Stop interfering in my business and I’ll release your little friend.’

Luke stepped forward, his expression thunderous. ‘Let her go, Gregory. Are you a man or a coward who hides behind a woman’s skirts?’

Gregory twisted Eliza’s arm so that she cried out in pain, but Waldo, who had been straining at the leash that bound him to Leonardo, broke free and with a mighty roar he scattered the remaining guests as he leaped at Gregory and knocked him off his feet. Eliza scrambled free and wrapped her arms around Waldo’s neck, uttering soothing words to the angry lion.

As if on cue, Cecil weighed in, using his Indian clubs to beat off the drunken male partygoers who were ready for a fight, and Gaston joined in, using the flat blade of his sword to subdue anyone who got in his way. The riggers threw punches, as did the clowns. Luke caught hold of Gregory by the scruff of his neck and marched him through the mêlée and out into the grounds. Leonardo restrained Waldo, who was growling ferociously, and Gilbert raised Eliza to her feet.

‘Are you hurt, Lizzie?’

She shook her head. ‘No, I’m fine, Gil. I’m the only one, apart from Gregory, who can identify Dawkins.’

‘Did you see him then?’

‘No, but I’d know his voice anywhere. Someone ought to go for the constable. Riding Solomon, you would make it the fastest.’

‘I don’t want to leave you, Lizzie. These are dangerous men.’

‘I promise to be careful. If you can find one of the guests sober enough to speak, they will tell you where the constable lives. Maybe you could alert the revenue men, too.’

‘All right. I’ll do it for you, but I’d rather you went back to the dower house and stayed safe.’

‘Don’t worry about me, Gil. I’ve got Waldo to protect me. I don’t think the local people here have ever seen a lion before.’

‘All right, but be careful. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’ Gilbert threaded his way between the flailing fists and stepped over prostrate bodies. The women who had so recently been cavorting half-naked fled, screaming. Ignoring them, Eliza held on to Waldo’s mane as she led him out of the castle and through the darkness to the steps that led down to the cove.

Luke and the men who had not stayed behind to finish the fight, were already on the beach. Pools of light from lanterns revealed a confusion of men struggling with heavy crates whilst fending off those who were trying to stop them from getting the cargo into a waiting boat. The sound of raised voices was muted by the crashing of the waves on the rocks, but Eliza could hear Luke’s commands, and she could visualise him in battle. This might not be the Crimea, but the fighting was intense and it endangered lives. Dawkins and Luke crossed into a pool of light and Eliza saw in horror the flash of blades. She released Waldo and ran with him into the thick of the scrum, regardless of her own safety.

Dawkins heard the roar and his mouth dropped open in horror as Waldo leaped on him, knocking him to the ground. The knife flew out of Dawkins’s hand and sliced through a wave, disappearing beneath the dark water.

‘Waldo, come here,’ Eliza called out, hoping that he would remember his training. ‘Here, Waldo.’ Her voice rose to a shriek as one of Dawkins’s men attacked Waldo with a club.

Luke stepped forward and felled the man with a left upper cut and Waldo raced back to Eliza’s side. Leonardo scrambled to his feet, having been knocked down after hurling one of the culprits into the sea. He brushed sand from his clothes and whistled to Waldo, who trotted over to him as meekly as a well-trained gun dog.

The rowing boat sent to collect the cargo was already out of sight as the crew headed back to their ship, leaving Dawkins and his men stranded on

the beach. Eliza looked up at the sound of shouts from above and saw the bobbing of several lanterns on the cliff as help arrived. Moments later Gil joined them together with the local constable and a couple of men from the nearest quarry. They rounded up the gang and marched them back up the cliff, leaving the crates on the shore.

Gregory eyed Waldo nervously. 'Keep that animal away from me. I don't like the way he's eyeing me.'

'He wouldn't waste his energy on the likes of you, mate,' Leonardo said scornfully. 'Waldo may be getting on in years, but he is an aristocrat amongst lions.'

'He certainly proved that tonight,' Luke added, smiling as he wiped beads of sweat from his brow. He turned to Gregory, who was standing nervously at the water's edge, looking as if he would like to dive into the sea and swim away.

'What are you going to do with me, Luke?' Gregory said, shivering. 'Are you going to turn me in? It's not my fault. It was Dawkins who made me an accomplice.'

'I find that hard to believe.' Luke took off his greatcoat and wrapped it around Eliza's shoulders.

'It's true. And I don't know what was in those crates. Dawkins threatened me. I was in fear for my life.'

'You didn't look very afraid when we interrupted your party,' Eliza said angrily.

'Lizzie is right.' Luke gave Gregory a calculating look. 'I'm not going to turn you in to the authorities on condition that you leave Crow Castle first thing in the morning, and you don't return.'

Leonardo had been listening intently and he sniffed. 'It's late, guvnor. We've got to get back to camp, unless of course you extend your hospitality to me and my friends, just for the night, you understand.'

'They would make sure that your cousin kept his word,' Eliza added. 'Can they stay in the castle, Captain?'

Chapter Thirteen

Eliza had no doubts that Waldo would see Gregory off, even if the others had no authority over him. It was late when she finally climbed into her bed, but next morning she was up early to take a tray of hot chocolate to Lavinia's room, where she regaled both Lavinia and Angelica with a colourful account of the previous evening's events.

'Are our friends from the circus still in the castle?' Angelica asked eagerly. 'Might I go and see them, please, Vinnie? I promise I won't stay too long.'

Lavinia sipped her cup of chocolate. 'Well, I suppose so, but it seems so unfair that I have to miss everything.'

'The castle is so close,' Eliza said thoughtfully. 'Leave it to me, Miss Lavinia. I'm sure I can find a couple of strong men to carry you there, perhaps later this morning.'

'That would be wonderful.' Lavinia's eyes shone with excitement. 'Do sit down and tell us more about the goings-on last evening, Eliza.'

'Please call me Lizzie. Everyone does, even the captain.' Eliza realised she was blushing and she turned away.

'Of course, Lizzie,' Lavinia said, smiling. 'Now what happened last evening? I can't wait to find out.'

'I have work to do, and I don't want to be caught shirking, but I'll tell all later.' Eliza left the room hastily. She had been tempted to stay behind and satisfy their curiosity, but she had to remind herself of her somewhat tenuous position in the dower house. She was just the housekeeper, while Angelica had been taken on as companion to Lavinia. Their positions were subtly different, and it would be easy to overstep the mark. She could hear their voices as they chatted excitedly about meeting the circus people, but as she negotiated the stairs, Eliza wondered if she had gone too far in encouraging Lavinia to leave the safety of her own room. Although, if she were to be honest, she thought that Mrs Wildblood mollycoddled Lavinia, it was not her place to say so.

She returned to the kitchen where she faced another barrage of questions about what had happened last evening at the castle and on the beach. Mrs Pearce, Nancy, Agnes and Jessie listened intently until Eliza had finished, and then they bombarded her with questions. Then, just as Eliza was relaxing with a hot cup of tea, the bell for Mrs Wildblood's room jangled on its spring.

'It'll be you she wants, Eliza,' Mrs Pearce said firmly. 'Like as not the mistress has heard something of what went on last night.'

Eliza reluctantly abandoned her tea and rose to her feet. 'I expect you're right, Mrs Pearce. I'll go now.' She made her way to Mrs Wildblood's room and, as she had expected, found her waiting eagerly for an explanation.

Eliza put everything as succinctly as possible with both Mrs Wildblood and Miss Harrington listening avidly to every word. When she came to the end of her account of the dramatic events, it was Miss Harrington who threw up her hands.

'Who would have thought that sort of mischief was going on all around us?'

'Who, indeed?' Mrs Wildblood frowned. 'I take it that your former colleagues have sent my nephew on his way, Brown?'

'As far as I know, ma'am. Might I have your permission to go to the castle and enquire?'

'Most certainly. I don't trust Gregory to keep his word. He was a nasty little boy and he's grown up to be a despicable person.'

Eliza hesitated in the doorway. 'Miss Lavinia expressed an interest in visiting the castle while the circus people are still there, ma'am. Would you agree to that, if I can arrange for her to be carried there?'

'I suppose so,' Mrs Wildblood said slowly. 'But only if your sister accompanies Lavinia and makes sure that she is well wrapped up against the cold. She must not stay there for more than a half-hour. Too much excitement is not good for someone in her delicate state of health.'

'Yes, Mrs Wildblood. I'll make sure of that.' Eliza left the room before her employer had a chance to change her mind.

Eliza wasted no time in getting ready. With a warm woollen shawl wrapped around her shoulders, she walked briskly through the grounds to the castle entrance. She had barely reached the doorway when Waldo came racing towards her, almost knocking her off her feet. He was followed by an anxious Leonardo, who came to a halt, smiling when he saw Eliza. She

made a fuss of the lion, as if he were an oversized dog, and Waldo returned the affection tenfold, his long tongue rasping on her cheek as a mark of affection.

‘He’s always loved you, Lizzie,’ Leonardo said, misty-eyed. ‘I’ve never seen an animal take to a human in such a way.’

‘Come with me, Waldo,’ Eliza said, grabbing a handful of his mane as she walked slowly into the castle. ‘He was amazing last night, Leo. I don’t think we could have got the better of Dawkins’s men without Waldo’s help.’

‘He’s a good boy.’ Leonardo nodded. ‘And he sent that man Fox packing earlier. I think he might have argued, but Waldo showed what teeth he has left and that was the end of that. I’ve rarely seen anyone move so fast.’

Eliza laughed. ‘Good for you, Waldo. My favourite lion. But seriously, Leonardo, are you going to return to Weymouth this morning?’

‘I think so. I need to get everyone together, which won’t be easy because I think they’re all enjoying our stay in a castle. It’s not the sort of thing that happens very often, if ever, and it’s better than cold, damp tents in a muddy field.’

‘I’m sure that the captain would allow you to stay a little longer if you wish,’ Eliza said quickly. ‘Actually, I was going to ask a favour, Leo.’

‘Anything for you or Angelica, my dear girl.’

‘Well, Miss Lavinia is confined to her room, and she is rather delicate, but she wants to come from the dower house to see you and especially Waldo. Could you find two strong men to carry her?’

‘I can do that easily. Go back and get her ready and I’ll send Harry and Ted to fetch her.’

‘Thank you, Leo. You are a darling.’ Eliza turned on her heel and headed back to the dower house to pass on the good news.

She was halfway across the lawn when she met Luke heading towards the castle.

‘Has my cousin gone?’ Luke demanded abruptly.

Eliza could see that he was tense, and she smiled. ‘Yes, don’t worry. Waldo apparently saw him off earlier. I doubt if he will return, at least while the circus folk are here.’

‘I can’t tell you how surprised I was to see them last night, but I’m indebted to them. I doubt if the outcome would have been so successful without their aid.’

‘They are good people, Captain.’ Eliza eyed him speculatively. ‘They seem to have really appreciated a night of warmth and comfort.’

‘I don’t doubt it. Did you say they are camped in a field outside the town?’

‘Yes, that’s right, but I don’t know the exact location.’

‘It’s midwinter, hardly the best time of year to be encamped on a muddy field,’ Luke said thoughtfully.

‘Are you thinking of allowing them to stay on in the castle? I mean, if Mr Fox should return unexpectedly, they would be there to send him on his way.’

Luke gave her a rueful smile. ‘You guessed correctly, Lizzie. I don’t trust my cousin, and with good reason. But the circus people did me a huge favour last night and there are many rooms in the castle that are little used. I’m sure we could come to some arrangement if they were willing to do so.’

‘You would need to speak to Mr Ward, the ringmaster. He is in charge of everything and everyone.’

‘I’ll do that. In fact, I’d planned to ride into Weymouth this morning. I’ll call in on Mr Ward after I’ve completed my business. I will have to return to London in a day or two and I’d feel better if I knew Crow Castle was in safe hands.’

‘Do you really think that Mr Fox would take advantage of your absence?’

‘I’m not sure that Gregory has anywhere else to go, Lizzie. If he can’t find anyone to take him in, he might well return, and I doubt if he will come alone. Gregory isn’t the sort of person to give up easily, and he really believes that he should have inherited Crow Castle.’

‘Why does he think like that, sir?’

‘Gregory’s mother was older than my father, but that doesn’t count. The law of primogeniture is clear: the eldest male child, or his male heir, inherits the title and the property, although Gregory chooses to believe what suits him.’

‘Might I come with you, Captain?’ Eliza asked impulsively. ‘Magicus has asked to see me, and I want to find out what it is he wants. It might be easier to speak to him on his own with so many of the performers and crew here.’

‘I don’t see why not, Lizzie. I’d enjoy your company.’

Luke spoke casually enough but to Eliza it was a compliment that sent a warm glow to her heart. She backed away hastily.

‘Thank you, sir. I’ll go and tell my sister to get Miss Lavinia ready, and I’ll fetch my cloak and bonnet.’

‘I’ll have a horse saddled for you,’ Luke said casually. ‘I suppose you can ride?’

Eliza hid a smile as she thought of the many hours she had spent helping Gilbert to train the circus horses.

She nodded. ‘I’m quite competent in the saddle, sir.’ She did not wait for his response, and she walked off towards the dower house, still smiling. She had never performed on horseback in the ring, but she was confident in her ability to handle the friskiest pony or the stubbornest of stallions.

When she reached Lavinia’s bedroom, she was not really surprised to find her dressed in her outdoor clothes and seated by the window. Angelica was also ready, and she could hardly contain her excitement.

‘I hadn’t realised how much I have missed everyone in the circus,’ Angelica said enthusiastically. ‘How long are they going to be here, Lizzie?’

‘I don’t know, but the captain is going to see Mr Ward and suggest that the performers stay in Crow Castle for the duration of their engagement.’

‘That is so delightful,’ Lavinia said, beaming. ‘I hope Mr Ward agrees. I was rather dreading a winter spent in the country, but this changes everything.’

‘You might be able to walk again if you try hard enough,’ Angelica suggested gently.

Lavinia smiled, shaking her head. ‘I don’t know about that, but it would be wonderful.’

Eliza picked up a pair of fur mittens and handed them to Lavinia. ‘You had better put these on. Two of the riggers are coming to carry you to the castle, and they will bring you home the moment you start feeling tired.’ She opened the door. ‘I’ll see you both later.’

‘Where are you going, Lizzie?’ Angelica demanded.

‘I’m going to ride into town with the captain. He said I could accompany him so that I can help him to convince Mr Ward to let the crew stay here. Also, I need to see Pa, I mean Magicus. He wants to speak to me, for some reason.’

‘It’s obvious that he can’t do without you, Lizzie,’ Angelica said sadly. ‘You always did more for him in the act than I did, although that wasn’t my choice. He favoured you above me.’

Eliza stiffened. 'He still sacked both of us, Angel. I don't think that shows any preference for my company. Anyway, I'll give him the chance to speak, which is more than he gave us.'

She did not wait to hear her sister's answer as she went upstairs to her room to fetch her cloak and bonnet.

Wrapped up against the bitter late December weather, Eliza made her way downstairs to the entrance hall where, to her surprise, she found Nancy chatting amicably with Gilbert, who was dressed for riding.

He looked up and smiled when he saw Eliza.

'I gather we are going to the circus together, Lizzie.'

She reached the bottom step. 'I am going with the captain.'

'I was in the stable, saddling Solomon when he came in and asked for two horses to be made ready. He said he was going to speak to Mr Ward and suggest that the performers and crew might like to stay in the castle rather than sleeping in damp tents.'

'Yes, I know about that,' Eliza said impatiently.

'And, as the captain has got other business in Weymouth, I offered to accompany you. He'll meet us there.'

Eliza tried not to look disappointed. 'Oh, are you sure, Gil?'

He grinned. 'I know I'm not the rich and handsome owner of a castle, but I might allow you to ride Solomon, if you agree to come with me.'

'Solomon!' Eliza stared at him in astonishment. 'You never let anyone ride him but yourself.'

'So, you see what an honour it is, Eliza. Anyway, the captain has loaned me one of his mounts, so I feel obliged to take proper care of his horse.'

'If you're letting me ride your horse there's something more to it, Gilbert. I suspect that the captain's animal is something special.'

'He's a one, ain't he, miss?' Nancy giggled. 'If I could ride a horse I'd go with you, guvnor.'

Eliza had forgotten that Nancy was listening to every word, and she turned to her, frowning. 'Thank you, Nancy. I'm sure you have work to do elsewhere.'

'I'll wager you're acquainted with some farmer's son who could teach you to ride, Nancy.' Gil blew her a kiss as he opened the front door. 'Are you coming, Lizzie?'

Eliza hurried after him. 'You shouldn't tease the poor girl. She'll get the wrong idea.'

‘Are you jealous, Lizzie?’ Gilbert took Solomon’s reins from the stable boy, who had been patiently waiting with the two frisky stallions.

‘No, of course not. I’m used to seeing you flirting with every pretty girl who crosses your path.’ Eliza allowed him to lift her onto the saddle. It was at times like these that she envied men with their clothing that was so much more adaptable when it came to sitting astride a horse. However, the moment she took the reins and felt the inevitable connection with a beautiful thoroughbred animal, she forgot all about Gilbert and Luke. She clicked her tongue against her teeth and urged Solomon into a trot and then a brisk canter. She neither knew nor cared if Gilbert was able to keep up with her on his borrowed mount, and she rode for the sheer pleasure of freedom, the wind on her cheeks and the cold winter air in her lungs. However, she realised that they had a long ride ahead and she reined Solomon in and looked over her shoulder to see Gilbert close behind.

‘I guessed that you would be ready for a bit of excitement, Lizzie. You are not the sort of girl to be constrained by the life of a housemaid.’

She laughed. ‘I’m Mrs Wildblood’s housekeeper, Gil.’

‘That’s even worse. Housekeepers are usually poor widows who cannot support themselves any other way.’

‘That is rather insulting to the thousands of women who fall into that category.’

Gilbert laughed. ‘I’ll race you to the windmill, Lizzie.’ He rode off, leaving her little alternative but to encourage Solomon to follow. However, Solomon was a much faster animal and Eliza won the race, although her elation faded when she saw Luke riding to join them.

‘I thought you were a good horseman, Grey,’ Luke said angrily. ‘You don’t treat my horse as if you’re riding in the St Leger.’ He turned to Eliza. ‘And you should know better than to indulge in such folly.’

Gilbert patted his horse’s neck. ‘No harm done, guvnor. It was just a short sprint.’

‘You may treat your animal with such casual contempt, but I value my horses. Maybe it was not such a good idea to offer you circus people my hospitality.’ Luke wheeled his horse around. ‘I’m going to town. You had better dismount, Eliza. I want you to take my animal back to the stables. You can do as you please with your own horse, Grey.’

‘Come now, sir. You’re making too much of what was probably a rather foolish dare. I apologise for any offence my actions have caused, but please

don't take it out on Eliza. It wasn't her fault.'

'Just a minute,' Eliza said breathlessly. 'I am not a child, and we were not endangering either animal. Gilbert is a horse-master, and no harm came to anyone. I trust him completely.'

'There we must differ, but that doesn't alter my decision. I don't want to shelter people who are going to ride roughshod over my commands. I will see my solicitor in Weymouth, but I will not be visiting Mr Ward. Make of that what you will, Mr Grey.'

Gilbert opened his mouth to argue, but Eliza shook her head, frowning. She dismounted and motioned him to do so. 'The captain is right, Gil. We should not have started a long ride in such a way. I know that and so do you.'

He did as she asked and handed her the reins. 'I'm sorry if I caused you trouble, Lizzie. It was not my intention.'

She nodded and allowed him to help her into the saddle. 'I know that, Gil. Take Solomon back to the stable at the castle,' Eliza said in a low voice. 'I need to speak to the captain alone.'

Reluctantly Gilbert did as she asked and mounted Solomon. With one last glance over his shoulder he rode off, heading back the way they had just come. Eliza wheeled her mount around so that she could speak to Luke, who was scowling angrily.

'I am sorry, Captain. It was foolish and I should know better. I've grown up around horses, and I've ridden since before I could walk. Circus folk learn to do a bit of everything. My only excuse is that I got carried away with the sudden sense of freedom.'

'I understand that, Lizzie,' Luke said slowly. 'But you could have broken your neck and injured both animals.'

'Yes, I admit all that, but please don't take it out on the others. You need the circus people to stay at the castle, and they will be eternally grateful for a warm billet in the middle of winter. Please think again.'

Luke frowned and was silent for an agonising moment, then he nodded reluctantly.

'All right. I can see the logic of that, and perhaps I was a bit too hard on both of you, although Grey should have known better.'

'Does that mean we can still visit the circus ground, and you will speak to Mr Ward?'

‘I can see that it means a lot to you, Lizzie. If you don’t mind waiting outside my solicitor’s office for a while we can ride on when my business with him is done.’

‘I’d be happy to wait for as long as it takes, Captain.’

‘Very well, but I warn you it’s a long ride and the going is rough over the causeway. However, it is quicker than going on the ferry.’

‘We used to ride for hours on end when we went from one showground to the next. Life with a travelling circus can be hard at times, particularly in the winter.’

‘I’ll hold you to that then, Lizzie. I don’t expect any complaints about being saddle-sore,’ Luke said, smiling. ‘Let’s enjoy the ride.’

It was a long ride and crossing the causeway was by no means easy, although both horses seemed to know their way and were very sure-footed. It was early afternoon by the time they arrived at the solicitor’s office. Eliza volunteered to stay with the horses as there seemed to be no one about who Luke considered to be trusted with such a responsibility. He went inside, promising to be as quick as possible, and Eliza walked the horses up and down the street until Luke finally emerged.

‘You must be hungry, Lizzie,’ he said by way of an apology. ‘There’s a pie shop round the corner. I’ll walk round and get a couple before we set off for the camping ground.’

Eliza nodded. She was extremely hungry, but she had not been about to complain.

‘That sounds delightful,’ she said softly. ‘Is there a horse trough near here? The poor animals must be thirsty.’

‘I’m sure there is something of the sort close to the bakery. Give them their heads and they’ll find a way to water. Horses are smarter than most people.’

Eliza laughed. ‘I couldn’t agree more.’ She relaxed her hold on the reins and allowed the horses to amble off in any direction they chose, and sure enough they followed Luke to the bakery where an iron trough had been filled with water. They drank thirstily while Luke went into the shop.

Minutes later he emerged with a satisfied smile. ‘I bought the last two pies, Lizzie. They’re piping hot so I suggest we look for somewhere to sit and enjoy our luncheon. I don’t fancy eating in the saddle.’

‘Me neither.’ Eliza handed him his horse’s reins. ‘I would love to find somewhere we can look at the sea.’

‘Follow me and we’ll find a place we can safely leave the horses and enjoy our food in peace.’ Luke handed her the pies, wrapped in butter muslin, while he vaulted onto the saddle. ‘I know the exact spot, Lizzie.’

Minutes later they had found a reasonably well-sheltered place on the seafront where Luke tethered the horses to the branch of a stunted tree and Eliza sat on an outcrop of rock. Luke sat down nearby and they ate their food, gazing out at the pale sunlight bouncing off the white-crested waves. Luke had not exaggerated when he said that the pies were good. In fact, Eliza was so hungry that she would have said her meal was delicious. She leaned back against the rock and closed her eyes. Above their heads, seagulls soared effortlessly and their plaintive cries mingled with the sound of the waves. Even with all the travelling that the circus had done, Eliza had never spent time so close to the sea. She took deep breaths of the fresh salty air and sighed.

‘Are you all right, Eliza? Not too tired?’ Luke said anxiously. ‘We can head back to the island if you are exhausted.’

She turned to look at him. ‘No, I’m not weary. I was just thinking how perfect it is so close to the sea. London is so crowded and dirty, but here it feels as if the tide sweeps in and then out again, leaving everything clean and fresh.’

‘That’s as good a description as I’ve ever heard. I grew up here, so I never gave it a thought, but since I returned from the Crimea and all the horrors of warfare, I have realised that there are far worse places to live. In fact, I can’t think of anywhere I would prefer to be at this particular moment, and that includes the company I’m keeping.’

Eliza stared at him in surprise, wondering if she had misheard his comment, but Luke was already on his feet.

‘It’s time we went to the circus, Eliza. I need to speak to Mr Ward and perhaps I ought to have a few words with the Great Magicus, too.’

‘Why would you want to speak to my pa, I mean, Magicus?’ Eliza asked.

‘It seems as if he raised you and your sister as his own children, Lizzie. Now he summons you because presumably his act has suffered since you left.’

‘There’s no need for you to speak up for me,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘I can look after myself, and Angel, too.’

‘Can you?’ Luke raised an eyebrow. ‘If that is so, why were you two young ladies abandoned in London and left to the mercies of a family you didn’t know? Tell me that.’

Eliza had no answer to that. She rose to her feet and walked over to where her horse was tethered. ‘I think it’s time we left for the circus ground, Captain.’

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Chapter Fourteen

A pall of smoke from campfires hung in a cloud over the soggy field where the circus tents had been pitched, and the work horses were penned in by a makeshift fence. The task of erecting the main marquee was in progress and the sound of hammering accompanied the shouts of the riggers. There did not seem to be much activity otherwise, but it had started to rain, and Mrs Sutton rushed out of one of the smaller tents to snatch clothes off a washing line suspended between two poles.

‘Nellie, Maud, come and help me, for goodness’ sake,’ Mrs Sutton’s high-pitched voice echoed off the surrounding hills.

The twins emerged from the tent and, dragging their feet, they went to help her.

‘I’ll show you Mr Ward’s tent,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘It’s larger than the rest, and then I’ll go looking for Magicus. I expect he’s rehearsing somewhere on his own. He doesn’t trust anyone with the secrets of his magic.’

‘Lead on.’ Luke held his horse back so that Eliza could go first. ‘We mustn’t take too long, Lizzie,’ he added. ‘We’ve got a long ride back to the castle.’

Eliza nodded. She pointed to a tent that was just a few yards away. ‘That’s Mr Ward’s. If he’s not there he’s probably in the marquee.’ She rode off without giving him the chance to answer. However, she had not gone far when she heard Luke calling to her and she reined her horse in. She turned in the saddle to see Magicus standing outside the tent and Luke was beckoning to her.

‘I am in charge permanently,’ Magicus announced grandly as she rode up to them.

Eliza dismounted. ‘What happened to Mr Ward?’

‘He never fully recovered from his accident,’ Magicus said gravely. ‘The damp and cold gave him a fever and he’s decided to retire, leaving me as ringmaster as well as being the Great Magicus.’

‘Congratulations,’ Eliza said slowly. ‘You wanted to speak to me?’

‘Come into the tent, both of you. It’s freezing out here. No wonder Mr Ward took sick.’ Magicus lifted the tent flap and disappeared inside.

Eliza dismounted and handed the reins to a boy who was already looking after Luke’s mount. Luke lifted the flap and followed her into the stuffy tent. It was obvious that the changeover from Mr Ward to Magicus had occurred recently, as possessions and magic props were strewn in a haphazard fashion. Magicus pulled up a stool and sat down.

‘What is it you wanted, Captain Wildblood? You speak first.’ Magicus folded his arms across his chest.

‘I was going to suggest that the circus people who came to my aid might like to stay on for a few days,’ Luke said casually. ‘I can see that conditions here are far from favourable. Maybe you yourself might care to come to the castle until everything is ready for the first performance.’

Magicus frowned. ‘It’s no good treating the performers to luxury, sir. They are tough people because they need to be if they are to survive life on the road. They must return tomorrow at the very latest. That’s my final word.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Luke said affably. ‘They were a great help to me, and I simply wanted to repay them.’

Eliza could see an argument brewing, and she stepped in between them. ‘What did you want to say to me, Pa? I mean, Magicus.’

‘The children from the orphanage are not shaping up well, Eliza. I realise now that it was unwise to take them on. I had you and your sister from babyhood, which meant that I could train you from a very early age.’

‘I’m sorry they are not performing as you might wish,’ Eliza said carefully. ‘But I don’t see how I can help.’

‘I want you to come back to the circus. Not Angelica, just you, Eliza.’

‘But that’s impossible, sir. What would I do? I’m too old to be Little Annie.’

‘You gave the young ladies into my custody, Mr Brown,’ Luke said firmly. ‘Or rather, it was my aunt with whom you dealt, but we took on both Eliza and Angelica, and they have been invaluable to my family.’

‘I dare say.’ Magicus brushed off Luke’s remark with a wave of his hand. ‘But my need is the greater. Eliza used to help me in my act and if she comes back now, I can train her to do even more.’ Magicus managed a smile, exposing a row of yellowed teeth. ‘You would be second in billing to me, my dear.’

Eliza flinched. She had never heard a term of endearment fall from Magicus's lips before and it sounded false. 'I don't think so, sir. Angelica and I have moved on. We are content to be part of Captain Wildblood's household.'

'Nonsense,' Magicus snapped. 'You were born to be a performer, Eliza. Your sister is perfectly suited to her present position where very little is expected of her, but you were meant for better things.'

'We can leave now, Eliza,' Luke said in a low voice. 'You don't have to put up with this.'

'I don't know what you mean, Captain.' Magicus rose to his feet. 'I am offering Eliza the chance to make something of herself. She can do better than being a slave to you and your family.'

'I am not a slave,' Eliza protested. 'I've had nothing but kindness from the captain, and Mrs Wildblood is a good employer. I'm sorry you will not allow your performers a little respite from the harsh conditions they must endure here, but I don't think there is anything more to be said.' She turned to Luke. 'Have you anything else to add, Captain?'

He shook his head. 'I think we should make our way back to Portland, Lizzie.'

'What about my performers?' Magicus demanded angrily. 'Will you send them back tonight?'

'It will be too dangerous for them to cross the causeway in the dark, sir.' Luke opened the tent flap. 'They will return at first light tomorrow morning, and they will be all the better for a rest and good food.'

'You're making a mistake, Eliza,' Magicus said angrily. 'But when you realise that this man and his family are merely making use of you, don't come crying to me.'

Eliza shot him a pitying glance as she left the tent. The smell of the crushed grass mixed with the heady aroma of stage makeup and smoke from the flambeaux outside would always remind her of this moment. She had walked out on the man who had ruled her life for so long, but had discarded her. Now, for the first time, she experienced a sense of real freedom.

'Are you all right, Eliza?' Luke asked anxiously.

'Never better, Captain. I think it's time we were on our way.'

It was late evening when they finally arrived back at the dower house. Flickering candlelight from the castle windows was a welcome sight, as was the sound of laughter and music emanating from a partially open window on the first floor. Eliza half expected to be greeted by Waldo, but there was no sign of him, and Gilbert's horses were safely ensconced in the stables. Eliza dismounted and waited for Luke while he gave instructions to the head stableboy.

'I'll move to the castle tomorrow morning,' Luke said when he joined her and they walked slowly towards the house. 'I don't want to spoil their enjoyment of this evening. Perhaps I was wrong to allow them to stay on. It will be all the harder for them to return to that muddy field and draughty tents.'

Eliza smiled. 'I wouldn't worry too much, sir. They are used to such a way of living, whether winter or summer.'

'You can still change your mind, Lizzie.' Luke came to a halt outside the front door. 'My aunt will no doubt want to remove to the castle as soon as possible.'

Eliza followed him into the house. 'Of course, you have a housekeeper there already. Mrs Tapper would not want me there, but what about my sister and Miss Lavinia?'

'I hadn't thought it through, although Vinnie is bound to go with her mama, and that means your sister will live in the castle. I'm sorry, Lizzie. Perhaps we should have discussed this before we went to see Magicus.'

'It wouldn't have made any difference to me, sir. I wouldn't want to go back to assisting him in the ring, and I've no intention of leaving Angelica. The circus will only be in this area for a short time and then they will pack up and move on. We lived that life for almost twenty years, but not any more.'

'You must, of course, stay on in the dower house,' Luke said firmly. 'I've decided to invite Marianne to stay there until our wedding in May. It will give us a chance to get to know each other again, having been parted for so long during the war.'

'Won't her family object to that, Captain?'

'Marianne's parents died from lung fever when she was a small child, and she was raised by her elderly grandfather and a series of nannies. The family solicitor has handled all her financial affairs together with an estate

manager, and housekeepers ensure the smooth running of the country house and the mansion in London.'

'It sounds very impersonal,' Eliza said thoughtfully.

'I agree, and I think Marianne would enjoy being the mistress of Crow Castle. She would get used to living on the island, which isn't for everyone. It can feel quite isolated, particularly at this time of year, but she would have you to rely on.'

'Are you offering me the position of housekeeper at the dower house until the wedding? Wouldn't Lady Marianne have something to say about that?'

'Marianne and I think alike, Lizzie. If I approve then I am sure she will, too.'

Eliza eyed him warily. She did not like to argue but she suspected that Lady Marianne Nesbit had a mind of her own and might well wish to choose her servants. However, she kept that to herself and merely nodded.

'I'll say good night to you then, sir. I'm quite tired after the long ride.'

'Of course. I'm sorry, I should have thought of that, Lizzie. Go to bed and enjoy a good night's sleep. We'll talk again tomorrow.' Luke picked up the lantern from the table at the foot of the stairs and handed it to her.

'You might need this, sir.'

He laughed. 'I have eyes like a cat. I learned to see in the dark during my posting to the Crimea. A soldier must be ready for anything at any time of the day or night. Sleep well, Lizzie.'

He strolled off into the darkness, leaving Eliza standing in a pool of light from the lantern. She turned away and went slowly upstairs to her room. Exhaustion made her drag her feet and the uncertainty of her future position in the household lay across her shoulders like a heavy load. However, there was always tomorrow, and she would feel better after a good rest. She practically fell into bed and was asleep almost instantly.

Next morning Eliza found it painful saying goodbye for a second time to the people who had been her family since childhood. It was even more difficult to part with Waldo, who followed her around like a faithful puppy rather than the king of the jungle. No matter how hard Leo tried to get Waldo into his cage, the lion resisted and ran back to Eliza, nuzzling her hand and gazing up at her with limpid eyes as if begging her to let him stay.

‘He always was your special pet,’ Leo said, frowning. ‘But he’s getting too old to perform now, Lizzie. I think I will have to give him to a zoo.’

‘Oh, no!’ Eliza placed her arms around Waldo’s neck. ‘That would break his heart.’

Leo put his head on one side. ‘Unless you could keep him here and allow him to spend his declining years in peace.’

‘It’s not my house,’ Eliza said slowly. ‘I don’t know if the captain would agree to such an arrangement.’

‘You have many outbuildings,’ Leo said hopefully. ‘I don’t want to see the old fellow locked up in a cage, Lizzie.’

Eliza stroked Waldo’s head. ‘Neither do I,’ she said slowly. ‘Take him to the kennels where he spent the night, Leo. I’ll make sure he’s made comfortable there and we’ll see how we go on. If the captain objects to Waldo being here, I will have to ask you to make other arrangements for him.’

‘That sounds fair, Lizzie. I’ll do that and any time you want to return to the circus, we’ll be waiting for you.’

‘I won’t be coming back,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘Magicus offered me a place in his act but, for one thing, it would mean leaving Angelica here, and that is out of the question.’

‘What is the other reason?’ Gilbert asked as he drew his horse to a halt beside them. ‘You could name your own terms if you accepted his offer, Lizzie.’

‘It’s not about money or prestige, Gil. I don’t think life on the road appeals to me now.’

‘She’s got a point, Gil,’ Leo said thoughtfully. ‘We’ve known nothing else, but Lizzie has had a taste of living in comfort. After spending last night in a castle, I could quite easily be persuaded to stay. Waldo didn’t want to get into the cage, and I can’t say I blame him. He knows when he’s well off.’

‘This isn’t farewell,’ Eliza said, swallowing hard to stop herself from crying. ‘I will come and see you when you are next in the area.’

‘I will find you first,’ Gilbert said firmly. ‘You’re right, Lizzie. This isn’t goodbye, it’s until we meet again, and I promise you that will be soon. You know how I feel about you and I won’t give up easily.’ He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. He turned his mount’s head and rode off, Solomon’s hoofs kicking up gravel as they went.

Eliza raised her hand to her face. She could still feel the warm imprint of Gil's lips on her cheek and his words had come as something of a surprise. Their romance had been over for some time, or so she had thought.

'He's always had a soft spot for you, Lizzie,' Leo observed, nodding. 'You could do worse, you know.'

'I'm very fond of him, but not enough to devote the rest of my life to the circus, Leo. We went our separate ways some time ago, or at least I did.'

'I don't think Gilbert sees it that way, Lizzie. But I'm an old man – what do I know?' Leo glanced over his shoulder at the sound of Cecil's command to get moving. He grabbed a handful of Waldo's thick mane. 'Come on, old boy, let's get you tucked up in your new home. Eliza will take good care of you.' He walked off with Waldo trotting obediently at his side.

Eliza clutched her shawl around her as a biting wind blew in from the sea. She watched the procession of her old friends and fellow performers set off. With a heartfelt sigh she retreated into the warmth of the dower house and closed the door. It was still very early, and she was making her way to the kitchen, checking as she went that the fires had been lit in all the main rooms, when she heard Luke calling her name. She looked up and smiled as he descended the stairs.

'Good morning, Captain.'

'Your friends have gone?'

'Yes, Captain.'

'You weren't tempted to go with them?'

'No, sir. I'm content to remain here while I can be of use.'

'That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Lizzie. Today I'll help my aunt to move her possessions into the castle, but tomorrow I intend to travel to London to bring Lady Marianne down here. I would like you to ensure that everything is ready and that she will have every comfort.'

'Of course, Captain. I'll do my best.'

'I know you will. I don't think I could manage without you, Lizzie.' Luke gave her a warm smile before walking away.

Eliza stood for a moment, struggling with conflicting emotions. She had been sincere when she agreed to do her best for Lady Marianne, but if she were to be honest, she was not sure how she would deal with a situation where she was supposed to devote herself to the young woman who was destined to marry Luke Wildblood. Eliza was about to go to the drawing room when she realised that she had forgotten to mention Waldo, but she

was sure that the captain would not mind. She had intended to put the ageing lion forward as more of a deterrent than a guard dog, especially if Gregory attempted to gain access to the castle. Just the sight of Waldo would be enough to frighten off criminals like Dawkins and his associates, but she might keep to herself the fact that the old lion had few remaining teeth.

She checked the state of the drawing room and the dining room before making her way to the kitchen to supervise the making of hot chocolate for the ladies upstairs.

Eliza spent the next few hours overseeing preparations of a room for Marianne, and one for her maids. The scrub women from the village were sent for and they were instructed to spring-clean the rooms. Nancy and Jessie were given the task of taking up the carpets and hanging them on a line in the back yard, where they attacked them energetically with rattan beaters, sending up clouds of dust. Eliza caught sight of them from the window on the stairway and she smiled at their obvious enjoyment. They seemed to have turned a dull task into a competition, and their laughter could be heard all the way upstairs to Mrs Wildblood's room, where Miss Harrington was helping her get ready for the move to the castle. The distance from door to door was only a hundred yards or so, but the way they were both fussing and fretting made it seem as if they were embarking on a long journey. Eliza tried her hardest to make light of the situation, but when Luke strolled into his aunt's room, he managed to calm them down with a few words. He proffered his arm to Mrs Wildblood, who went with him meekly, followed by Miss Harrington, who was convinced that it was about to rain and cold enough for them to catch lung fever before they reached the castle gates.

'Don't worry, Miss Harrington,' Luke said confidently. 'I have had the carriage brought to the front entrance. Agnes is waiting for you both with an umbrella, in case of a sudden downpour, and you will be ensconced in your new quarters within minutes.'

'If you're sure, Captain,' Miss Harrington said, dabbing her eyes with her hanky. 'I have a very delicate constitution. I'm surprised that I've managed to survive on this windswept island for so many years. Not that I am old,' she added hastily.

‘I’m sure you are in your prime, Miss Harrington,’ Luke said gallantly. ‘Are you all right, Aunt Margery? You are not afraid of getting your feet wet?’

‘Certainly not, Luke. If there are puddles, I expect you to carry me.’

Eliza stood aside and watched them as they made their way slowly downstairs. She sighed. Life in service was so different from anything she had known in the past, and now she must go upstairs to Lavinia’s room and help Angelica to pack.

It came as a surprise when she discovered that Lavinia did not wish to move to the castle.

‘Why don’t you want to make the move, Miss Lavinia?’ Eliza stared at her in astonishment. ‘I thought the idea appealed to you. Surely you will have more room in Crow Castle?’

‘Maybe,’ Lavinia said, shrugging. ‘But I love this room with the view of the bay and the waves crashing on the rocks.’

‘Anyway, you’re staying on here, Lizzie,’ Angelica added. ‘We need you to look after us. We don’t know the servants at the castle.’

‘And I want to get to know Lady Marianne.’ Lavinia smiled sweetly. ‘I want to test her and find out if she’s good enough to marry Cousin Luke. He’s very special and I don’t want him to marry someone just because they have a large dowry.’

‘I think a large dowry is just what the captain needs at the moment,’ Eliza said grimly. ‘Without that he might have to sell the castle as well as this house.’

Lavinia and Angelica exchanged horrified glances.

‘Surely not,’ Lavinia said breathlessly. ‘There must be another way.’

Eliza picked up a tray of dirty crockery and moved towards the door. ‘If either of you think of something, please let me know. We can only hope that her ladyship will be as nice as she was at our first meeting.’ She left the room before either of them could speak. Her first impression of Lady Marianne had been favourable, but that was before she knew the captain so well. There had been odd fleeting moments of closeness between her and Luke Wildblood that were more intimate than their positions would allow, but these needed to be cast aside and forgotten. Lady Marianne would soon be mistress of the dower house.

When Eliza reached the kitchen, she found Mrs Pearce deep in conversation with Agnes and Nancy. They stopped talking immediately, all three of them looking guilty for a moment and then Mrs Pearce smiled.

‘It’s only you, Lizzie. We were just talking about the captain’s fiancée. You’ve met her, haven’t you?’

‘I think you’re wanted in the entrance hall, Agnes,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘Mrs Wildblood is worried that it might rain, and you are to be there with an umbrella, just in case.’

‘Yes, Miss Brown.’ Agnes hurried from the kitchen.

Eliza handed the tray to Jessie, who had emerged from the scullery so quickly that it was obvious she had been eavesdropping.

‘Lady Marianne is charming,’ Eliza said carefully. ‘I don’t know her well, but she seemed very nice when we met her in London.’

‘She’ll be in charge here, won’t she?’ Mrs Pearce frowned.

‘This will be her home until she and the captain get married. Then I assume they will move to the castle.’

‘What will become of us then?’ Mrs Pearce demanded anxiously. ‘I’ve grown used to my position here. The money is very helpful, especially when my son gets laid off because of illness or injury. Working in the quarry is hard. It led my husband to an early death.’

‘I imagine that Mrs Wildblood will move back here after the wedding. It is the dower house, meant for just such a circumstance.’

‘I’m sorry the circus people have gone,’ Nancy said, sighing. ‘They were fun. I’ve a mind to run away and join them.’

Jessie rolled her eyes. ‘You wouldn’t last five minutes. You would wreck anything you touched, you’re so clumsy, Nancy Dean.’

‘I may be a bit of a butterfingers,’ Nancy admitted, tossing her head, ‘but I could do almost anything if I tried hard.’

‘I’m sure you could,’ Eliza said gently. She turned to Mrs Pearce. ‘I would like you to save all the good scraps of food and put them in a bucket for Waldo.’

Mrs Pearce paled visibly. ‘Waldo? That lion is still here?’

‘He’s harmless,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘Yes, he’s in the kennels, but I won’t leave him there all day. He’ll follow me round like a puppy when I am out of doors, but he will be limited to the conservatory when it comes to being inside the house.’

‘I can help look after him.’ Nancy clapped her hands. ‘I could take him for walks, miss.’

‘We’ll see.’ Eliza backed towards the door. ‘Just make sure we have plenty for him to eat and he’ll be no trouble at all.’

‘I wonder what Lady Marianne will think about having a lion roaming the grounds,’ Mrs Pearce said grimly. ‘What will you do if she tells you to send him back to the circus, Lizzie?’

‘I’ll deal with that matter when it arises, Mrs Pearce.’ Eliza spoke confidently, but she knew she might have a fight on her hands, and she was beginning to dread Lady Marianne’s arrival.

Chapter Fifteen

Eliza kept away from the castle for the next few days, allowing Mrs Wildblood and Miss Harrington to settle in before she went to see them. After all, it was not her problem if Mrs Wildblood was unhappy with things as they were. She had Mrs Tapper to run the household, and Mrs Tapper would bear the brunt of any complaints she raised. Eliza concentrated on preparing the dower house for the arrival of its new mistress, but whenever the opportunity arose, she would go to the kennels to spend time with Waldo or take him for a walk in the grounds or on the beach. The weather was not too bad considering how early in the year it was, although the sea was often rough, with huge waves crashing against the rocky coastline.

Word got around in the village that Miss Brown and her lion were keeping guard over Crow Castle and the dower house, which made Eliza smile. However, if that kept miscreants away it was a positive outcome. She made sure she was seen as often as possible with Waldo, even taking him down to the village post office on one occasion, which terrified several of the older women but thrilled all the children who saw Waldo. He was quickly becoming a local hero in some people's eyes, and a frightening wild animal to others. Eliza earned the name Lion Lady, which she found hilarious.

She had just returned to the house one cold and rainy afternoon when she saw a carriage outside the dower house. It was a rather run-down growler that had long since been retired from use on the mainland, but it was the only vehicle available for hire on the island. Eliza laid her hand on Waldo's mane as he started to move cautiously towards the vehicle, but she was too late to prevent the occupant from seeing him in the fast-fading winter light.

Lady Marianne clutched her hands to her throat as she was about to alight, and her scream echoed off the stone walls. Luke had been about to assist her to the ground, but he looked around, frowning when he spotted Waldo.

'Eliza, I thought you were going to keep that beast under control.'

‘Yes, of course, Captain. I’m sorry.’ Eliza led Waldo towards the kennels, leaving Luke to take Lady Marianne into the house. She caught up with them on the front steps, having first secured Waldo and given him an apologetic cuddle for leaving so abruptly.

‘Welcome to the dower house, my lady,’ Eliza said, curtsying. ‘Will your maid be following on with the rest of your luggage?’

‘Unfortunately, Denham was taken ill just before we left for Dorset, and there wasn’t time to look for a replacement. You will need to find someone suitable to take care of me until she recovers.’ Marianne treated Eliza to a frosty stare. ‘But more to the point, what on earth is a lion doing here, of all places, Miss Brown?’

Eliza hurried to open the front door. ‘It’s a long story, my lady.’ She looked around, hoping that Agnes might have heard the carriage arrive, but there was no sign of her, leaving Eliza little choice other than to take Lady Marianne’s cloak, bonnet and gloves.

‘I see we’ve caught you unprepared,’ Luke said mildly. ‘I sent a boy with a message, but it seems you didn’t receive it, Lizzie.’

Marianne cleared her throat. ‘Her name is Miss Brown, Luke. I think you ought to address her properly. We can’t have servants being treated as equals. They will very soon get above themselves.’

‘Eliza has a position of trust here, Marianne,’ Luke said with a hint of annoyance in his tone.

‘If you would like to go to the drawing room, my lady,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘I will send for some tea and biscuits to refresh you after your journey.’ She turned to Luke and held her arms out to take his outer garments, but he shook his head.

‘You have a burden there already, Eliza. I suggest you give them to Agnes.’ Luke eyed Marianne, frowning. ‘Eliza has been more than helpful since our flight from London, and my aunt will second that.’

‘I am exhausted, Luke. A cup of tea would be most welcome, Miss Brown. Come, Luke, you must show me to the drawing room.’ Marianne laid her hand on his arm. ‘I hope there is a fire in my bedchamber. This old house is so cold and draughty.’

Luke laughed. ‘Just wait until we move into the castle, my love. This will seem like a hothouse.’

‘Don’t, please. I’m beginning to regret coming here. I was expecting a much larger house, Luke. This sort of dwelling is not something to which I

am accustomed.' Marianne tossed her head.

'It's only a temporary measure, Marianne,' Luke said softly. 'When we are married you will be mistress of Crow Castle.'

'From what I've seen so far that is hardly an enticing option.' Marianne turned to Eliza. 'Hurry up with the tea, Miss Brown. If there is such a thing as a slice of cake, I would be grateful. Although they probably think that bread and jam is a treat in this far-flung outpost.'

'I'll see what I can find, my lady,' Eliza said meekly. She waited until they had headed towards the drawing room before going downstairs to the kitchen. However, a nagging doubt had crept into her mind. On the face of it, Lady Marianne had been sweetness itself when they first met in London, but the person who had just arrived seemed quite the opposite. Perhaps the change in Lady Marianne's demeanour could be put down to exhaustion after the long journey, but that did not prevent Eliza from worrying. She said as much to Mrs Pearce when she reached the kitchen.

'So, her ladyship thinks we are heathens, does she?' Mrs Pearce pursed her lips. 'As it happens, I've made a lovely chocolate cake, but perhaps I should give her a large dough bun to chew on instead.'

Eliza smiled. 'Your famous dough buns are delicious, Mrs Pearce. I think her ladyship will have to earn the right to be given such a treat, but chocolate cake will go down very well, I'm sure.' She turned to Nancy. 'Please go and light a fire in her ladyship's bedroom. Make sure it's burning properly before you leave. She is already complaining of feeling cold.'

'Yes, Miss Brown.' Nancy pulled a face, but she left the room hastily, taking with her a scuttle filled with coal and kindling.

'What shall I do?' Agnes asked worriedly. 'I'm sorry I wasn't at the door, Miss Brown. We didn't hear the carriage arrive.'

Eliza thrust Lady Marianne's outdoor garments into Agnes's hands. 'Her ladyship's maid has been detained in London, Agnes. Perhaps you could look after her until Miss Denham comes to join us.'

'Me, a lady's maid?' Agnes beamed. 'Ma would be so proud of me. What shall I do first?'

'Just make sure that her ladyship's cloak is hung up so that the creases drop out, please, Agnes. I have a feeling that she is going to be very particular.'

'I hope she's not going to be too difficult,' Agnes said nervously. 'I might do or say the wrong thing.'

‘I expect her ladyship is simply tired after the long journey, Agnes. You should go to her room and start unpacking her things.’

‘Yes, Miss Brown.’ Agnes hurried off, leaving Eliza and Mrs Pearce eyeing each other warily.

‘We will all need to be careful not to put a foot wrong, especially while her ladyship is settling in,’ Eliza said, forcing herself to sound calm. ‘After all, I expect this house is very different from her mansion in London.’

‘It makes you wonder why she’s come here, in that case,’ Mrs Pearce said crossly.

‘Lady Marianne is going to marry the captain.’ Eliza sighed. She had not expected Lady Marianne’s arrival to cause such disruption, but she must not let the other servants see how she was feeling. ‘Her fortune will help to restore Crow Castle to its former glory. It’s up to us to make her feel at home, Mrs Pearce.’

‘If you say so, Miss Brown. I’m sure we’ll all do our best.’ Mrs Pearce busied herself making a pot of tea and the conversation came to an abrupt halt.

As she cut a slice of chocolate cake and placed it on one of the best china plates, Eliza had an uncomfortable feeling that the next few weeks were going to be difficult.

Having settled Lady Marianne in front of the fire with a tray of tea and a plate of cake, Eliza went to check on the bedchamber to ensure that everything was as perfect as possible. A warm glow from the burning coals lit the room and Agnes had already begun unpacking one of the larger valises.

Eliza frowned. ‘I believe there is more luggage to come, Agnes.’

‘Then her ladyship will need a much larger bedroom, Miss Brown. The clothes press is already full, as well as the chest of drawers.’

At that moment the bedroom door opened, and Angelica stood on the threshold, supporting Lavinia, who was leaning on her heavily.

‘What on earth are you two doing?’ Eliza asked, torn between laughter and the need to keep order in a household that seemed to be reeling from the shock of the new arrival.

‘We wanted to see what Lady Marianne has brought with her,’ Lavinia said, giggling. ‘I imagine she has some beautiful gowns and undergarments trimmed with lace.’

‘Where’s her maid?’ Angelica looked around as if expecting to see a lady’s maid emerging from one of the wall cupboards.

‘The poor woman was taken ill in London,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘Agnes has stepped in to help until Miss Denham has recovered.’

‘I’ll help you, Agnes.’ Angelica abandoned Lavinia so abruptly that Lavinia almost lost her balance.

‘Be careful, Angel.’ Eliza reached out to support Lavinia. ‘This wasn’t one of your best ideas. I think you had both better go back to your room.’

‘Oh, but, Lizzie, this is much more fun,’ Angelica protested. She snatched up a silk camisole and held it out for Lavinia to examine. ‘Isn’t this exquisite, Vinnie?’

‘What exactly is going on here?’ Lady Marianne stood in the doorway, unnoticed until she spoke.

‘I am so sorry, my lady,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘Agnes has started unpacking your things.’

‘And I wanted to see what you had brought with you.’ Lavinia drew herself up to her full height, standing without support and her eyes flashing. ‘This is not your house, Marianne. You are just a guest here until you marry my cousin.’

‘How dare you speak to me in that insolent tone?’ Marianne glowered at Lavinia. ‘You are a spoiled brat, Lavinia Wildblood. I don’t think there is anything wrong with you, other than the fact you love to be the centre of attention.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Angelica said angrily. ‘You can’t speak to Lavinia like that. I don’t care if you are the captain’s fiancée.’

‘Be quiet, you are a nobody.’ Marianne turned to Eliza, her face pale with fury. ‘Are you going to allow your sister to address me in such a fashion?’

Eliza took a deep breath, frowning. ‘Angelica, please take Miss Lavinia back to her room. I’ll deal with you later.’ She folded her arms across her chest.

Reluctantly, Angelica put her arm around Lavinia’s waist and was about to leave the room, but she paused in the doorway. ‘It is you who should apologise to Miss Lavinia, my lady. You know very well that she has been sickly since childhood.’

Lavinia shook off Angelica’s restraining hand. ‘I can speak for myself. I’m tired of being treated like an invalid. I am perfectly well, just a little

shaky when I walk, but tomorrow I will come downstairs for luncheon and dinner, too. You will help me, Angelica.'

Eliza turned her head at the sound of footsteps.

'What is going on?' Luke demanded, fixing Lavinia and Angelica with a puzzled gaze. 'I could hear your voices from the hallway.'

'Your cousin has been abominably rude to me, Luke.' Marianne's bottom lip trembled. 'I won't stand for it.'

'Vinnie? Is this true?' Luke looked from one to the other.

'No, well, yes in a way. But she started it, Luke. I know that Marianne is your fiancée, but she called me names, and she said I am spoiled.'

Eliza was about to step in but to her surprise, Luke threw back his head and laughed.

'Well, it's true, Vinnie. You are a spoiled brat, but your mama is terrified that you are going to succumb to some dreadful ailment. I've always told her that she shouldn't keep you a prisoner in your room, but she won't listen to reason.'

'Then you can stand up for me, Cousin. I am sick and tired of being told to rest and eat slops and being dosed with tar water.' Lavinia faced him defiantly and Luke laid his hand on her thin shoulder.

'Now that, I suspect, is more of a punishment than a cure. However, I think you should apologise to Marianne.' Luke glanced over his shoulder. 'And you should apologise to Lavinia, my dear. She is a victim of an over-zealous mother when it comes to her wellbeing, but that is not her fault.'

'I'm tired, Luke,' Marianne said peevishly. 'I will say I'm sorry if I was unkind, and I accept your apology, Lavinia. But what I really want is to go to bed with a cup of hot milk. I just hope that the sheets are aired and the blankets are not damp.'

'I can assure you that your bed has been thoroughly aired, my lady,' Eliza said firmly. 'Agnes will help you to undress and I will see to it that a cup of hot milk is brought up to you.' Eliza fixed Angelica with a steely look. 'You must help Miss Lavinia to her room. We will sort all this out in the morning.'

'I do apologise if I was rude,' Lavinia said reluctantly. 'But I want dinner. Standing up for myself has given me an appetite, and I agree, Lizzie. Tomorrow we will all begin again.' She shrugged and walked off slowly with Angelica following close behind.

Luke's hope that Lady Marianne would be content to live in the dower house until their marriage, planned for early summer, seemed doomed from the start. Marianne had ideas of her own and they did not seem to include living in what she considered to be an inferior property with barely enough room to house her possessions, which arrived daily by carrier. Eliza was present when Luke remarked humorously that there could be very little left in the Nesbit mansion in Mayfair, which sent Marianne into an impressively fierce fit of temper. Lavinia and Angelica were there to witness it, too, and they watched in awe. The tantrum ended when Marianne picked up an ornament that happened to be a favourite piece belonging to Mrs Wildblood and she hurled it at Luke's head. It missed and shattered against the wall behind him.

'That's enough, Marianne,' he said angrily. 'There is no need to carry on in this manner over a simple remark.'

'This is not what I was expecting,' Marianne's voice broke on a sob. 'You misled me into thinking I would be comfortable and happy here. Well, you were sadly mistaken. I hate this draughty, old-fashioned house.'

Lavinia and Angelica covered their mouths but not before Marianne had heard their stifled laughter. She rounded on them furiously.

'And you two young ladies ought to know better. It's high time you were married off or found suitable employment elsewhere.' Marianne glared at Eliza. 'Why are you standing there like a dummy? Can you not control your sister? In fact, I don't know why she is here in the first place. Lavinia does not need a companion. She needs to grow up.'

Eliza signalled to Angelica, pointing to the doorway. 'We should give you some privacy. This is none of our business.'

'You are quite correct, and as to you, Miss Brown, I would thank you to remember you are a servant in this house. You are far too familiar with my fiancée, and it must stop or you will find yourself unemployed.'

'That is enough, Marianne,' Luke said coldly. 'Don't take it out on people who have done nothing but attempt to make you feel welcome. I'm beginning to think this was a dreadful mistake. You would have been happier had you remained in London.'

'Indeed, I would. I should never have allowed you to persuade me to come to this place. In fact, I refuse to stay here a moment longer than necessary. You will take me to the castle, Luke, and I will speak to your aunt. A woman of her sensibilities will understand my predicament.'

‘Do you mean to move into the castle?’ Luke asked, frowning. ‘That would be most improper, Marianne.’

‘I most certainly do.’ Marianne faced him with a stubborn set to her jawline. ‘You will move back here, and look after the two ninnies, and Miss Brown will come with me in Denham’s stead. I need a personal maid, and I will train her to do my bidding.’

Luke met Eliza’s startled look with an apologetic smile. ‘I cannot force you to agree, Lizzie. You would probably be much more comfortable in the castle than here, but you do not have to agree to this move.’

Eliza opened her mouth to respond but Marianne moved swiftly to her side and grasped her hand in a grip that was surprisingly strong for such a small woman.

‘I think Miss Brown would rather take Denham’s place than see her sister evicted from the dower house. Lavinia has already stated that she is no longer a sick child, and she wishes to be treated like any other member of the household. There is therefore no place here for Miss Angelica Brown.’ Marianne faced Luke with a triumphant smile as if she knew she had won.

‘I can’t compel you to accept the change in your position, Lizzie.’ Luke turned to her with an apologetic smile. ‘But I assure you that Angelica will not lose her position as Vinnie’s companion.’

‘The decision is mine, Luke,’ Mariane said firmly. ‘You promised that you would do anything in your power to make me happy here, and I choose to take you up on that.’

‘No, Marianne. You can’t use that against me, nor can you treat people like pawns in a game of chess.’

‘Yes, I can, Luke. I think you’re forgetting that I am the one who possesses a fortune, which I know you need desperately to make the castle habitable and to keep your cousin Gregory at bay.’

Eliza shook off Marianne’s restraining hand. She could see that Luke was struggling to contain his anger and bafflement at his fiancée’s sudden change of heart, and she needed to protect Angelica.

‘I am willing to comply with her ladyship’s request, Captain. I am sure that my sister could take over most of my duties here. We were brought up to be practical, especially when it came to managing money and being economical with the housekeeping.’

‘Nobody has asked me,’ Angelica protested loudly. ‘But I will do anything that my sister wishes me to do. If Lavinia doesn’t mind, of

course.'

Lavinia nodded eagerly. 'I agree with Angel, and I will help her. It's time I did something useful. You are right there, Marianne, although I dislike the way you try to bully everyone, including my cousin, into bending to your will.'

'Fetch my cloak, bonnet, gloves and pattens, Eliza,' Marianne said imperiously. 'We are going to the castle. You will accompany us, Luke, and you girls will remain here and manage the house.'

'We will go to the castle and speak to my aunt, but the final decision is hers, Marianne. Until we marry, she is the mistress of Crow Castle and must be given that respect.' Luke opened the door for Eliza. 'We'll wait for you in the entrance hall.'

Eliza nodded, saying nothing. Matters had taken a strange turn, but she was not in a position to argue with Lady Marianne. However, that did not mean she would obey slavishly. Marianne might have the upper hand, but Eliza did not intend to bend to her will. For the moment it was necessary to give her the impression of being a subordinate, but if life in the circus had taught her anything, Eliza knew how to stand up for herself when necessary.

'And you will get rid of that ferocious wild animal you have hidden in the kennels,' Marianne added with a triumphant smile.

'Waldo is not ferocious, nor is he wild,' Eliza said angrily. 'He was raised from a cub and now he is old and totally harmless.'

'You are a servant, Miss Brown. I say that the animal goes and that's the end of the matter.' Marianne spun around to face Luke. 'You cannot disagree with that.'

Luke proffered his arm. 'We will deal with that later, but now I think you wished to go to the castle and speak to my aunt.'

'Yes, of course.' Marianne laid her hand on his arm. 'Pack my bags, Miss Brown. Be ready to join me in the castle, and on the way, you must say goodbye to that creature.' She allowed Luke to lead her from the room.

There was a moment of stunned silence, but Angelica was the first to speak. She rushed to her sister's side and hugged her.

'You can't allow this to happen, Lizzie. That woman will make your life a misery if you accept the position as her maid.'

'I agree with Angel,' Lavinia said hastily. 'Lady Marianne is not the person we once thought her to be. I was never so disappointed in anyone.'

‘You should go to speak to your mama, Vinnie,’ Angelica added seriously. ‘Tell her that we are harbouring a snake in our midst.’

‘No, don’t do that, Miss Lavinia.’ Eliza took a deep breath. ‘I don’t like it, but I think I will have to go along with her decision, at least for the time being.’

‘What are you saying, Lizzie?’ Angelica demanded. ‘You were always the one to stand up for us when Pa was being unreasonable.’

‘Yes, Angel, but that was different. We can’t afford to lose our jobs and our home in the middle of winter.’

‘We could go back to the circus,’ Angelica said stubbornly. ‘I know that Pa only wanted you, but I’m sure I could fit in somewhere.’

Eliza stared at her, frowning. ‘Are you so unhappy here, Angel?’

‘I wasn’t until that woman came along. It’s obvious that she wishes to get rid of us both, Lizzie.’

Lavinia clutched Angelica’s arm. ‘Mama won’t allow that. She will do anything to make me happy. We need to go to the castle and tell her what is going on.’

‘Please don’t do anything on my behalf,’ Eliza said urgently. ‘Let me speak to Mrs Wildblood. Besides which, the captain won’t allow you to be left without a companion, Miss Lavinia.’

‘Luke seems besotted with that dreadful creature.’ Lavinia rolled her eyes. ‘Heaven knows, I thought better of her. She was nice to me when we were in London, but I think she wants to get rid of anyone who takes Luke’s attention away from her, especially you, Lizzie.’

‘Maybe I am the one who should go,’ Eliza said thoughtfully. ‘You would be safe here, Angel. I could rejoin the circus and work with Pa.’

‘No!’ Angelica and Lavinia spoke in unison.

‘Please don’t leave me,’ Angelica added tearfully.

‘Don’t get upset.’ Eliza moved to her sister’s side and gave her a gentle hug. ‘I will sort things out, and that’s a promise.’

Chapter Sixteen

Mrs Wildblood looked from Eliza to Lady Marianne and then she turned to Luke.

‘Is this what you intended? Do you want your fiancée to move into the castle immediately? What will everyone think?’

Luke shook his head. ‘I don’t care what people might say, Aunt Margery. I simply want what is best for Marianne, and she finds the dower house too small and cramped for her liking.’

‘Maybe you should have thought about that before you brought her all the way from London.’ Mrs Wildblood curled her lip. ‘This is not what we agreed, Luke.’

‘I realise that,’ Luke said miserably. ‘Perhaps we can bring the wedding forward.’

‘Certainly not.’ Marianne shot him an angry glance. ‘That would start tongues wagging. We have only just become formally engaged. What went before was a mere youthful attachment.’

‘I wouldn’t say that, Marianne. I was always sincere in my regard for you.’

Marianne tossed her head. ‘I agreed to come to Dorset, and I always keep my word, but I need to live in a style to which I am accustomed and that means moving into Crow Castle, today preferably.’

Mrs Wildblood seemed to notice Eliza for the first time. ‘Why have you brought Miss Brown here? I thought she had taken over as housekeeper in the dower house, or has that been a fiasco, too?’

‘My maid could not accompany me from London due to illness,’ Lady Marianne said coldly. ‘I do not trust the country girls to know how to care for me and my personal belongings. Brown seems to have more common sense than anyone else at the dower house.’

Mrs Wildblood raised a delicate eyebrow. ‘Are you agreeable to this change in status, Eliza?’

‘I believe it to be a temporary position, just until Miss Denham recovers from her illness.’ Eliza spoke carefully.

‘And we are very grateful to you,’ Luke said firmly. ‘But all this means that we will be living here with you, Aunt Margery.’

Mrs Wildblood shook her head. ‘Lady Marianne is welcome, as is her maid, but for propriety’s sake I suggest you move your belongings back to the dower house, Luke.’

‘But I ought to be here in case Gregory shows his face again. I doubt if he’s changed his mind about taking over the castle. He’s determined enough to try anything in order to get Crow Castle for himself.’

‘We have servants to protect us, Luke. Anyway, I don’t think Gregory has the funds to finance a challenge of ownership. I hope we’ve seen the last of that young man.’ Mrs Wildblood rose from her chair. ‘Now I am going to my room to rest. All this upheaval is very tiring. However, you may move in as and when it suits you, Marianne.’ She walked slowly to the door and Luke sprang forward to open it for her.

‘I will do as you ask, Aunt. But remember I am not far away. If there is any sign of trouble just send someone to the dower house, and I will come immediately.’

‘I’m sure we will be safe here, Luke,’ Lady Marianne said firmly. ‘Perhaps you could send a servant to make a room ready for me, Mrs Wildblood, and somewhere for Brown to sleep, too.’

‘Yes, of course. After all, this will be your home when you and Luke are married, Marianne.’

Mrs Wildblood managed a tight little smile, but Eliza sensed that it was forced. It was easy to imagine a constant tussle of wills when the two ladies were living in the same house.

‘Off you go, Brown,’ Lady Marianne said abruptly. ‘Make sure that my clothes are packed carefully and put away so that they are not creased. You will soon learn how I like things done.’ Lady Marianne sank down on one of the sofas. ‘I will wait here. Luke, you should go back to the dower house with Brown. You must designate one of the other servants as housekeeper.’

Luke moved to the doorway. ‘Come along then, Lizzie. You can help me decide whom to put in charge.’

‘Please address her properly, Luke.’ Marianne frowned ominously. ‘A lady’s maid must be almost invisible. Familiarity breeds contempt, as the saying goes.’

Eliza avoided meeting Lady Marianne’s stern gaze as she followed Luke out of the drawing room and into the wide corridor that led to the front

entrance.

Luke hesitated as he was about to open the door. 'I'm sorry about all this, Lizzie. My aunt took you and your sister on with the best of intentions, and it was never meant to turn out this way. You are worthy of better than this.'

'It's not your fault,' Eliza said hastily. 'Maybe the change in circumstances has been just too much for Lady Marianne to bear. This is an out-of-the-way place, you must admit.'

'Do you think I've been unfair expecting her to fit in with my way of life here in Crow Castle?'

'Not unfair, but perhaps you didn't give it enough thought.' Eliza shook her head. 'I'm sorry, Captain. It's not my place to criticise you or your intentions. You weren't responsible for our plight. That lies with Magicus, and now he wants me back in his act, as you know.'

'Are you tempted, Lizzie?'

Eliza met his intense gaze with a smile. 'Not really. I do miss my old friends, but working with Magicus is not for me any longer,' she laughed, adding, 'and I have Waldo to keep me company. You will let him stay here, won't you?'

Luke opened the door, and a gust of wind hurled dead leaves at them. 'Of course he may, but keep him out of sight of my aunt and Marianne.'

'I will, I promise.' Eliza wrapped her shawl more tightly around her as she followed him out into the blustery cold of a January day. The sound of waves crashing against the rocks in the cove was now so familiar that she barely noticed it, although today the wind had reached gale force. As they walked back to the dower house, Eliza could see a mist of sea spray rising above the cliff. It was a relief to go indoors.

Luke closed the door and shrugged off his coat. 'Come to the kitchen, Lizzie. I'll need you to help me choose a housekeeper. I really don't know who to pick.'

Eliza put her head on one side. 'I think there's only one person capable of handling the servants, and that is Mrs Pearce. I know she is the cook, but the girls respect her and they will do as she says. You can rely on her, of that I am certain.'

'Come with me anyway, Lizzie. You know them all better than I do.'

'All right, although I think they will do anything you ask. I'll get Agnes to help me pack up her ladyship's belongings, but I will need help to take

all her luggage to the castle.'

'Don't worry. I'll give instructions to the head groom to bring the dog cart round, and he'll do all the carrying. You can simply supervise.'

Mrs Pearce accepted the promotion, beaming with pleasure, and it seemed to please everyone, although they all protested that they would miss Eliza. She assured them it was only a temporary move and that when Lady Marianne's maid was fully recovered she would come down to Dorset to join her mistress. Having said that, Eliza took Agnes upstairs to Lady Marianne's erstwhile bedchamber, and they set about the task of packing up everything she had brought with her.

'This doesn't look like a temporary move to the castle,' Agnes said, sighing. 'It was only yesterday when I was told to unpack her ladyship's belongings. I don't think she intends to return to the dower house, do you?'

Eliza shook her head. 'No, I agree with you. I think she thought she would move into the castle from the start. It's Mrs Wildblood who isn't too happy with the change in circumstances.'

'There will be a few arguments, I'm sure,' Agnes pulled a face. 'I wasn't considered good enough to be her ladyship's maid, but we all know why she chose you, Lizzie.'

'Why was that? I'm sure I don't know the reason,' Eliza stopped packing a valise and stared at Agnes.

'Because it's obvious that the captain likes you, Lizzie.'

'That's nonsense,' Eliza said hotly. 'Don't allow that piece of gossip to spread, Agnes. The captain is a good man and if such a tale reached her ladyship's delicate ears there would be hell to pay. Do you understand?'

Agnes nodded. 'I do indeed.' She turned away and began sorting through a drawer filled with scarves and handkerchiefs.

Two hours later, with boxes and cases piled high, Eliza went in search of Joe Miller, the head groom, which was a slight exaggeration in title as he was the only groom, with a couple of local boys to help when needed. She struggled against the wind as she made her way to the stables, but she stopped at the door when the sound of deep male voices alerted her to the fact that there was a stranger in the coach house. She hesitated, trying to make out what was being said, when suddenly she recognised the voice and she knew who was speaking to Miller.

‘Good man, Joe. I knew I could rely on you.’

Eliza moved swiftly to the side of the building, peering around the corner as Gregory Fox strolled out of the stable. He had lost none of his old swagger and she would have known him at any distance by the way he walked. His arrogant attitude was obvious to anyone watching. Eliza held her breath. She did not know whether to run in the opposite direction and seek out the captain, or to follow Fox so that she could discover where he had been hiding. He disappeared into the shrubbery that surrounded the castle, and she suspected that he was going to look for a way to get inside. The captain had said he would stop at nothing to have his own way, but she had not believed him at the time. Now things looked different. Gregory was far from beaten, although it was difficult to imagine how his twisted mind was working. Rather than follow him, however, she decided it was more important to find out if he had confided in Miller. She went into the stables, calling his name.

Miller emerged from a stall with a harness in his hands. ‘Good morning, miss. What can I do for you?’

‘I believe the captain asked for the dog cart to be brought round to the front entrance. Lady Marianne has moved into the castle.’

‘Yes, miss. That’s what I was about to do.’

‘I thought I heard voices as I came round the corner. Was the captain here?’

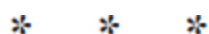
Miller met her gaze with a bland smile. ‘No, miss. It were probably me, singing. I does that when I’m on me own – not when the boys are here because they say I got a voice like a cornrake.’

Eliza could see that she was not going to get the truth from him, and she acknowledged his answer with a nod.

‘The luggage is ready, Miller. Please bring the dog cart now.’

‘It will be done directly, miss.’ Miller tipped his cap and disappeared into a stall.

Eliza could hear him talking to the horse as he put it in harness and she hurried from the stable. She was tempted to go after Fox, but she had to get back to the dower house and make sure that her ladyship’s personal effects were transported to the castle. What puzzled her most was how Fox thought he could get into the castle without being seen, and what possible reason he had for returning now. She walked briskly back to the house.



Later that day Eliza took her own things to the castle, having first made sure that Lady Marianne was happy with her own accommodation and the way her clothes had been unpacked and put away. All this time Eliza was trying to work out where Gregory had hidden himself. The castle was not a medieval building with towers and secret passages, although there were plenty of small chambers and attic rooms that might be good hiding places. Eliza made up her mind to explore further as soon as she had the chance. However, there proved to be little free time when taking care of Lady Marianne, who was a most demanding mistress. Eliza was beginning to think that Miss Denham's illness might have been a convenient excuse not to accompany her ladyship to Dorset. Of Gregory, there was no sign, and Eliza was beginning to think that he had simply been keeping an eye on the castle, which he considered was his for the taking. She decided that he was not a real threat and she put him out of her mind.

Luke moved back to the dower house and Eliza had to find a series of different excuses to return there in order to make sure that Angelica was coping without her. In fact, Angelica seemed to have the best of the bargain, as Lavinia had insisted in being allowed out of her room and they came downstairs to the dining room for their meals, after which they retired to the drawing room. Luke was all for the change in Lavinia's circumstances and he encouraged her to take short walks on days when the weather was mild enough to go outside, with Angelica accompanying her to make sure that no harm came to her. If Eliza happened to see them walking in the grounds, she would slip away, and join them, without saying a word to Lady Marianne. She dared not stay too long for fear of being found out, which would earn a sharp reprimand at best, or a tirade of anger from her ladyship. It was strange how the sweet-faced young woman could suddenly evolve into a spiteful termagant, and just as quickly revert into her former self. The latter usually happened when Luke walked into the room and Eliza doubted if he had ever witnessed his fiancée's true temperament.

Mrs Wildblood, on the other hand, had seen it all and she was not happy with the situation. Eliza suspected that she held back from saying anything against Lady Marianne for fear of being sent back to live in the dower house. Eliza did her best to keep her ladyship happy, but it was not easy.

Sometimes, late in the evening, she would wrap her shawl around her head and shoulders and creep out of the house to visit Waldo in the kennels,

where she was always sure of an affectionate welcome. On one particular evening, after a month of living from one moment to the next, Eliza had spent more time with Waldo than she had intended. She was about to leave the brick-built kennels, when she heard voices and she shrank back into the shadows.

‘We can’t keep meeting like this, Gregory.’

Eliza held her breath at the sound of Lady Marianne’s agitated voice.

‘My darling, that’s how I feel, too.’ Gregory’s tone was almost gentle, a far cry from the last time Eliza heard him speak. She pressed herself against the wall of the kennels as the couple strolled past, arm in arm.

‘I’m beginning to think I made a terrible mistake agreeing to marry, Luke.’ Marianne’s voice broke on a sob.

‘That’s what I told you from the start, my love. You are far too good for him. He’s nothing now he’s left the army, and when he’s sold his commission the funds won’t go very far when it comes to running this place. It pains me to say it, Marianne, but he only wants you for your money.’

‘I don’t want to believe that, Gregory.’

‘Of course not, my darling. Any man would be a fool not to see what a jewel you truly are. I would marry you even if you were penniless.’

‘You want to marry me?’

They came to a halt, facing each other with Gregory clutching Marianne’s hands.

‘I have nothing to offer you other than myself and my utter devotion. I am really the heir to all this, but for a quirk of fate. My mama was the eldest, but Crow Castle and the estate went to her younger brother, who was Luke’s father. I’ve been reduced to living in modest rooms in Clarges Street when I am not trying to prove my claim here.’

‘But, my dear Gregory, why would you want to live here on this tiny island? The castle is draughty and badly furnished. My mansion in London is far more comfortable. I can’t believe that I allowed Luke to bring me here in the first place.’

‘If you don’t love Luke, it is only honour that keeps you tied to him.’

‘He was such a dashing officer when we first met. I was quite overwhelmed by his presence and the romance of sending him off to battle in the Crimea.’ Marianne sighed and laid her head on Gregory’s shoulder.

‘Living here is torture, Gregory. Only a gentleman like yourself would understand that.’

Eliza clenched her fists. The treachery of this woman amazed and disgusted her. She kept silent with difficulty, although her first instinct was to call out and shame Marianne.

Waldo seemed to sense her distress, and he growled deep in his throat.

‘What was that?’ Marianne demanded shakily.

‘Luke must have bought a gun dog, my love. I thought the kennels were disused but it seems I was mistaken.’

‘It’s not a dog, Gregory. That wretched female from the circus has taken a lion as a pet. It will tear us all to shreds if it is allowed out.’

Eliza placed her arms around Waldo’s neck, holding him close and stroking his fur so that he purred like a kitten.

‘Don’t be afraid, my darling. When we are married, I will take back control of the castle, and I will shoot the beast.’

‘When we are married – is that what you really desire, Gregory?’

‘How can you even ask that, my dearest? I’ve loved you since we first met in London, years ago, but I was too poor to even think of allowing myself to hope. However, I have a plan and if you have the courage to agree to it, we will be together for ever.’

Their voices faded into the distance and Eliza strained her ears, but she could not hear what was being said and she dared not move in case Waldo took it into his head to make a noise. She waited until she was sure it was safe before giving Waldo a last loving pat. She emerged into the darkness with only the sound of the wind and the sea to keep her company. Now she faced a real dilemma. Should she go straight to the captain and tell him what she had overheard? But it would be her word against Lady Marianne’s, and she would be unlikely to admit her treachery. Gregory was too clever to be caught, although someone in the household must know of his presence. Maybe he had bribed one of the kitchen servants to keep him supplied with food, or else he was a very adept thief and had managed to steal enough to eat without leaving a trace.

Eliza quickened her pace as she walked back to the castle and let herself in through one of the tall windows at the rear of the building, which had a broken lock. She paused as she stepped into the darkness of the music room. Perhaps this was how Gregory let himself in and out of the castle without anyone knowing. One of the many clocks in the castle struck

midnight and Eliza made her way through the darkness to her room, but she knew she would be unable to sleep until she had made up her mind what to do for the best.

Next morning, after a night of waking every couple of hours and battling with her thoughts, Eliza rose early, washed in icy cold water, dressed and brushed her hair. She secured it into a neat bun at the nape of her neck before going downstairs to the kitchen to fetch Lady Marianne's morning hot chocolate. To her surprise she found Mrs Tapper, looking flushed and flustered as she interrogated the kitchen staff.

'Is something wrong, Mrs Tapper?' Eliza asked urgently. 'You look upset.'

'I've been housekeeper here for fifteen years, Miss Brown. I've never had such a thing happen to me.'

Eliza glanced at the pale faces of the kitchen maids and the belligerent outthrust of the cook's chin.

'What's wrong? Can I help in any way?'

'Not unless you know who has broken into the locked drawer in my office where I keep the housekeeping monies. All gone. Not even a penny left.'

'And a mutton pie stolen from the larder, Mrs Tapper,' Cook added, sniffing. 'I've noticed small amounts of food being taken for several days. I was going to challenge the servants about it today, ma'am.'

'We have a thief in our midst,' Mrs Tapper said grimly. 'I want you all to turn out your pockets and I will inspect your sleeping quarters directly.'

'Mrs Tapper.' Eliza cleared her throat. 'I think I might be able to help you here.'

'You? What do you know, Miss Brown?' Mrs Tapper eyed her fiercely. 'Speak up, please.'

'Mr Fox is back, or at least he was last evening.'

'Mr Gregory?' Mrs Tapper pursed her lips. 'I thought he had gone for good. But if he's back, why would he steal a mutton pie and take the money from my office? He's gentry and in no need of money.'

'I think the opposite is true, Mrs Tapper,' Eliza said carefully. 'I don't think he is an honest man.'

'He was master here for four years and looked to continue, had the captain lost his life in the fighting.' Mrs Tapper stood arms akimbo glaring at Eliza. 'He wouldn't stoop so low.'

‘Er, if I might speak, ma’am?’ One of the youngest housemaids spoke nervously.

‘Yes, what is it, Prudie?’ Mrs Tapper glared at her and the girl backed away.

‘When I lit the fire in Lady Marianne’s room, she weren’t there, ma’am.’

‘She wasn’t there?’ Mrs Tapper exchanged worried glances with Eliza. ‘What do you mean exactly, Prudie?’

‘Her bed hadn’t been slept in, Mrs Tapper.’

Eliza backed towards the doorway. ‘Leave this to me, ma’am. I’ll go up and check her room again. There must be some logical explanation.’ She left the kitchen without waiting for an answer and took the stairs two at a time with her skirts hitched up above her knees. When she reached Lady Marianne’s room her worst fears were realised. What Prudie had not noticed was that the clothes press was open and garments taken out in a hurry. Some must have been packed hastily, and others were scattered about on the floor. It was obvious that Fox was in dire need of money, and that would explain his desire for a wealthy wife, but he must have been very persuasive to convince Lady Marianne of his undying love, so much so that she had run away with him. Eliza cared little for what might happen to her ladyship, but she was desperate to save Luke from heartache. She left the room and raced downstairs.

Dawn was breaking in the east, but it was still dark when Eliza left the castle and headed for the dower house at a run. She might have prevented this disaster had she gone straight to the captain last night, but it was too late to worry about that now. She needed to speak to him urgently and tell him what had happened. The runaway couple had several hours’ head start and the damage was already done. She still had a key to the dower house, and she let herself in. Without a moment’s hesitation she went to the captain’s room. She had already thrown modesty out of the window, and this was not the time to bother about protocol. She knocked on the door.

Moments later Luke opened it, blinking sleepily.

‘Lizzie? What’s wrong? Is the house on fire?’

Eliza looked away, embarrassed by his state of undress, but he ushered her into the room, and closed the door.

‘The servants will talk,’ he added, smiling as he wrapped his dressing gown around him and tied the sash.

‘This isn’t funny,’ Eliza said crossly. ‘Something awful has happened, and it isn’t a fire, although it will cause a firestorm of gossip when the word gets out.’

Luke’s smile faded. ‘Tell me, what it is that has upset you so badly?’ He pulled up a chair. ‘Please sit down. You look done in.’

‘Last evening I was with Waldo in the kennels, and I overheard a conversation I would much rather not have listened to.’

‘All right. I can see it was upsetting. Can you bring yourself to tell me who were they and what was said?’

‘You don’t need to know exactly what passed between them, but the outcome is that Gregory Fox has returned to the castle and he has convinced Lady Marianne that he is in love with her. I hate to tell you this, but Lady Marianne has vanished. Her bed was not slept in. I think they have eloped.’

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Chapter Seventeen

‘That libertine Fox is determined to ruin me one way or another,’ Luke said angrily. His furious expression softened slightly. ‘But I can’t believe that Marianne could have been taken in by him. We were to be married in the summer.’

‘He was very persuasive, Captain.’ Eliza made an effort to sound convincing, although it had not seemed that Lady Marianne was averse to Fox’s practised charm.

Luke paced the floor. ‘What makes you think they have eloped? Maybe this is all a misunderstanding.’

‘I don’t think so, sir. Money has gone missing from Mrs Tapper’s office.’

‘I can’t believe that Marianne would have gone willingly. They can’t have travelled far.’

‘I didn’t stop to check the stables, Captain. I came straight to you.’

‘You did the right thing, Lizzie. Stay here while I go there and speak to Miller. Hopefully he can give me some more information.’

‘Do you think they have taken the dog cart? It’s the only roadworthy vehicle left in the coach house.’

‘Either that or they have gone on horseback. Although, I can’t imagine Marianne agreeing to ride out into the night. She is too used to travelling in style.’ Luke reached for his clothes, seeming to forget her presence in his haste.

‘I’ll leave you to get dressed, sir,’ Eliza said hurriedly. ‘I’ll go to the stables.’

She did not wait for his answer, and she left the room. On the ground floor she could hear the familiar sound of someone clearing out the grate in the drawing room. She stepped into the shadows to avoid being seen by Nancy, who was yawning sleepily as she made her way to the kitchen.

Outside the air was bracing and the salty scent of the sea was refreshing. Eliza could feel her cheeks stinging from the sharp breeze that caressed her face none too gently and tugged at her hair. She raced to the stables but came to a halt as Joe Miller emerged from the coach house.

‘It’s gone,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘The dog cart has gone. We’ve been robbed, miss.’

‘Is the captain’s horse still in the stable?’ Eliza asked anxiously.

‘Thieves must have come in the night. They left Nimbus but they took old Barney. He’s slow but he’s sure-footed.’ Joe pushed his cap to the back of his head. ‘Now there’ll be trouble and I’ll get the blame.’

‘You know very well who has taken the vehicle, Joe. You were aware all along that Mr Fox was hiding somewhere in the castle. You should have informed the captain.’

Joe’s eyes widened and his bottom lip trembled. ‘You won’t tell on me, will you, miss? I’ll lose me job for certain.’

Eliza chose to ignore his question. ‘They can’t take the cart along the causeway,’ she said thoughtfully.

‘No, miss. I dare say they’ll abandon it at the ferry terminal and cross to the mainland where they can hire a carriage.’

‘Saddle the captain’s horse, Joe. I’ll go and tell him what’s happened.’

‘You won’t tell the captain that I knew about Mr Fox, will you, miss?’

‘Don’t worry about that, Joe. I think the captain has more important matters on his mind than any errors of judgement you might have made.’

Eliza hurried back to the house to pass the information on to Luke.

When she reached his room, she found him fully dressed and putting on his riding boots.

‘I can see by the look on your face that it’s not good news, Lizzie. At least tell me that my horse is still there.’

‘Yes, Captain. They took the dog cart. Joe thinks they will leave it at the harbour and take the ferry to the mainland.’

‘That’s what I think, too. Did you ask him to saddle Nimbus?’

‘Yes, I did, but I think I should come with you.’

‘That won’t be necessary. Besides which, you will slow Nimbus down. I doubt if you weigh much, but a double load is a lot to ask of a horse when you want him to go fast.’

‘Even so, they might have to wait for the ferry. An unmarried lady travelling alone with a gentleman will cause much speculation and gossip. I am supposed to be Lady Marianne’s maid, so it will look better if she has me with her.’

Luke shrugged on his riding jacket. ‘You would accompany her even if she was going to London?’

‘Of course I would, if that is what you wished.’

Luke eyed her steadily. ‘It won’t be a comfortable ride, but we might be able to cut them off by taking the causeway and waiting for them at the harbour on the other side of Smallmouth Bay.’

‘That sounds like a sensible plan,’ Eliza said stoutly.

‘Then let’s not waste time talking. Even if there is an early ferry, they won’t get very far at the Weymouth end. I need to find out if Marianne really is infatuated with Fox, or if it is a passing fancy.’

‘You will just let her go if her affection is elsewhere?’

‘I would be the last man to hold a woman to a promise against her will. The mere fact that she has gone so willingly with Fox is reason enough to break off our engagement, but if she was coerced in any way I will stand by her, of course.’

It was not the most comfortable ride to the ferry terminal, even though Luke had his arms around Eliza, holding her tightly. Sharp pellets of rain mixed with sleet attacked them as Nimbus gamely cantered for most of the way but reverted to a trot when the gradient was too steep for safety. However, when they reached the terminal, it was in time to see the ferry disappearing into the darkness, its lights bobbing and swaying as it encountered steep waves.

‘There’s nothing for it,’ Luke said apologetically. ‘We’ll have to take the causeway. Are you all right, Lizzie?’

She managed a smile. ‘Yes, I’m fine. Carry on.’ She was not going to admit that every bone in her body ached. Besides which, she was not going to pass up the opportunity of seeing Lady Marianne exposed for the calculating person who could leave the man who loved her when tempted by someone with a better offer. Fox had proved himself to be ruthless when it came to getting his own way, and perhaps abducting Lady Marianne was part of his plan all along. From the little that Eliza knew of him she doubted if he cared for anyone other than himself.

They rode on, Nimbus picking his way across the stony causeway, sure-footed and showing no signs of fatigue even though he was carrying a double burden. However, when they reached the terminal on the mainland the ferry had docked and its passengers disembarked. The ferryman had little information to give them, other than the fact that he had told Fox

where he could hire a carriage that would take them to the railway station in Dorchester.

Luke turned to Eliza with a worried frown. 'I can't ask you to travel to London with me, Lizzie. It wouldn't be appropriate. But I must go. I need to speak to Marianne, but you could return to the castle. The ferry is there taking on passengers, and I will give you the money to hire a cab at the terminal.'

Eliza shook her head. 'No, sir. I've come this far and I'll go to London with you.'

'If you're sure, Lizzie. But I need to hire another horse to take us to Dorchester Station. Poor old Nimbus is a real war horse, but I can't ask too much of him.'

Eliza thought for a moment. 'If the circus is still in town Gilbert will lend me a suitable mount.'

'Won't they have moved on by now?'

'Sometimes in the winter, if the weather is inclement, they will stay longer in one place than they would normally. They had a particularly good field protected from the worst of the weather by hedgerows, so they might still be there.'

'I think Nimbus will make it that far. Maybe your friend could lend us two horses and I can leave Nimbus in his care until we return.'

'Gilbert will be pleased to oblige. He lives for his horses.'

'You were fond of him, weren't you, Lizzie?'

She shrugged. 'I am still, but I couldn't compete with his animals. They are his first love and probably his last love, too.'

'Let's mount up then, Lizzie. We'll go in search of the circus, and if they've moved on, we'll find a livery stable for Nimbus.'

'Do you think Fox will go to Lady Marianne's London home?'

'I don't think they have any choice. Gregory used to rent rooms in Dover Street, but that was some time ago. He will have to convince Marianne that he is the legal heir to Crow Castle if he hasn't done so already.'

'Do you think he wants to live there so that he can take up with his criminal activities again?' Eliza asked slowly. 'He didn't seem like a man who was interested in keeping the estate together.'

Luke vaulted onto the saddle and lifted her up in front of him with apparent ease.

‘I think that’s exactly why he wants the castle. It’s an out-of-the-way place, no doubt haunted by smugglers years ago, and a perfect cover for whatever nefarious business he has chosen.’

‘We can’t allow that to happen,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘I’ve only lived there for a short time, but I feel as though it’s been my home for ever. I will do whatever it takes to help you keep Crow Castle and everything that goes with it.’

‘I believe you, Lizzie.’ Luke urged Nimbus into a walk. ‘I count myself very fortunate to have an ally like you.’

‘Angelica and I owe you such a lot. We would have been homeless but for you and your aunt.’

‘Angelica has worked wonders with Vinnie, and I’ve come to rely on you for good sound common sense.’

Eliza nodded, although this was not a description of herself that she found flattering, or even encouraging. It made her sound like a prim and proper maiden aunt.

They rode on until they came to where the circus had been encamped, but it was obvious that they were packing up and preparing to leave. Already half the wagons had moved on and for a moment Eliza thought that Gilbert was amongst those already gone, but she spotted him at the far end of the field, attempting to catch one of his animals that had a will of its own.

‘I’ll have a word with Grey,’ Luke said as he helped Eliza dismount.

‘He might not want to help if he’s moving on with the circus,’ Eliza said hastily.

‘I can but ask him. Anyway, there’s someone who seems to want to speak to you.’ Luke smiled as he jerked his head in the direction of Mrs Sutton, who had stopped taking down a washing line and was waving frantically to Eliza. Luke rode off to help Gilbert catch the wayward horse and Mary Sutton waddled through the wet grass, arms outstretched.

‘It’s good to see you, Lizzie. But you’re too late if you want to see your pa,’ she said cheerfully. ‘He went on ahead to secure a site before dark.’

‘I didn’t come to see him, as it happens, but how are you, Mary?’ Eliza asked, giving her a hug. ‘Are you still taking care of the twins? I gather they did not fit in well with Pa’s act.’

Mrs Sutton shook her head. ‘No, love. It was a disaster from start to finish. You and Angelica were raised in the circus from birth. Those poor

mites never took to performing, so now they help me in the wardrobe and all the other tasks that get heaped upon me.'

'I'm very glad they are with you,' Eliza said earnestly. 'I felt so sorry for them when I last saw them. They did not seem very happy.'

'This life isn't for everyone, dear. Although you and your sister seemed to enjoy being in the spotlight.'

'Yes, I think we both did, but everything has changed. It's a long story but the captain and I have come to ask Gilbert a favour. We need to borrow two horses as a matter of urgency.'

Mrs Sutton's eyes lit up with curiosity. 'That sounds exciting. Where are you going?'

'The captain's fiancée has run away with another man. We need to get to the railway station in Dorchester because we think they've gone to London.'

'I'm sure Gilbert will help you. He always had a soft spot for you, Lizzie. I thought you two might make a match of it at one time.'

Eliza laughed. 'You are a true romantic, Mary. I am fond of Gil, but I think he loves his horses more than anything or anyone in the world.'

'You could be right, dear. But I must get on with packing up or Sutton will be put out and will not speak to me for a week.' She winked at Eliza and returned to sorting out the washing line.

Luke rode up to Eliza, followed by Gilbert, who was leading the errant horse.

'Lizzie, it's always a pleasure to see you,' Gilbert said, smiling broadly. 'Luke tells me you need my help.'

'Only if it's not going to put you out,' Eliza said hastily. 'Mary tells me you are all moving on today.'

'All except me.' Gilbert dismounted still holding the reins of both horses. 'My best horse, Solomon, has gone lame. I cannot move him until he has healed.'

'As I said, Grey, we just need to get to the railway station, and I need to put Nimbus to livery until we get back from London.'

'Leave him with me. I'll lend you two horses, and I'll ride with you to Dorchester. Nimbus will be fine left here until I return. I've rented a barn from the farmer who owns this field. Your horse will be safe there with Solomon. They can keep each other company.'

'We don't know how long we will be in London,' Eliza said worriedly.

‘I’m in no hurry, Lizzie.’ Gilbert patted her on the shoulder. ‘Maybe when you return, I could bring my horses to the castle. They need to rest for the remainder of the winter, and so do I.’

Eliza shot a sideways glance at Luke. She could see that he was not very keen on the idea, but they were wasting time. ‘I’m sure that will be all right, won’t it, Captain?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Luke said reluctantly. ‘We really need to go now, Grey. If you can do as you say.’

‘I’m a man of my word, Captain.’ Gilbert saluted. ‘Follow me to the barn and we’ll pick the best horses for you and Lizzie.’

Eliza fell into step beside Luke. ‘With all this delay we aren’t likely to catch up with them, are we, Captain?’

Luke shook his head. ‘I doubt it, but I have to try.’ He came to a halt. ‘They will almost certainly go to Marianne’s home. Perhaps you ought to return to the castle, Lizzie. I doubt if there is much to be achieved by your accompanying me now.’

‘Why not?’ Eliza asked, frowning. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Marianne will not need chaperoning once she is at home. You would be put in an awkward position if we went there together.’

‘I am supposed to be her maid, sir.’

‘Not when she’s in London, Lizzie.’ Luke raised his hand to acknowledge a call from Gilbert, who was standing by the open five-bar gate. ‘We’re coming.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ Eliza said grudgingly. ‘But we might still catch them at the railway station and maybe we can persuade her to come back to the castle with us. You need to tell her what kind of rogue she has fallen in with.’

Luke laughed although there was no humour in the sound. ‘Gregory has a way with women. I doubt very much if Marianne would listen to a word against him. But I will try.’

Gilbert’s horses were fresh and eager to be out on the road. It took nearly an hour and a half to get to the railway station in Dorchester, only to be informed that they had missed one train and the next one was not due for another couple of hours.

‘That settles it I’m afraid,’ Luke said reluctantly. ‘You need to return to the castle, Lizzie. There’s nothing more you can do to help me. I’ll deal

with Gregory, and I'll talk things over with Marianne. If she is genuinely in love with him, I won't stand in their way. I care about her happiness.'

'You're a better man than I am,' Gilbert said tersely. 'I would not be so forgiving if the woman I loved treated me in such a way.'

'You are not me, Grey. I want to hear Marianne's side of the story before I leap to conclusions.'

Eliza stepped between them. 'Of course, you do, Captain. I'll return to the castle if Nimbus is up to the journey.'

'I'll see her safely home,' Gilbert added. 'It might be best if Lizzie stays with the Suttons for the night as they are not travelling on until tomorrow. We can leave early in the morning. I don't fancy attempting the causeway after the dark.'

'I'm sorry to have put you in this position, Lizzie,' Luke said slowly. 'If there was any other way . . .'

'Please don't worry about me. Gilbert will make sure I get back to the castle safely. We can talk about old times on the way.' Eliza studied his expression carefully as she tried to gauge his real feelings about Lady Marianne's treachery. 'Do you think you will stay in London for long?'

'It all depends on how I find Marianne, and what Gregory's intentions are. I won't leave her with a man who is intent on ruining her reputation.'

'Of course not.' Eliza turned to Gilbert with a weary smile. 'We'd better be on our way.'

That evening, Eliza and Gilbert ate supper beneath the stars with the Suttons and the twins, Maud and Nellie. They all sat around a blazing campfire exchanging amusing memories of things that had happened during the years they had worked together in the circus ring. Maud and Nellie had little to add to the conversation, but they listened avidly and laughed in all the right places. Eliza was glad to see that the two girls had found a good home with the Suttons, which would be a great deal more congenial than trying to please the Great Magician, as she knew from experience. It seemed like old times, except for the absence of the rest of the troupe, and she could only wish that Angelica had been with her to share the experience.

It was late when Eliza said good night to Gilbert and the Suttons. A makeshift bed had been made up for her in the girls' tent, and they were sound asleep as she crept between the rough woollen blankets. The ground

was hard, but she was too tired to notice any discomfort and was soon fast asleep.

Eliza slept so soundly that she did not awaken until Maud brought her a cup of tea next morning. The scent of bacon frying and the sound of cheerful voices was temptation enough for her to rise from her bed and put on her boots. She stepped outside into a misty and very chilly morning. The sun had not yet risen, and every blade of grass was tipped with frost, as were the hedgerows. Mary Sutton was once again standing by the fire with a large frying pan in her hand as she held it over the flames. She turned to Eliza with a wide grin.

‘I remember you were partial to bacon and eggs for breakfast, Lizzie. Find a place and I’ll give you yours. You’ll need it if you’ve got a long ride ahead.’

Lizzie picked up a plate and held it out to receive a couple of rashers of crisp bacon and two fried eggs. ‘Thank you, Mary. This smells wonderful.’

‘Don’t they cook this for you in the big castle?’

‘They do, but everything tastes better when cooked outside. Besides which, you have always had a magic touch when it comes to making tasty food. I remember when Angel and I used to hang around your tent at mealtimes, hoping you might spot us and ask us in for a bite to eat.’

Mary smiled indulgently. ‘You were like two little orphans, even if Magicus was your pa.’

‘Now you have two more little girls to care for. They are very fortunate to have been taken in by you and Charlie.’

‘It benefits us even more, dear. We are a proper little family now and the twins are a great help to me.’ Mary waved to Gilbert as he emerged from his tent. ‘I cooked enough for you, too, Gil. You’ve got a long ride today if you’re taking Lizzie back to the castle.’

Gilbert came striding across the field, his boots leaving footprints on the crushed stems.

‘You are a wonder, Mary. I’ll be grateful for some breakfast, and then we should leave, Lizzie. I’ll have Nimbus on the leading rein, so we’ll be slower than if it were just us two.’

Eliza swallowed a mouthful of food. ‘I understand. I’m ready when you are, Gil. But what about your other horses?’

‘I’ll leave them in the barn. The farmer said he will let them out to pasture and take them in at night. I’ve paid him well so he’ll make sure they

are taken care of properly. Anyway, I'll be back for them in a day or two.'

Eliza finished her breakfast and Nellie rushed up to take her plate from her.

'Thank you, Nellie,' Eliza said, smiling.

'I'll wash it up, miss. It's my turn to do the dishes today.' Nellie skipped off, taking the plate and cutlery with her.

'They've settled in well since Magicus abandoned them,' Gilbert said drily. 'It seems to be his most famous disappearing act: first you and Angelica, and then Maud and Nellie.'

'They do seem happy now. I'm glad because I was so sorry for them when we took them from the orphanage. They looked lost and afraid. Magicus has a lot to answer for.'

'He is the one who has lost more now, Lizzie. So many of the old troupers have left and gone to other circuses that he had barely enough acts to put on a decent show.'

Eliza eyed him curiously. 'Is that why you and the Suttons stayed behind, Gil? Are you thinking of seeking employment elsewhere?'

'To be honest, that is why I am still here. I think Charlie Sutton is also having second thoughts about joining up with Magicus and those who are left, but they are still planning to leave today.'

'Maybe you and the others should have sacked Magicus and run the whole thing yourselves,' Eliza said slowly. 'You could lead them, Gil. You have the ability, I know you do.'

'Maybe I could have done so, had you wanted to stay with me, Lizzie. I think together we could have made the show great again.'

Eliza felt the blood rush to her cheeks. She turned her head away, for once not knowing how to respond.

She was saved from replying by Sutton hurrying towards them, clutching a pail of milk and a basket of eggs. 'I see that Mary has fed you, so no doubt you'll be leaving very shortly.' He kissed Eliza on the cheek. 'Good luck, my dear girl. The circus isn't the same without you and Angelica.' He turned to Gilbert before Eliza had a chance to say anything. 'Look after her on the road, Gilbert. We'll probably be gone by the time you return.'

Gilbert slapped him on the shoulder. 'You're a good man, Charlie Sutton. I'll catch up with you sooner or later.'

As if on cue Mary hurried from their tent to give Eliza a hug. 'Goodbye, dear. It's been lovely seeing you again, even briefly.'

Eliza took a deep breath. 'Goodbye, Mary. Goodbye, Charlie. Whenever you and the circus are in town you can be sure I will be there to clap and cheer you on, and that goes for Angelica, too.' She returned Mary's hug before turning away to hide the tears that had sprung to her eyes.

Gilbert touched her gently on the shoulder. 'Come on, Lizzie. It's time for us to be on the road. We've a long ride ahead.'

'You were always a wanderer at heart, Gilbert,' Mary said tearfully. 'Maybe you'll find what you're looking for on the island.'

'You read too many romantic stories, Mary.' Sutton backed away. 'I'll help you saddle up, Gilbert. If you stay any longer, we'll all be crying.'

They walked off together, heading towards the barn where the horses were stabled.

'You could do worse than Gilbert Grey,' Mary said, wiping her eyes on her pinafore. 'He's a good man, Lizzie.'

'He is and I'm fond of him, but as your husband said, Gilbert is a wanderer at heart.'

'But a good woman might make him want to stay in one place, Lizzie. Just think about that while you're riding back to the castle together.'

Chapter Eighteen

The ride back to Crow Castle was far from easy and it took much longer than Eliza had expected, but they arrived eventually just as the light was fading and darkness was engulfing the island. It was strangely quiet in the stable, with no sign of Joe Miller or the young boys who came in from the village to help him.

‘I’ll see to the horses.’ Gilbert took the reins from Eliza. ‘Go indoors, Lizzie. It’s too cold for you to wait around. I’ll follow when these fellows are taken care of.’

Eliza frowned. ‘I can’t think what’s happened to Miller. This isn’t like him at all.’

‘Leave them to me. It’s what I would do anyway.’

‘Thank you, Gil. I don’t know what I would have done without you.’

Eliza hurried from the stables, but she could not bring herself to walk past the kennels without visiting Waldo. He greeted her, purring happily while she stroked his mane and told him how much she loved him. He rubbed his great head against her shoulder, almost knocking her off her feet, and he whimpered when she left him, but she had to harden her heart and head for the main entrance of the castle.

The feeling that all was not well increased as she let herself into a dark entrance hall. She struck a match and lit a candle before making her way upstairs to Mrs Wildblood’s room, where she found her huddled in a chair close to the dying embers of a fire.

Eliza placed the candlestick on a nearby table. ‘Why are you sitting in the dark, ma’am? What has happened?’

Mrs Wildblood wrapped her shawl closer around her body. ‘We are ruined, Eliza. That is what has happened since you left here yesterday.’

‘I don’t understand. How could things have reached such a pass in such a short time? Miller was not in the stables. Where are the servants?’

‘Mrs Tapper left this morning, together with Cook and the parlourmaids.’

‘Why did they do that, ma’am? Everything seemed to be going well just a day or so ago.’

‘All is not well, Eliza. I discovered that they haven’t been paid for months and I am virtually penniless. We were relying on the prospect of Marianne’s dowry to restore the family fortunes and living on credit. However, if she’s really run off with Gregory there seems to be little hope of her marrying Luke.’

Eliza sank down on the nearest chair. ‘Does the captain know about this, ma’am?’

‘Not entirely. I mean, he knows that we are impecunious, but he doesn’t know that Gregory failed to pay his servants and has run up debts with all the local traders.’

‘That is shocking indeed, Mrs Wildblood. But why did they leave it until now to demand their back pay?’

‘They expected to be paid at the end of the last quarter, but they had nothing from Gregory, and now Marianne has departed, leaving us in dire straits, unless Luke manages to sell his commission. That would give us a breathing space.’

‘The captain has gone to London, ma’am. I’m sure he will come back with sufficient funds to settle all debts.’

‘We can but hope.’ Mrs Wildblood sighed. ‘I take it that you did not catch up with Marianne and Gregory.’

‘No, ma’am. The captain hopes to speak to her and to Mr Fox. Maybe Lady Marianne will have had a chance to think things through. She might have realised that she is in danger of losing a good man.’

‘I don’t think Crow Castle quite came up to Marianne’s expectations,’ Mrs Wildblood said wearily. ‘I can’t see her living here like a country squire’s wife. Really, I love my nephew, but he knows nothing about women.’

Eliza had nothing to say to this. She realised that Mrs Wildblood was expecting her to perform some miracle and make everything right again.

‘Did everyone leave the castle today, ma’am? Surely Miss Harrington would not have abandoned you in this way.’

‘Miss Harrington said that her sister was unwell and she had to travel to Somerset to care for her. She left just before Mrs Tapper and the rest of the staff.’

‘We will just have to manage, ma’am.’ Eliza piled the last few nuggets of coal onto the dying embers of the fire. ‘It seems to me that we must do

things for ourselves. We don't know how long the captain will be away for, and we have to live in the meantime.'

'Without servants it will be impossible, Eliza.'

'I agree, it might be difficult, but first thing in the morning, I'll ask Mrs Pearce and the servants from the dower house to come here. My sister and Lavinia will have to live with us for the time being.'

'That sounds sensible. However, it does nothing to help settle debts with the local shopkeepers and I haven't had anything to eat since luncheon.'

'I'm sure I can find something in the kitchen, ma'am. Leave it to me.' Eliza gave the fire a poke and flames licked up around the pieces of coal, crackling and spitting merrily. She left the room and made her way below stairs to the kitchens, where she lit a few candles and began exploring the various cupboards, the pantry and the larder. She laid her finds out on the scrubbed pine table. She was just trying to work out what she could do with what was left of a leg of ham, a heel of cheese and a few potatoes when Gilbert strolled into the room.

'I saw a light in the window, but the rest of the castle looks deserted.'

'The servants have all left because they haven't been paid for months,' Eliza said gloomily. 'Apparently matters came to a head yesterday. I knew the finances were strained, but I had no idea things were so bad.'

Gilbert eyed the food on the table. 'Are you going to make a meal from that?'

'I'm no expert cook and I have no idea what to do with these ingredients. Mrs Wildblood is all alone in the house, and she hasn't eaten since midday.'

'The horses are settled for the night and I'm starving, Lizzie. Leave this to me. I can make a meal out of anything and have done many times in the past.'

'You can cook?' Eliza stared at him in amazement. 'All these years I've known you and yet that's something new to me.'

Gilbert laughed. 'You and Angelica were always too busy to care if I had food or not, and to be fair you spent all your spare time looking after Magicus. No wonder he is lost without you girls.' He went to the range and riddled the ashes until a few faint embers struggled into life.

'He is?' Eliza shook her head. 'I can't believe that. He took on the twins to help him.'

'Poor little things,' Gilbert said sadly. 'They were terrified of him. It's just as well that Mary Sutton took a liking to them or he might have thrown

them out on the street. You know only too well what he's like, Lizzie.'

'I do indeed.' Eliza watched fascinated while he added coal and used the bellows to persuade the fire back to life. Having done that, he took a paring knife from a drawer in the dresser and began peeling the potatoes.

'If you would be good enough to find me a saucepan and fill it with water, I'll soon have these on the boil and then I'll see what I can do with the ham and the cheese. If you can find any eggs in the larder I could make an omelette.'

'I'll have another look.' Eliza took a saucepan from one of the many shelves and half-filled it with water. Having done that, she made a more thorough search of the pantry and found a tray of eggs hidden behind a small sack of flour. She cried out in triumph as if she had just struck gold. She did what she could to help Gilbert prepare the meal, and she was amazed to see how competent he was in the kitchen.

Mrs Wildblood was still in a bad mood, but when Eliza placed a tray of food on a small table beside her, together with a glass of wine, she took a sip and managed a feeble smile.

'I didn't know we had anything in the cellar, Eliza.'

'Gilbert thought he might find the odd bottle that had been missed, but he said the cellar is well stocked. It seems that Mr Fox had his wine shipped in from France by the crate.'

'No doubt avoiding duty on each bottle,' Mrs Wildblood said, taking another sip. 'This is excellent claret. At least Gregory had good taste in something.'

'Yes, ma'am.' Eliza was about to leave the room when Mrs Wildblood called her back.

'Bring me a bottle of this claret, Eliza. It has definite medicinal properties.'

'Yes, ma'am. I'll be back directly.'

Having settled Mrs Wildblood by a roaring fire, which unfortunately used the last of the coal, and having placed an uncorked bottle of claret within arm's reach, Eliza returned to the kitchen where she laid two places at the table.

Gilbert served the food, and they sat down together to enjoy their meal.

'I'll say this for Mr Fox, he had good taste in wine,' Gilbert said, raising his glass. 'Here's to an almost full cellar.'

Eliza clinked her glass with his. 'And here's to you, Gil. You managed to make a delicious meal out of almost nothing. I don't know how I would have managed if you had not accompanied me here today.'

'It was my pleasure, Lizzie. I was at a bit of a loss when the rest of the circus folk made the decision to move on. I wasn't sure what to do.'

'What now, then? Will you follow them and rejoin the troupe?'

He shook his head. 'I don't think I can work with Magicus any longer. It was all right while Mr Ward ran things, but Magicus lacks the human touch. Anyway, I'll come to a decision in a day or two. Perhaps I could stay here until the captain returns. I'd feel happier if I knew you weren't left on your own.'

'I would enjoy your company, although I can look after myself.'

'I don't doubt it, Lizzie, but you have enough to do without taking care of the stables as well. It's fortunate in a way that your head groom left, as it leaves something positive for me to do.' Gilbert smiled. 'I could give riding lessons to make a bit of money.'

'And I could take in lodgers,' Eliza said, laughing. She stared at him, suddenly serious. 'Do you know, Gil. That might be the answer.'

He piled up the used crockery and cutlery. 'What are you talking about, Lizzie?'

'Not lodgers or riding lessons, but the castle is huge. We put up almost all the circus performers and crew with ease. We could turn it into a hotel.'

Gilbert dumped the plates into the stone sink with a clatter. 'Who would want to come to this wild place in the middle of winter?'

'I don't know,' Eliza said, frowning. 'Maybe some people simply wish to get away from their day-to-day lives. After all, this is a magnificent spot. Even in terrible weather there is always something to look at and wonder. People living inland might long to see waves crashing against the rocks.'

'Maybe, but how would they know where to come, Lizzie?'

'How do people know that the circus is coming to town?' Eliza warmed to the point. 'They know because we used to advertise. We used to put up fliers in the next town or village, and the local newspapers printed stories about us.'

'Yes, I take your point, but all that costs money, which is in short supply. You would have to settle all the household debts first and pay the servants what is due to them.'

‘You’re right,’ Eliza said slowly. ‘I’ll have to think hard about that, but there must be a way. First thing in the morning I need to go to the dower house and speak to Mrs Pearce and the other servants about coming to the castle to work.’

Gilbert drained his glass and refilled it from the almost empty bottle of claret. ‘If Lady Marianne chooses to return and marry the captain, all your troubles will be over, Lizzie.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Eliza said doubtfully. She had a feeling in the pit of her stomach that if Marianne decided to marry Luke it would be the end of her time at Crow Castle. She rose to her feet. ‘I’m tired, Gil. I’ll tidy up in the morning.’ She left the kitchen without giving him a chance to respond.

Mrs Pearce listened intently while Eliza explained the situation in which she found herself, sparing no details. She came to a halt, waiting for Mrs Pearce to speak.

‘Well, Miss Brown, I can see you have a problem, but I only came to the dower house as a favour in the first place.’

‘I realise that Mrs Pearce. I’m so very grateful. I know I’m asking a lot of you, and I can’t promise to pay any of you until the captain returns.’

‘When will that be, Miss Brown?’

‘I don’t know, and that’s the truth. It could be tomorrow or it might be a week or even more, but we have to manage somehow.’

Mrs Pearce hesitated for a moment and then she nodded. ‘I’ve always fancied working in the castle, but I can’t speak for the others. Then there’s Miss Lavinia and your sister – will they be staying here on their own?’

Eliza shook her head. ‘No, that’s not possible. I’m going upstairs to speak to them both, but I wanted to ask you first. We can’t manage without a good cook.’

‘Well, now, if you put it like that I can’t very well refuse,’ Mrs Pearce said, smiling.

‘Thank you, that’s all I wanted to know. I’ll speak to Agnes, Jessie and Nancy later.’

‘Miss Lavinia and Miss Angelica came down for breakfast. I expect they are still in the dining room,’ Mrs Pearce said hastily. ‘They went out for a short walk yesterday.’

‘That’s excellent. I’ll go and see them now.’ Eliza left the kitchen and made her way to the dining room where Lavinia and Angelica were just

finishing their breakfast.

‘You’re back then,’ Angelica said, smiling. ‘Did you manage to catch up with Marianne?’

Eliza looked longingly at the slices of toast nestling in a silver rack. ‘Do either of you want that toast? I haven’t eaten yet today.’

‘Sit down and join us, Lizzie.’ Lavinia pointed to a chair next to her. ‘Tell us all about your adventure chasing the reluctant bride.’

Eliza smiled as she sat down and reached for the toast. ‘Is there any coffee left in the pot, Angel?’

Angelica picked up a bell and rang it energetically. ‘Agnes will fetch fresh coffee and more toast if you wish, Lizzie. What’s going on? Do tell.’

‘We went to the railway station, but Marianne and Gregory had left on an earlier train, or so we assume. The captain decided to go after them, while I stayed at the circus ground with Gilbert. We had supper with the Suttons, and it was too late to ride home so we stayed there for the night. We came home yesterday to find that Mrs Tapper and all the servants had left the castle because they haven’t been paid for months.’

‘Good gracious, how awful.’ Lavinia stared at her in horror. ‘How can my mama manage without servants?’

‘I found her alone in the castle, sitting in the dark by a fire that had almost burned to ash.’ Eliza buttered a slice of toast and reached for the quince preserve. ‘Luckily Gilbert had ridden home with me, and he was a great help. He turned out to be a very good cook, even though there was very little left in the larder.’

Angelica and Lavinia exchanged meaningful glances.

‘So, he’s at the castle now?’ Angelica’s lips quivered as if she were trying not to laugh.

‘Don’t look like that,’ Eliza said, frowning. ‘He only came to look after the captain’s horse and to make sure I got home safely.’

‘I’m sure he did. He was always sweet on you, Lizzie.’ Angelica winked at Lavinia.

‘And I’m fond of him,’ Eliza said calmly. ‘Don’t make more of it than it is, Angel. I feel safer with him around, especially at the moment.’

‘What do you mean?’ Lavinia’s eyes widened in fear. ‘Do you think the smugglers or whatever they are will come back?’

Eliza had a vision of the cellar well stocked with expensive wine, but she shook her head. ‘No, of course not. Dawkins was caught and is probably in

prison now. Who knows what Gregory Fox was up to, but he has gone to London with Lady Marianne.'

'So, what happens now, Lizzie?' Angelica asked eagerly.

Eliza opened her mouth to answer just as Agnes entered, bobbing a curtsey.

'You rang, Miss Lavinia?'

'Yes, Agnes. We need some more toast and a fresh pot of coffee.'

Agnes took the silver coffee pot from the table and hurried from the room.

'Well, Lizzie. What were you going to say?' Angelica demanded.

'Just that you two might be more comfortable in the castle from now on. I will have to close the dower house up until the captain returns. I just hope he will have some funds to pay Mrs Pearce and the other servants.'

'What happens if he doesn't have any money?' Lavinia asked nervously. 'Will we be thrown out of the castle?'

Eliza tossed her head. 'Not if I have anything to do with it, Miss Lavinia. I will think of something, I promise you that.'

'You aren't a servant in my eyes, Lizzie. We are all relying on you to tide us through these bad times. Please call me Vinnie. You and Angelica are my friends.'

'Your mama won't approve,' Eliza said firmly. 'Perhaps when we are alone together, I will call you that, but in front of Mrs Wildblood I still have to be formal. There's no getting away from the fact that Angel and I are servants.'

Angelica giggled. 'We haven't been paid yet, Lizzie.'

'I thought of a way to support us all,' Eliza said slowly. 'But I need to think it through before I go any further.'

The door opened and Agnes edged in carrying a tray of coffee and another rack of toast, which she laid on the table.

'Thank you, Agnes. That will be all.' Eliza reached for the coffee pot, but she hesitated with her fingers touching the handle. 'Is there something else, Agnes?'

'Oh, miss. Is it true that we are all to be sacked and the dower house closed for good?'

Eliza sighed. 'No, Agnes. At least part of it is true in that I am forced to close the dower house as a temporary measure, but I am hoping that you, Jessie and Nancy will come and work at the castle. If you get everyone

together in the kitchen I will come and speak to you when I've finished my breakfast.'

'Yes, Miss Brown.' Agnes hurried from the room, closing the door behind her.

Angelica leaned forward eagerly. 'What is your amazing idea, Lizzie? Do tell us.'

'It's simple really,' Eliza said, taking another slice of toast and buttering it. 'We run the castle as a hotel. We would have to start off slowly because it's midwinter, but by the spring and summer we might have made a name for ourselves.'

Lavinia frowned thoughtfully. 'I suppose it could work. But where will you find the money to pay the servants we have now, Lizzie?'

'That's the most pressing problem,' Eliza said seriously. 'I am trying hard to think of a way, but first we need to get you all to the castle and close this house up.'

'I will help Vinnie to pack.' Angelica jumped to her feet. 'We can choose our own rooms if we go to the castle this morning.'

Lavinia rose more slowly. 'I want one that overlooks the cove.'

Eliza laughed at their eagerness. 'Perhaps you had better wait until I have persuaded all the servants to move to the castle, otherwise you will have wasted your time, and I will have to think of something else.'

With no argument from the servants, the move to the castle began straight away. It took the rest of the day to make sure that everything necessary had been transferred, and that the rooms had been allocated to everyone's satisfaction. The dower house was shuttered and locked up until such time as it was possible to open it again. Gilbert was very helpful when it came to carrying heavy bags and boxes of kitchen equipment that Mrs Pearce insisted were absolutely necessary if she was to perform her duties satisfactorily.

The main problem then was to persuade the local coal merchant to make a delivery before settling the account, and the same went for Farmer Coggins, who kept the castle supplied with milk, butter, eggs and cheese. Then there was Mr Roper, who kept the village shop. His bills had been piling up until he refused to fill another order unless they were settled in full. It transpired that Nancy was his niece, and she agreed to accompany Eliza to the shop in order to persuade her uncle that their need was urgent.

Eliza had little hope of success, and she could not in her heart blame Mr Roper for his refusal to supply them with anything more, but she had to try. Hopefully the captain would return soon with sufficient funds to keep them from starvation, or at least with Lady Marianne and her fortune.

Eliza's next call was on Farmer Coggins, but he was adamant that he would not let her have a single egg until his bill was paid. She returned to the castle, fighting back tears, but Mrs Pearce bristled with anger.

'You leave Ned Coggins to me, Miss Brown. He was sweet on me when we were younger. We walked out together after church on Sundays for quite a while.'

Eliza was instantly diverted. Somehow, she could not imagine Mrs Pearce as young and attractive. 'Did you fall out over something?'

Mrs Pearce laughed. 'More like someone, dear. I met my Billy and that was the end of me flirting with anyone else. But I kept on friendly terms with Ned. He's a decent enough sort of fellow. Leave it to me, Miss Brown. We'll have our supplies restored or my name is not Dora May Pearce.' She tossed her head and laughed.

'Well, between us we should have enough to eat for a while,' Eliza said, smiling. 'But we still need to convince the coal merchant to deliver.'

'Just tell him that his younger sister, Agnes, is shivering with cold at Crow Castle.' Mrs Pearce nodded wisely. 'Pete Flew is very fond of Agnes, so I'm told. In fact, it might be best if you send Agnes to see him first. He'll be impressed by her being moved to the castle. He'll probably see it as promotion.'

'I hope you're right, Mrs Pearce,' Eliza said earnestly. 'Can I leave Agnes to you?'

Mrs Pearce nodded. 'Yes, of course, miss. We'll have the cold castle warmed up in no time at all.'

It had not been easy, but at the end of the day there were fires lit in all the major rooms of Crow Castle, and Mrs Pearce had enough ingredients to make a reasonable dinner. Mr Roper had been reluctant at first, but Nancy used her youthful charm to persuade him to part with necessities, with the promise of full payment as soon as the captain returned from London. Mrs Pearce was quietly triumphant when she demonstrated her success in obtaining necessities from Farmer Coggins's dairy. That evening everyone had a good meal and the family occupied a warm dining room. Gilbert

made another foray into the cellar, and he opened a bottle of burgundy to celebrate their modest success. Eliza was happy to join in the toast, but she knew that their future depended upon the captain, and she could only hope that he would return sooner rather than later.

At dinner that evening Mrs Wildblood insisted that Eliza should join them.

‘You are not exactly a servant, Eliza,’ she said as they took their seats at table. ‘You are more like a personal assistant than a housekeeper. I value your opinion and I’ve come to rely on your good judgement.’

‘I’m flattered, ma’am,’ Eliza said slowly.

‘Mama is quite right,’ Lavinia added firmly. ‘You and Angelica have been our saviours. I don’t know how we would have managed without you.’

‘I’ll raise a glass to that.’ Mrs Wildblood sipped her wine with obvious enjoyment. ‘I can’t imagine where Gregory got his supplies, but he must have had a very good source. This is excellent burgundy.’

‘I agree, ma’am,’ Gilbert said, raising his glass to his lips. ‘Your nephew has inherited a valuable collection of vintage wines.’

Mrs Wildblood drained her glass and held it out for a refill. ‘Ah, therein lies a tale. It is not generally known, but Luke’s inheritance of the castle, its contents and a sizeable fortune, relies on one thing only.’

‘What is that, Mama?’ Lavinia asked eagerly. ‘Don’t keep it a secret.’

‘Luke will inherit a substantial sum of money as well as the castle on the day he marries.’

Eliza was the first to speak. ‘But, ma’am, what will happen if Lady Marianne decides she does not wish to return to Crow Castle?’

‘Then we will all be looking for another home. Gregory knew this, which is why he was so confident that he would one day inherit everything despite being second in the line of succession. He will have won if Lady Marianne turns Luke down.’

‘But Luke could find another bride,’ Gilbert said slowly. ‘Why is it such a problem?’

Mrs Wildblood sighed. ‘A time limit was set in his grandfather’s will. Luke must marry before his twenty-sixth birthday, on the twelfth of March, or everything is lost.’

Chapter Nineteen

‘Why would Captain Wildblood’s grandfather impose such a condition on him?’ Eliza asked, breaking the silence that had followed Mrs Wildblood’s announcement.

‘My father-in-law disapproved of Luke being an army officer. He thought it more important for him to carry on the line and look after Crow Castle and the estate. The inheritance goes to Luke but if he dies in action then Gregory is next.’

Lavinia frowned. ‘But Cousin Luke is selling his commission. He is no longer in the army.’

‘Very true, Lavinia,’ Mrs Wildblood said, nodding. ‘All he has to do now is to convince Lady Marianne that he is sincere in his affection for her, and that living on the island would be to her liking.’

‘Cousin Luke can be very charming when he chooses to be so,’ Lavinia replied with a wry smile. ‘Don’t you think so, Angel?’ she added slyly.

Angelica shrugged. ‘Of course I do, but I am a realist, Vinnie.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. We have enough problems without adding a lovelorn servant to the case.’ Mrs Wildblood drained her glass and rose to her feet. ‘Let’s hope that Luke can persuade her ladyship that life on a small island would be preferable to living in luxury in London and the Nesbit country estate in Gloucestershire. However, I’m exhausted after all this upheaval, so I’ll say good night. You should go to bed, too, Lavinia. You’re looking pale and tired, my dear.’

‘Yes, Mama.’ Lavinia half rose to her feet but sat down again as soon as the door closed on her mother. ‘I’m not at all tired, Angelica. Shall we have a game of cards?’

Angelica glanced at Eliza. ‘Shall we, Lizzie?’

Eliza smiled. ‘Perhaps Gilbert might like to play with you, but I need to go outside and settle Waldo for the night. The poor animal will think I’ve deserted him today.’

‘I swear you would have him living indoors if you thought you could get away with it,’ Angelica said, laughing.

‘Of course she would,’ Gilbert agreed, smiling. ‘Waldo was always Lizzie’s pet.’

‘That is true,’ Eliza said calmly. ‘I won’t deny it, but you are exactly the same with your horses, Gil.’

‘Yes, where are they now?’ Angelica asked eagerly. ‘You only brought a couple with you, and Eliza said the circus has moved on.’

‘I made an arrangement with the farmer,’ Gilbert said casually. ‘My horses need to rest and build up their strength for the coming season. They can remain on his land until such time as I decide to rejoin the circus.’ He stood up. ‘Shall we adjourn to the drawing room, ladies? I believe you challenged me to a game of cards. What is it to be? Whist, Hearts or Cribbage?’

Angelica pushed back her chair and rose to her feet, pausing to help Lavinia to stand. ‘We’ll start with Hearts. It’s Vinnie’s favourite and she wins because she cheats.’

Lavinia’s cheeks reddened. ‘I do not cheat. That’s a cruel lie, Angel.’

‘We will all play by the rules,’ Gilbert said, winking at Eliza as she went to open the door. ‘Give Waldo a kiss from me, Lizzie. If you dare.’

Eliza tossed her head. ‘I’d rather kiss Waldo than most men, Gil.’ She could hear them laughing as she closed the door behind her. She collected her cloak on the way to the kennels where she spent a good half an hour with Waldo, who licked her face and purred with pleasure as she stroked his mane.

‘If only everyone was as sweet-natured as you, Waldo,’ Eliza said softly. ‘There would be no problems in the world. I just hope that Luke manages to persuade Lady Marianne to come home.’ However, even as the words left her lips, she knew that it was a lie. In the beginning she had thought that Lady Marianne Nesbit was a charming person, but her opinion had changed recently, and she pitied any man who chose to marry a title and a pretty face without getting to know the person beneath the silk and satin. It was true that Marianne’s fortune could save Crow Castle, but whether or not it would bring happiness to her and Luke was another matter. Even worse, what would happen to Luke, his mother and Lavinia if Marianne decided to marry Gregory? Eliza sighed and leaned against Waldo’s warm body. If only there was another way to keep the castle from falling into the wrong hands. She knew she would sleep little that night. She could not rest until she had thought of a way to put things right.

She said a reluctant good night to Waldo and made her way back to the castle. As Eliza passed the drawing room, she could hear laughter, but she was not tempted to join in the card game. Tonight, she must think hard about what to do next since no one else seemed capable of sorting out their current and pressing problems.

There seemed to be no permanent answer to their problems and Eliza took each day as it came. The weather had taken a turn for the worst and Gilbert had been persuaded to stay on for a while, which suited Eliza as she felt safer with him around and he was good company.

Life resumed a normal pattern, despite Luke's continued absence and a painful lack of funds. Eliza managed somehow to persuade the local tradesmen to continue allowing them credit in the hope that Luke would return soon with the wherewithal to pay their considerable debts. In the meantime, she kept the servants occupied with preparing the unused rooms for a purpose she kept to herself. She had not given up on her idea of running the castle as a hotel, but the harsh winter weather was not likely to encourage people to venture from their warm homes, and she would need Luke's permission to turn his ancestral home into a financial concern.

For some reason everyone kept asking her when he was likely to return, to which she replied that she had no idea as he had not contacted her or his aunt. Eliza did her best to appear cheerful and confident but inwardly she was anxious and feared the worst. If Gregory Fox had persuaded Lady Marianne to marry him, then the castle and its land would be lost, unless Luke married before his birthday. Eliza's heart ached for him, in that he must be suffering after such cavalier treatment from the woman he loved. She waited daily for news, but the days went by and she found herself leaning more and more on Gilbert, whose cheerful nature kept everyone feeling that things would improve.

Despite the household's ever-stricter economies the tradesmen were becoming increasingly reluctant to extend their credit any further. Then, just as matters were so desperate that Eliza was about to tell Mrs Wildblood that they would have to let the remaining servants go and close most of the rooms in the castle for lack of coal and candles, she was prevented from saying anything by a sudden noise in the courtyard below. She ran to the window and opened it. A gust of salt-laden air slapped her in the face, and

she could see Nancy waving to her. Gilbert was struggling to open the castle gates as the wind battered the island.

‘What is it, Brown?’ Mrs Wildblood asked tiredly. ‘I hope we aren’t being dunned by creditors.’

‘I don’t think so, ma’am.’ Eliza shielded her eyes with her hand, and a cry of pleasure escaped her lips. ‘I think it’s the captain. He’s come home, Mrs Wildblood.’

Eliza did not wait for a response. She slammed the window and ran from the room, picking up her skirts as she raced downstairs and out through the main entrance.

‘It’s Captain Wildblood, miss,’ Nancy said, dancing up and down. ‘He’s come to save us.’

Eliza hurried past her, coming to a halt as Luke rode into the castle grounds. Gilbert closed the gates behind him.

‘Luke, I mean, Captain Wildblood, you’re home at last.’ Eliza took the reins from him as he dismounted. ‘Thank goodness you’re here.’

Gilbert strode up to them, taking the reins from Eliza’s hands. ‘I’ll take care of the horse. The captain looks perished, Lizzie. Best get him inside and give him a tot of brandy.’

‘I’m perfectly fine, thank you, Gilbert. But I’ve been riding for hours, and a cup of coffee would be most welcome.’ Luke turned to Eliza, but his ready smile faded. ‘What’s the matter? Has anything happened to upset you?’

‘Come inside out of the cold.’ Eliza led the way into the castle, stopping in the entrance hall. ‘Nancy, take the master’s hat and cloak. Ask Mrs Pearce to make a pot of coffee.’

‘We used the last of the coffee a week ago, miss,’ Nancy said in a low voice.

‘Well, tea then.’ Eliza tried not to sound impatient.

‘Them leaves has been used and dried and used again, miss. I doubt if they’ve got as much strength as a newborn babe.’

‘Do what you can then, Nancy.’ Eliza waited until Nancy had walked off, half-buried in Luke’s heavy cloak with his hat balanced precariously on top of his leather gloves.

‘What’s been going on in my absence, Lizzie?’ Luke demanded, catching her by the hand as she was about to walk away.

‘We owe money everywhere, Captain. What has kept you away for so long?’

‘I had to talk seriously to Marianne, but first I had to find her and Gregory.’

‘She did not go home?’

‘She had been there only to collect some of her clothes and then they had travelled on by train to Scotland.’

Eliza stared at him in surprise. ‘To Scotland?’

‘My cousin was taking no chances. He had persuaded her that it would be very romantic to get married over the anvil in Gretna Green.’

‘But surely Lady Marianne wanted a proper wedding in London?’

‘Marianne is easily swayed, Lizzie. I learned that during our time together. She believed Gregory when he said that he is the rightful heir to Crow Castle and the family fortune. He painted me as the villain of the piece. He convinced her that I was only after her money, which is not true. I genuinely thought I was in love with her.’

‘I can’t believe that she was so taken in, although from what I overheard by accident, he can be very convincing. So did you follow them to Scotland?’

Luke nodded. ‘Yes, of course I did.’

‘What happened?’ Eliza asked breathlessly. ‘Did you manage to stop the wedding?’

‘No, in fact I acted as a witness.’ Luke laughed. ‘Don’t look so shocked. I had spent a whole evening trying to talk sense into the pair of them, but Gregory told Marianne that I will lose the castle if I am not married before my twenty-sixth birthday, and that was enough to convince her that I was only interested in her dowry.’

‘And she believed him?’

‘It didn’t look good for me, Lizzie. If I were to be completely honest, I think I was in love with a dream rather than a real woman. I realised then that I didn’t know Marianne at all.’

Eliza shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, but it doesn’t help the situation now. Mrs Wildblood told me about your grandfather’s will. It seems very unfair.’

‘I suppose, considering my chosen profession, it was not so unreasonable.’

‘But you are not in the army now,’ Eliza said, frowning. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘No, I am not in the army now. Fortunately, I managed to sell my commission, which is partly why I have been away for so long. You must stop worrying, Lizzie. I have enough money to keep Crow Castle going for some time.’

‘We have a lot of debt, Captain. The tradesmen have stopped supplying us with just about everything.’

‘We will pay them today, but first I should see my aunt and tell her what’s happened. We will deal with one thing at a time, but I need to warn her that Gregory will be hovering not too far away, just waiting for my birthday when he plans to evict us from the castle.’

‘There must be a way to prevent that happening,’ Eliza said as she followed him up the narrow flight of stairs to the drawing room, where a fire had been lit earlier that morning. The rest of the castle was freezing.

Mrs Wildblood stood up when she saw Luke and she held her arms out to him. ‘Luke, I have never been so pleased to see anyone.’ In an unusual show of affection, she gave him a genuine hug. ‘We have been quite desperate.’

‘That is over for now, Aunt.’ Luke kissed her on the cheek. ‘I will visit the tradesmen after I have had something to eat and drink, if there is such a thing as a crust of bread in the kitchens, and I will settle all the bills. Eliza can accompany me with a list of necessities, and they will deliver them in time for us to have a decent dinner.’

That evening everyone enjoyed a good meal. Luke went down to the cellar and brought up two bottles of excellent claret with which to celebrate his return and the sale of his commission. Conversation at table was deliberately light-hearted, but Mrs Wildblood, having downed three glasses of wine, was not going to avoid the issue any longer. She fixed Luke with a hard stare.

‘Well, Luke. You say that Gregory has married Lady Marianne. What are you going to do now? Are you going to give in without a fight? Are you going to allow us all to be thrown out on the street?’

‘That’s not fair, Mama,’ Lavinia protested angrily. ‘Give Luke a chance to explain.’

Luke smiled at her, holding up his hand. ‘It’s a fair comment, Vinnie.’ He turned to his aunt. ‘You are right, of course. I’m afraid I have let you down badly.’

‘You could still inherit if you do what Grandpapa wanted,’ Lavinia said seriously. ‘I’ll marry you, Luke.’

‘Don’t talk such nonsense.’ Mrs Wildblood raised her wine glass to her lips and drank the last few drops. ‘You are a child, Lavinia.’

‘I’m seventeen, Mama.’ Lavinia pouted and her eyes filled with tears. ‘I’m not a baby.’

Luke reached across the table to cover Lavinia’s hand with his. ‘Of course not, Vinnie. I appreciate the offer, but you will find someone much more suitable than me.’

‘You haven’t even come out yet, Lavinia,’ Mrs Wildblood insisted. ‘But perhaps we could find you a more suitable bride, Luke.’

‘There is only a week until my birthday, Aunt Margery. I don’t know anyone who would take me on at such short notice.’

‘It would be more a business arrangement,’ Mrs Wildblood said, warming to the idea. ‘If we could find a respectable young woman who would agree to marry you and stay with you for long enough to secure the castle and the inheritance, you could afford to divorce her and settle a reasonable sum on her.’

‘That seems rather harsh,’ Luke said slowly. ‘And very unfair on the poor woman concerned.’

Eliza cleared her throat. ‘Have you anyone in mind, Captain?’

Luke met her gaze with a wry smile. ‘Are you offering, Miss Brown?’

‘Lizzie would be ideal,’ Angelica said eagerly. ‘You would do it for the good of the family, wouldn’t you, sister?’

Eliza rose to her feet. ‘You’re forgetting that we are servants, Angel. We are not family and never will be.’ She began clearing the dessert plates. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I’ll ring for Agnes to clear the table. I need to settle Waldo for the night.’ She did not wait for a response and rang the bell before hurrying from the room. The sound of their voices echoed off the stone walls, and she could still hear them talking excitedly as she left the castle.

She had just given Waldo some food and made sure he had plenty of water when the sound of footsteps on the cobblestones made her look around.

‘Are you all right, Lizzie?’ Gilbert stood in the doorway. ‘You seemed upset when you left the dining room.’

‘Maybe I was just angry because Angelica put me in such an awkward position. It was embarrassing.’

‘But you didn’t dislike the idea of being the sacrificial lamb?’

‘Don’t you start, Gil. I get enough of that from Angel and Vinnie. My sister forgets that we are in a precarious position in the Wildblood household. We are servants even though we are allowed privileges such as taking our meals with the family.’

‘Mrs Wildblood seems to rely on you completely, Lizzie.’ Gilbert moved closer to Waldo and stroked his head. ‘If you volunteered for the position, you would have the opportunity to put your plan of turning the castle into a hotel into action. You could really save the family fortune.’

‘At what cost to me, Gil? I would give everything to the Wildblood family, only to be cast aside if and when Luke finds a more suitable wife.’

‘Then I will marry you, Lizzie,’ Gilbert said lightly.

‘You always turn everything into a joke,’ Eliza said crossly. She bent over Waldo, dropping a kiss on top of his head. ‘I will stick to Waldo. He’s a faithful old lion.’

‘I’ll always be there in the background,’ Gilbert added firmly. ‘I’ll be around when you need me, Lizzie.’

She laughed. ‘No, you won’t, Gil. As soon as the weather improves you will be off to be reunited with your horses and then you’ll be on the road again to join the circus. There’s no point denying it. I know you only too well.’

‘That’s true,’ Gilbert said ruefully. ‘But I meant what I said. I would marry you tomorrow if you would have me.’

Even in the semi-darkness with only a hint of moonlight, Eliza could see that Gilbert was serious and she was touched. She leaned over to brush his cheek with a kiss.

‘Thank you, Gil. I’ll always love you, but as a dear friend.’

He gave her a lop-sided grin. ‘I was afraid you might say that. Go back indoors, Lizzie. It’s chilly in here but Waldo has a heap of straw to keep him warm. I’ll lock up.’

‘Good night, Gil.’ Eliza left quickly and returned to the castle. She had barely walked into the entrance hall when Agnes pounced on her.

‘Miss Brown, you’re wanted in the drawing room. Mrs Wildblood wants to speak to you urgent, like.’

‘All right. I’ll go there now. Thank you, Agnes.’ Eliza made her way slowly upstairs to the drawing room. She had a feeling she was not going to like what Mrs Wildblood had to say.

‘Do sit down, Eliza,’ Mrs Wildblood said firmly. ‘I have something to ask you.’

Eliza had the uncomfortable feeling that this was not going to be an easy conversation, but she sat down anyway, folding her hands in her lap.

‘What is it you wish to ask, ma’am?’

‘You know what our problem is, Eliza. I am asking you to help solve it.’

‘I don’t understand, ma’am. What could I do?’

‘You know the terms of my late husband’s father’s will. I don’t think you are immune to my nephew’s charm. I have seen the way you are together, even if you do not admit to your feelings for him.’

‘Let me be clear about this, ma’am.’ Eliza took a deep breath. ‘Are you suggesting that I might be the person who marries the captain in order for him to claim his inheritance?’

‘I think you owe it to this family to help in our time of need. I took you and your sister in at a time when it was hardly convenient to me to do so. You have been treated like family.’

Eliza had a sudden flash of memory of when she was made to shovel snow in the back yard of the London house for hours on end and treated to nothing but scorn and ridicule by Cook and the housekeeper.

‘Not always, ma’am.’

Mrs Wildblood waved that aside. ‘Nonetheless, you owe us something, and I have a way in which you can repay the whole family. I am suggesting that you marry my nephew and make everyone believe that it is a love match.’

‘Does the captain know what you propose, ma’am?’

‘Of course, I spoke to him about it first. However, he is against putting you in such an invidious position, Eliza. It would, of course, be a marriage of convenience but it would be up to you to convince him that you would do this freely for the sake of the family who took you and your sister in.’

‘I can’t do that, Mrs Wildblood. It isn’t fair to ask this of me.’

Mrs Wildblood nodded. ‘I agree entirely. It is not fair, as you say, but I am desperate to keep a roof over our heads. You know what the consequences will be should Luke not be able to fulfil the terms of the will.’ Mrs Wildblood rose to her feet. ‘Help me to my room, Eliza. You may have

tonight to consider your options, but I want an answer in the morning. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Eliza proffered her arm. ‘I told Nancy to light a fire in your room. It should be warm by now.’

A faint smile curved Mrs Wildblood’s lips. ‘You are a thoughtful young woman, Eliza. If you were well born, I would welcome you into the family. As it is, we cannot afford to be choosers.’

It took a while for Eliza to get Mrs Wildblood to her room and help her undress, but eventually she had her settled in her four-poster bed with the curtains drawn to keep out the draughts. Eliza banked up the fire and blew out the candles as she left, closing the door behind her. She was about to go downstairs to the kitchen to make a cup of cocoa for herself when she met Luke on the stairs. He gave her an apologetic smile.

‘I can see that my aunt has already spoken to you, Lizzie.’

‘Yes, she gave me until tomorrow to come to a definite decision.’

‘It is a preposterous request,’ Luke said carefully. ‘I don’t want you to feel beholden to us in any way.’

‘What are you saying?’ Eliza met his look with a steady gaze. ‘Do you want me to refuse? Perhaps you have someone else you might ask?’

‘I thought I was genuinely in love with Marianne. Now I realise that I was in love with a dream. We were both very young when we became engaged, and I was about to be sent to the Crimea. It all seemed very romantic back then.’

‘You haven’t answered my question.’ Eliza stood her ground. It was suddenly vital to know the truth.

‘There is no one else I could or would ask. I realise that this is a dire situation for all of us. If I don’t fulfil my grandfather’s wishes we will all be homeless and the money from the sale of my commission will run out very quickly. The only thing I can say is that if you should decide to do what my aunt suggests, it would be a marriage of convenience. I would not impose upon you, and I would treat you with all due respect. You and I have always got along well, Eliza. I would do my utmost to take care of you and your sister. You would want for nothing.’

‘Except my freedom,’ Eliza said quickly. ‘I would have to pretend to be a dutiful wife, even though I knew in my heart it was a lie.’

‘Not a lie exactly. I have a deep regard for you. Any man would be proud to be married to a woman like you, Eliza.’

‘But you don’t love me, Luke.’

‘I have genuine feelings for you, Lizzie. I respect you as a person and I would do nothing to make you unhappy.’

‘Are you sure you aren’t simply panicking because there is only a week left until your birthday?’ Eliza shook her head. ‘If we were to marry so suddenly it would be obvious that it was merely to gain your inheritance.’

‘I don’t see why people would think like that,’ Luke said earnestly. ‘Anyone who knows you would think that I was a very lucky man. You are a beautiful, kind and generous woman, Eliza Brown. Any man would be proud to have you at his side.’

Eliza eyed him curiously. ‘While you were away,’ she said slowly, ‘I had the idea of turning the castle into a hotel. I thought we could make it profitable.’

‘That’s a good plan, but it won’t be necessary. If I come into my inheritance we won’t need to take in paying guests, and there is the estate to run, which will keep me busy, as I will have to learn how to manage things. You will find plenty to occupy you as my wife and mistress of Crow Castle.’

‘I am not a well-brought-up young woman like Lady Marianne. That would become obvious to everyone. You might be embarrassed by my ignorance.’

Luke seized her hands. ‘You are more of a lady than most of the high-born women I have ever met, Lizzie. I would be honoured if you would marry me.’

‘A marriage of convenience,’ Eliza said with a half-smile.

‘Who knows, we might get along better that way. What do you think, Eliza? I value your opinion. Could such a marriage be a possibility for us?’

Chapter Twenty

Eliza would have opted for a quiet wedding, but Luke was having none of it, and the moment she agreed to marry him he decided to go to London to get a special licence. The vicar was consulted and agreed to marry them in the magnificent St George's Church, even though it was not in their parish. The splendid Georgian edifice built in sparkling Portland stone was grand enough to make any ceremony spectacular. However, Eliza had misgivings, but Luke waved them all aside and he dismissed Eliza's request for a simple, quiet ceremony in the village church.

'I won't have people say this is a hole-and-corner affair or a marriage arranged simply to collect what is due to me,' Luke said as he mounted his horse. 'I'll be back before you know it, Lizzie, my dear. Make sure that Aunt Margery invites all her old friends and any relations who are physically able to get here.' He rode off without waiting for her response.

Gilbert wheeled his horse around, preparing to follow Luke. 'Would you like me to find some of the circus folk to join in the celebrations, Lizzie?'

'Please don't,' Eliza said, rolling her eyes. 'I have enough to contend with here.'

Gilbert leaned over in the saddle. 'It's not too late to call it off. You don't have to marry a man you don't love.'

'It will be all right, Gil. You'd better go after Luke if you're going to bring his horse home.'

Gilbert saluted with a playful grin and encouraged his horse to a brisk trot. 'I'll be back later.'

Eliza watched until he was out of sight before walking slowly back to the main entrance. She knew what she was doing would be best for the family, including the servants and the Wildblood estate, but although it seemed like a fairy tale on the surface, she was not convinced that there would be a happy outcome. If Luke did not love her, he might meet someone with whom he had a genuine connection, and that would be unbearable. She had tried to convince herself that her own feelings were not involved, although in her heart she knew that was untrue.

She had only just stepped into the entrance hall when Angelica called out to her from the top of the stairs.

‘Where have you been, Lizzie? We’ve got so much to do in such a short time. Come upstairs now and help Vinnie and me. We’re making so many lists that my head is spinning.’

‘I’m coming, but I thought we were going to keep things very simple. This is getting out of hand.’ Eliza ascended slowly. Her first instinct was to put a stop to the whole charade, but if she did that she would have to stand by and see the people she had come to love suffer degradation and homelessness.

Angelica was waiting for her at the top of the stairs. ‘Do hurry up, Lizzie. Anyone would think you were a reluctant bride. You do want to marry Luke, don’t you?’

‘That’s a silly question,’ Eliza said with more conviction than she was feeling. ‘You’d better show me what you and Vinnie have been up to.’

Angelica entered the drawing room where Lavinia was seated at a table in the window surrounded by sheets of paper. She looked up and her lips drooped as if she were about to cry.

‘I can’t make sense of any of this, Lizzie. We’ve been making so many lists that everything is in a muddle.’

Eliza pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. She examined the notes carefully.

‘I appreciate the hard work you two have put in on this one,’ she said, holding up a crumpled sheet of paper. ‘But all of this should be left to Mrs Pearce when the number of guests has been settled upon and the menu decided, and that should be left to your mama, Vinnie.’

‘Mama was lying down with one of her megrims when I went in to see her this morning,’ Lavinia said, pouting. ‘She says it is all too much for her.’

‘Then we must take over the arrangements, but you need a little help.’ Eliza picked up a random sheet of paper and studied it. ‘This is unnecessary.’

Angelica looked over her shoulder. ‘But that one is the most important. You will need a new gown and so will Vinnie and me if we’re to be your bridesmaids.’

Eliza shook her head. ‘There is no time to get gowns made. We will wear our best clothes, and that goes for all of us.’

‘But you’re the bride,’ Angelica protested.

‘This is supposed to be a quiet wedding,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘There will be some guests who will need to stay here for at least one night, maybe two, but fortunately we’ve been making the rooms ready so that we could go ahead with my hotel plan, so that is something less to worry about.’

‘Stabling for guests’ horses,’ Lavinia added triumphantly. ‘We need boys to help Gilbert.’

‘Assuming that Gil is going to remain here.’ Angelica fixed Eliza with a hard stare. ‘He’s always had a soft spot for you, Lizzie. I doubt if he will want to stay and see you married to another man.’

Eliza shuffled the notes into a neat pile and rose to her feet. ‘That’s nonsense, Angel. I know he’s fond of me as I am of him, but we are too much alike to be well suited. Gilbert is happy for me, and for the whole family who will benefit from Luke’s inheritance.’

‘That’s true, Angel,’ Lavinia said seriously. ‘Maybe Gilbert will turn to you when Lizzie is a married woman.’

Angelica’s pale face was suffused in blushes. ‘I do not have any feelings for Gil. He’s just a good friend.’

Eliza could see an argument brewing, and she selected one of the lists, holding it out in front of Lavinia. ‘This is something that you two can do together. You’ve already noted down some names for the guest list. Maybe there are some people you might have forgotten. I’ll leave that with you.’

‘Who is going to write the invitations?’ Angelica demanded eagerly. ‘I have a very neat hand.’

‘As have I,’ Lavinia said hastily.

‘Then that makes it easier.’ Eliza tore the list in half and thrust a piece into their hands. ‘There you are, that will make it much quicker. Vinnie, I suggest you check with your mama when she is feeling better. She might have more people in mind. We need to get the invitations delivered as soon as possible.’ She left them poring over their halves of the guest list, confident that this task would take them the best part of the day.

Eliza hesitated outside the drawing room, wondering whether to involve Mrs Wildblood in the arrangements for the wedding. She was tempted to manage without her help, but she had a feeling that Mrs Wildblood would not take kindly to being left out, and Mrs Pearce would be in the kitchen most of the day. Eliza made her way to Mrs Wildblood’s room, where she was surprised to find Miss Harrington doing Mrs Wildblood’s hair.

‘I thought you had left us to look after a sick relative, Miss Harrington.’ Eliza eyed her suspiciously. It seemed like too much of a coincidence that she had suddenly become available. Eliza had a feeling that rumours must already be circulating around the village.

‘My sister recovered under my care, so I came to see if Mrs Wildblood was still in need of a personal maid,’ Miss Harrington said smugly.

‘It’s most fortunate considering the fact that we have so much to do before the wedding.’ Mrs Wildblood smiled happily. ‘I don’t know how I have managed without Cordelia, but she is back now.’

‘Yes, so I see.’ Eliza closed her fingers around the crumpled lists that Angelica and Vinnie had made.

‘Was there something you wanted to say to me, Eliza?’ Mrs Wildblood asked wearily. ‘Can it not wait until I am ready to come downstairs?’

‘I was wondering if you had any particular instructions regarding the wedding breakfast, ma’am. Or will you leave it to me and Mrs Pearce?’

‘I am happy to let you make the necessary arrangements, Eliza. I will be busy with fittings for my new gown. Cordelia has given me the name of an excellent seamstress who has been known to work wonders when it comes to making beautiful garments in a very short space of time.’

Eliza nodded and backed towards the doorway. ‘I won’t trouble you any further, ma’am.’

‘Just a moment, Eliza.’ Mrs Wildblood’s voice sharpened.

‘Is there something else, ma’am?’

‘You don’t seem like a young woman who has had the enormous good fortune to be chosen to marry the heir to all this.’ Mrs Wildblood made an expansive hand gesture, taking in the whole room, but her meaning was clear. ‘We don’t want people to talk, do we, Eliza?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Then please try to appear happy and show a little excitement, Eliza. In less than a week you will be Mrs Luke Wildblood. I trust you will do your duty.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Eliza could see Miss Harrington smirking as she brushed Mrs Wildblood’s hair and she suspected that word had got around about the conditions in Luke’s grandfather’s will. ‘No one could be in any doubt that Captain Wildblood has done me the honour of asking me to be his bride.’

‘Quite so. Anyway, you had better go and speak to Mrs Pearce. I am sure there are many things that need to be done before the nuptials.’

‘Please don’t worry,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘Everything will be done and I will smile happily for all to see on my wedding day.’ She left the room before Mrs Wildblood could respond, and she went downstairs to the kitchen where she could be certain of a dose of common sense from Mrs Pearce.

After that conversation Eliza did her best to take on the persona of an excited bride-to-be with everyone except Angelica, and even then, she did not reveal the true extent of her feelings. She tried to treat the arrangements for the wedding as if it were for someone else, and only when she was on her own in the kennels with Waldo did she give vent to her worries. Waldo was a good listener, or at least he appeared to understand, and he was not going to repeat anything she said. However, to her surprise it was easier when Luke returned from London three days later.

After a rapturous greeting from Lavinia and a slightly more subdued one from Angelica, Luke took the first opportunity to take Eliza aside and have a quiet word with her.

‘You seem to be managing magnificently,’ he said softly. ‘But I know it can’t be easy for you, Lizzie.’

She met his sincere gaze with an attempt at a smile. ‘It has been rather hard.’

He took her hand in his and held it gently. ‘If you can’t go through with it, I understand. I’ve been thinking of you all the time I was away, and I know I’ve put a terrible burden on you.’

She fought back a sudden desire to cry, but it was with relief and not despair. ‘I didn’t think you’d understand. I know it is a great honour . . .’

Luke released her hand and wrapped his arms around her. ‘Don’t speak of honour, Lizzie. I am the one who has asked you to do the unspeakable, simply for my own benefit and that of my family. I have taken advantage of your position in the household, and you have every right to refuse and tell me to go to hell.’

Eliza pulled away, dashing her hand across her eyes. ‘I would never do that. You didn’t force me to agree, Luke. I could have refused, as you say, and I know you would have taken it well, but I could not bear to see you and your family treated so badly by your cousin. I will marry you as we arranged and you owe me nothing.’

‘I owe you everything and I promise to care for you and respect our agreement. You have nothing to fear from me ever, Lizzie.’

The next few days were so busy that Eliza forgot to be anxious and devoted herself to making the necessary arrangements for the wedding. Gil returned after spending some time on the farm with his horses and he had ridden off in search of the circus. He had found them encamped outside Dorchester until the weather improved enough to make travel easier. They had willingly followed him to the island, led by the Suttons together with Maud and Nellie, Leonardo, Cecil and Gaston, the sword swallower. Even more of a surprise was that Magicus arrived dressed in his ringmaster's costume and announced that he was going to give the bride away.

'Why would you want to do that?' Eliza exchanged puzzled glances with Angelica. 'You quite literally gave us away, sir. You said that Angel and I meant nothing to you.'

Magicus dropped his gaze, clearing his throat nervously. 'A man can change, Eliza. I realised that I had treated you both very badly. Your dear mother would want me to make amends.'

'But she wasn't our real mother,' Angelica said angrily. 'You told us that we came from an orphanage.'

'That wasn't quite true. I said that because I felt guilty for abandoning you both.'

'So, are we your real daughters?' Eliza stared at him in disbelief.

'Your mother was a housemaid when I met her. I had just been employed as a footman by the same family. I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, and as I got to know her, I discovered that the eldest son of the house had forced his attentions on her, and she was with child. He refused to acknowledge his guilt, which meant disgrace and loss of her job.'

'Is that why you married her? Did you love her at all or were you simply sorry for her?' Eliza eyed him suspiciously. She wanted to believe him, but the callous way in which he had treated her and Angelica still rankled.

'I was hopelessly in love with her, Lizzie. We were married and a few months later she gave birth to you and Angelica. She adored you both and she would have been heartbroken had she known how I treated you.'

Eliza and Angelica exchanged baffled glances.

'I don't understand,' Angelica said slowly. 'You wanted to be rid of us, so why did you pick the Wildblood family? How did you know them?'

'Was it the Wildblood family our mother worked for?' Eliza reached out to clutch her sister's hand. 'You knew Mrs Wildblood, which is why you left us with her?'

‘Mrs Wildblood was a distant cousin of the family where your mother and I were employed. She visited often, and one day, she came across your mother in a state of distress. When she discovered the reason, she could not do enough to help us. She even gave your mother a gown for the wedding.’

‘Why are you telling us this now?’ Eliza asked slowly.

‘Gilbert went out of his way to find us, and he came to pass on the news that you are marrying into the Wildblood family. I thought you should know the truth. Your real father is a titled gentleman, and you have his blood in your veins. You are not the daughters of a common circus performer.’

Eliza laid her hand on his arm. ‘We were never ashamed of you, Pa.’

‘No, indeed.’ Angelica added fiercely. ‘It was a cruel thing you did, but at least you’ve come to put things right.’

‘Is that how you feel, too, Eliza?’ Magicus raised his eyes to her face.

‘Will you allow me to give you away?’

‘I’d be honoured,’ Eliza said simply.

A rare smile lit his face and Magicus put his arms around her in a hug, which was accompanied by a round of applause from the others, who had been standing back quietly observing the reunion.

Mrs Wildblood came towards them, holding out her hand. ‘So, you have come to the rescue once again, Herbert. I always thought you would be reunited with your girls one day.’

Magicus raised her hand to his lips. ‘I am honoured to do so, ma’am. I couldn’t wish for a better outcome for my little Lizzie.’

‘Come with me, Herbert. I think this reunion calls for a celebration. I’ll say one thing for my nephew, Gregory, he has excellent taste in claret.’

‘I don’t think I am entitled to such kindness, ma’am. I’m afraid I never gave my late wife the life she deserved, and I let our girls down badly.’

‘That is nonsense and you know it. You did your best for all three of them, which is why I took your daughters into my home. Come to the drawing room and I’ll send one of the maids to fetch a bottle from the cellar.’

At that moment Leonardo walked into the entrance hall, bringing Waldo with him. Then Waldo was the centre of attention as Cecil, Gaston and Bella, the tightrope walker, all wanted to make a fuss of the old lion.

‘This is just like old times,’ Angelica said, laughing. ‘I’d forgotten how much I missed them all.’

‘You will be staying here, won’t you, Pa?’ Eliza had to raise her voice to be heard over the chatter and laughter.

‘We left the wagons on the other side of Ferrybridge,’ Magicus said thoughtfully. ‘We’ll be travelling on the day after your wedding as we’ve got a booking in Yeovil, but it would be good if you could put us all up.’

Eliza smiled and patted his hand. ‘We can, of course. I’ll go and tell Cook and have fires lit in all the guest rooms.’

‘You’re a proper lady of the manor now, girl,’ Magicus said with a wry grin. ‘Your ma would be so proud of you.’

‘Come along, Herbert,’ Mrs Wildblood said impatiently. ‘Leave everyone to sort themselves out.’

Eliza watched them walk away. Everything had changed in such a short space of time. The truth of her birth had come as a shock, and her opinion of the man she had known as her father had changed subtly. She needed to talk it over with Angelica, but that would have to wait.

Luke threaded his way through the crowd, heading towards her and he was smiling.

‘Gilbert told me that he has invited the whole circus to attend the wedding tomorrow. He wanted you to have the people you care for most to witness our marriage.’

Eliza looked away. ‘It was kind of him.’

‘What’s the matter, Lizzie?’ Luke’s smile was replaced by a look of concern. ‘You seem upset. Are you having second thoughts, because if you are you can still call the whole thing off?’

‘I just learned the truth about Angelica and my parentage.’

‘None of that matters to me, Lizzie.’

She raised her eyes to look him in the face. ‘You know about it?’

‘Aunt Margery told me some time ago. It doesn’t make any difference to me. You know that I genuinely care for you.’

‘I believe you, Luke.’

He frowned. ‘Lizzie, my love, if you want to change your mind, please say so now. I wouldn’t want you to go through with the wedding against your will.’

‘It’s too late to cancel it now,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘I agreed to it, Luke. You will keep Crow Castle and Gregory has found himself a wealthy bride, although I find it hard to believe that Lady Marianne actually married him.’ She looked Luke in the eye as she spoke. ‘You loved her once.’

Luke caught her by the hand. 'Yes, I did, but that was a long time ago. We were much younger then and we have both changed.'

'I believe you.' Eliza looked around as laughter sounded from the circus folk. 'Come and meet everyone, Luke,' she said, tucking her hand in the crook of his arm. 'You know some of my old friends, but I'm not sure you've met everyone.'

'I think the party has already started,' Luke said, laughing. 'I can see a very busy evening ahead of us. Unfortunately, I couldn't contact many of my old comrades in arms, and those I did speak to had made other arrangements, but Gilbert has agreed to be my best man.'

Eliza managed a smile. 'Then we are all set, Luke.'

Angelica rushed up to them and grabbed Eliza by the hand. 'Don't just stand there. Come and join us. It's so good to see everyone again.'

'Take them all to the drawing room, Angel,' Eliza said, withdrawing her hand gently. 'I need to speak to Mrs Pearce about arrangements to feed everyone at such short notice.'

'All right, if you must.' Angelica turned to Luke. 'You'll want to get to know all our old friends. Vinnie has already made friends with Bella, and I don't think you've met Gaston. A word of warning, though.' Angelica held her finger to her lips, glancing over her shoulder as if afraid Gaston might hear. 'Keep your dress sword out of his way after the wedding. A few glasses of wine and he'll be eager to perform. It's not for the faint-hearted.'

'I'll bear that in mind, thank you,' Luke said, laughing. 'Lead on, Angelica.'

Eliza left them and went to the kitchen to give Mrs Pearce the bad news.

'How am I expected to feed a whole circus?' Mrs Pearce demanded angrily. 'You need your magician friend to conjure up a feast for so many.'

Eliza lifted the lid of a pan that was simmering gently on the hob. 'This is one of your excellent stews. Can we double the contents? I can peel vegetables and Agnes can help. If Nancy runs down to the bakery, she can buy up all the bread they have left. My friends will be most grateful for anything, let alone something cooked by you.'

Mrs Pearce puffed out her chest. 'Well, I have got extra supplies for the wedding breakfast so we can use up some of those. Never let it be said that Dora May Pearce couldn't rise to the occasion.'

'Excellent.' Eliza rolled up her sleeves. 'What would you like me to do first?'

With Mrs Pearce organising the proceedings, Nancy was sent to the bakery, and Agnes was delegated to scraping carrots brought up from the root cellar. Jessie was given the task of peeling potatoes and turnips, leaving Eliza with the eye-watering chore of preparing onions. It was in the middle of all this work that Luke entered the kitchen.

‘What’s the matter, Lizzie? Why are you working in the kitchen and why are you crying?’

‘The onions,’ she said, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. ‘This is a terrible job. I’ve never fully appreciated what cooks go through.’

‘I’ve dealt with worse,’ Luke said, smiling. ‘Let me help.’

‘No, Captain, you can’t do that.’ Mrs Pearce snatched the knife from Eliza’s hand. ‘It’s not seemly for a gentleman like you to be in the kitchen.’

Luke relieved her gently of the paring knife. ‘I’ve cooked over a campfire in the past, Mrs Pearce. A soldier has to be prepared to do anything in order to survive, and if that includes peeling a few onions, then that’s what I will do. I can’t have my bride looking as if she has spent the night sobbing into her pillow.’

Eliza laughed and tossed a large onion at him, which he caught with one hand.

‘All right, Captain Wildblood. Let’s see who can deal with the most of these spiteful little vegetables. I challenge you to a competition.’

Agnes and Jessie clapped their hands, but their grins were wiped away by a warning look from Mrs Pearce.

‘Well, sir,’ she said stiffly, ‘if you’re intent on helping, I suggest you get on with it. The stew won’t cook itself.’

After an hour of peeling, chopping and slicing, and when a larger pan had been found, the stew had more than doubled in size. Nancy returned from the bakery with enough bread to feed a small army and Mrs Pearce shooed Luke and Eliza out of the kitchen.

Luke fell into step at her side as they made their way to the drawing room. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

‘This is not how I would have expected to spend the evening prior to my wedding day, Lizzie.’

She took a handkerchief from her skirt pocket and mopped her eyes.

‘We look as if we’ve been in a fight or had a terrible row. We can’t join the others looking like this.’

Luke came to a halt and spun her around to face him. 'Don't say that, Lizzie. The smell of onions will always remind me of tonight, and you've never looked more beautiful in my eyes. I'll be proud to wait for you at the altar tomorrow.'

Eliza drew away from him. 'Don't say things you don't mean, Luke. This is a marriage of convenience, and you know it, so please don't insult me by pretending that you care about anything other than your inheritance.' She walked away and she did not look back.

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Chapter Twenty-one

The meal, aided by several bottles of wine, was a great success, and at midnight the circus folk were still entertaining each other as if they could go on until morning. Exhausted by the day's events, Eliza left them and retired to her room to get ready for bed. Even through the thick walls she could still hear the babble of voices, bursts of laughter and someone was singing loudly, accompanied by Cecil, who had brought his fiddle to the party. She doubted if she would sleep, but the moment she laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes she drifted off and did not wake until the first grey light of dawn crept through her window.

Eliza rose from her bed and dressed as if it were a normal day since there was no one else to check that all the arrangements had been made for the wedding breakfast and that the guests were being treated well. She had just spoken to Mrs Pearce in the kitchen and was on her way to check that the drawing room and other reception rooms were ready, when she met Luke. He looked her up and down, frowning.

'Isn't it supposed to be unlucky for the groom to see the bride before the ceremony?'

Eliza laughed. 'This is not a normal situation, Luke.' She glanced upwards and saw Angelica leaning over the banisters.

'Why aren't you in your room, Lizzie?' Angelica demanded crossly. 'Vinnie and I have been looking for you. We need to get you ready for the wedding.'

'My Sunday best clothes are laid out on the bed,' Eliza protested. 'It will only take a few moments for me to get changed.'

Luke gazed at her in horror. 'You are wearing an old gown for the wedding? What have I done to you, Lizzie?'

'It really doesn't matter,' Eliza protested. 'No one will know.'

'Everyone will know when they see you walking down the aisle,' Angelica said loudly. 'I told you to get Mrs Wildblood's dressmaker to run up something suitable, but you wouldn't listen.'

‘It does matter, Lizzie,’ Luke said earnestly. ‘It’s not what I want for you.’

‘You want to inherit Crow Castle and the fortune that goes with it.’ Eliza met his worried gaze with a straight look. ‘That is why I agreed to this. I don’t want to see you and your family evicted by your cousin, and that goes for me and my sister. If you lose your home, then so do we.’

‘You make it sound so matter-of-fact and even a little cold-blooded,’ Luke said, frowning.

‘I’ve always had to be practical, and even more so now.’ Eliza edged past him. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go and change. As we circus folk say, the show must go on. I’ll see you at the church, Luke.’ She did not wait for an answer as she hurried upstairs to her bedroom.

After enduring the ministrations of Angelica and Vinnie, Eliza was relieved when they finally agreed that they could do no more in the circumstances, and she was ready to be escorted to the waiting carriage and driven to the church.

‘You have no flowers, Lizzie,’ Angelica wailed as she climbed into the carriage. ‘How could we forget that?’

‘It’s still winter,’ Eliza protested. ‘The daffodils are only just in bloom.’

Vinnie had been about to follow Angelica, but she stopped. ‘Wait just a minute.’

‘We’ll be late,’ Eliza said wearily. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Of course it does. What is wrong with you, Lizzie?’ Angelica demanded fiercely. ‘You are about to marry the owner of all this and more. Why aren’t you happy? I know I would be if I were in your position.’

‘I only said we’ll be late.’ Eliza sank back against the worn leather squabs. ‘I like to be punctual, you know that.’ She glanced over her shoulder. ‘What is Vinnie doing?’

‘She’s picking a bouquet for you, Lizzie. Some of us are happy that you are marrying Luke, even if you can’t show the slightest bit of excitement.’

Eliza lapsed into silence while Lavinia collected enough flowers to make a small bouquet, which she thrust into Eliza’s hands as she climbed into the carriage.

‘Drive on.’ Lavinia settled herself beside Angelica, smiling triumphantly. ‘There, Lizzie. That’s a finishing touch. A lovely spot of colour against your dull grey gown and mantle.’

‘She should have used Mrs Wildblood’s dressmaker,’ Angelica said in an undertone, but loud enough for Eliza to hear.

‘There wasn’t time,’ Eliza said patiently. ‘May we forget my appearance, please? The important thing is that none of us will lose our home, and Luke gets what is due to him.’

‘He’s getting you, too, Lizzie,’ Angelica said, smiling. ‘I’d say he’s a very lucky man.’

‘Yes,’ Lavinia added. ‘He could have married Lady Marianne and that would have been a disaster.’

They lapsed into silence as the carriage bumped and jolted over ruts in the road, until they arrived finally at the church, where Magicus was waiting in the doorway.

‘You’re late, Lizzie,’ he said as he helped her to alight. ‘You know better than that. We always performed on time.’

‘It was my fault, Mr Brown,’ Lavinia said as she allowed Joe to help her to the ground. ‘Lizzie didn’t have any flowers, so I picked the daffodils.’

‘It’s a rum do altogether,’ Magicus said, scowling. ‘But I ain’t complaining. I’ll have one daughter married off to a rich cove and just one more to go.’

‘Thank you, Pa,’ Angelica said crossly. ‘You make me sound like an old maid and I’m only just twenty.’

Magicus proffered his arm to Eliza. ‘Ignore your sister. Let’s get this over and we can go back to the castle for the wedding breakfast.’

Eliza slipped her hand in the crook of his arm, and they entered the church to the sound of the organ playing. Magicus came to a dramatic halt, gazing around the pews at the congregation, which was mostly made up of the circus folk.

Eliza could see Luke, looking dashing in a dark blue frock coat and grey striped trousers. Standing beside him was Gilbert, dressed in his circus uniform, which did not look out of place given the circumstances.

Luke turned to look at Eliza, and despite the organist playing the processional march, he broke away and strode down the aisle, causing the members of the congregation to gasp in amazement.

‘What the devil?’ Magicus exclaimed as Luke reached them and swept Eliza into his arms. She was too startled to protest until the cold air outside brought back the power of speech.

‘Luke, put me down. What are you doing?’

He lifted her into the waiting carriage and climbed in beside her. 'I can't do that to you, Lizzie. I don't want a bogus marriage with you agreeing only to save Crow Castle and my inheritance, let alone to keep a roof over your and Angelica's heads.' He turned to Joe, who was gawping at them from the driver's seat.

'Drive on. Back to the castle.'

'You can't do this, Luke,' Eliza protested angrily. 'Think what you're doing, please.'

He looped his arm around her shoulders. 'I've only just come to my senses. It would be a crime to force you into marriage this way. I love you, Lizzie – I think I always have loved you – but if we were to be wed, I would want your heart as well as the beautiful person you are.'

'But I agreed to marry you, Luke. Now you've spoiled everything, and to no avail.'

'I've given you back your freedom, Lizzie. I don't want you to marry me out of pity or loyalty or anything other than genuine affection. I trapped you into this and now I'm setting you free.'

Eliza shook her head. 'This is a mistake. Turn the carriage round. We still have time to go through with the ceremony.'

The sound of hoofbeats and Gilbert's voice calling them to stop made her turn around in her seat. 'Gilbert is coming after us, Luke. What will you tell him?'

Gilbert rode up to them before Luke had a chance to reply.

'What in heaven's name is going on, Luke?'

'The wedding is off,' Luke said calmly. 'We'll see you back at the castle.'

'You can't just leave everyone sitting in the church,' Gilbert protested angrily. 'What were you thinking?'

'This is between me and Eliza,' Luke said firmly. 'It has nothing to do with anyone else. If you want to help, then go back to the church and tell everyone to return to the castle. The wedding breakfast will go ahead as planned.'

'Don't I have a say in this?' Eliza demanded. She was getting over the shock of being removed bodily from the church and now she was angry.

Gilbert wheeled his horse around, facing the way he had just come.

'I never expected the best man duties to include telling the congregation that the wedding was off, but I'll do it. Then I want an explanation. Eliza is

one of us, Captain Wildblood. You do not take liberties with circus people and get away with it.' He rode off.

'What are we going to tell everyone?' Eliza asked dazedly. 'I think this was a dreadful mistake, Luke.'

'My mistake was asking you to go along with a false marriage in the first place. I don't know what possessed me, Lizzie. I can't apologise enough.'

'This is ridiculous,' Eliza said angrily. 'I went along with it, Luke. It was all arranged and now you've ruined everything. Your cousin will sweep in and take your inheritance. We will all be homeless and penniless, too.'

'I will take care of you and Angelica. I have the money from selling my commission and that will last for a while.'

Eliza could tell by the angle of his head that Joe was listening to their conversation and no doubt it would be circulated around the village before evening.

'Let's leave it until we get home,' she said hastily. 'There's no point arguing about it now. What's done is done.'

Luke glanced at Joe and he nodded. 'Yes, I understand.'

They drove on in silence until they reached the castle, and the carriage came to a halt. Luke helped Eliza to alight, and they made their way indoors. There were no servants to greet them as they had all been given permission to attend the church ceremony.

'What do we do now?' Eliza demanded angrily. 'Do we sit at the head of the table during the wedding breakfast? Did you consider all this when you decided to call the whole thing off, Luke?'

'You deserve better, Lizzie. I'm going to be honest with everyone. I will tell them the truth and leave them to make their own decisions.'

'We can't have a celebration when there is nothing to celebrate, Luke. I think it would be best to allow everyone to have the meal and be on their way afterwards.' Eliza took off her bonnet and cloak and was about to take them up to her room when the door to the main entrance was flung open and Magicus strode into the hall followed by Gilbert.

'You have disgraced my daughter, sir,' Magicus said loudly. 'I should challenge you to a duel for that.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Pa,' Eliza said, reverting unconsciously to the old way of addressing him. 'Whatever Luke has done, he did it with the best of intentions. You do not know the whole story.'

Magicus drew himself up to his full height. 'I only know that my daughter has been publicly humiliated and I won't stand for it.'

'You and I should have a talk in private, sir,' Luke said calmly. 'Come to my study.' Luke strode off and Magicus followed him, protesting all the way.

Gilbert laid his arm around Eliza's shoulders. 'What was he thinking, Lizzie? There's really no excuse for what that brute has done to you.'

'I'm not sure of anything any more,' Eliza said dazedly. 'Earlier this morning everything was settled and it seemed to be going well, and now look at us. I don't understand it, but I can tell you the outcome is not going to be good for anyone.'

'I could do him serious harm for treating you so badly. One word from you and I will teach him a lesson he won't forget.'

'No, please don't, Gil. The captain and I had an agreement. He was engaged to Lady Marianne, but she eloped with his cousin, who will now inherit the castle and the fortune that goes with it unless Luke marries before his twenty-sixth birthday, which is tomorrow.'

'So, he was just using you,' Gilbert said thoughtfully. 'He must have had a pang of conscience and decided he couldn't go through with it. I am not standing for it, Lizzie. One word from you and I will do as I just said. No doubt Cecil and the others would like to join me.'

'No, you mustn't do anything. I went along with his plan, Gil. I was willing to marry him to keep a roof over our heads. I do care what happens to him.'

'That makes it even worse. He has used you and now he's cast you aside. No matter what you say, he has treated you badly and I want him to own up to it.'

'There will be plenty of time for that. Let's get over the wedding breakfast first and the inevitable questions that will be asked.'

Gilbert took her hands in his. 'Think about it, Lizzie. I'm not being dramatic but how will you cope with all that and what will you and Angelica do when you are all evicted from the castle? Where will you go?'

'I don't know, Gil. I haven't had time to think things through.'

'Come away with me, Lizzie. Come back to the circus where you belong.'

'But I don't belong there now,' Eliza said faintly. 'I have no act to perform.'

Gilbert looked around at the sound of footsteps as Magicus came hurrying towards them.

‘The man is a charlatan,’ Magicus said flatly. ‘I want you and your sister to return to the circus with me, Eliza. I will adapt my act to involve you, at least. Angelica will find a place somewhere.’

Eliza shook her head. ‘Thank you, Pa, but it’s too late for that. I don’t think either of us could consider returning to the circus. We’ve lived a different life here.’

‘Which is about to end if what Captain Wildblood tells me is the truth. He was honest, Lizzie, I’ll give him that, although I would be within my rights if I gave the fellow the beating that he deserves for humiliating you.’

‘That I would like to see,’ Gilbert said sarcastically. ‘You are an old man, Herbert Brown, and Luke Wildblood is a trained soldier. I would stand a better chance of flooring him than you.’

‘Stop this, both of you.’ Eliza backed away. ‘As if things are not bad enough without you two acting like schoolboys. I want you to leave me alone. I will decide what to do next without any help from either of you.’ She could see Luke standing by the front entrance talking to his aunt and she went to join them.

‘What have you done, Luke?’ Mrs Wildblood demanded, gulping back a sob. ‘You know what will happen tomorrow, don’t you? Once Gregory gets to hear of this, nothing will stop him. We will be homeless before the end of the week.’

‘Maybe he will see reason, Aunt Margery,’ Luke said calmly. ‘After all, he has married Marianne and she is wealthy enough for both of them. I’m sure that Gregory would much prefer living in the town house to being buried in the country.’

Mrs Wildblood glanced over her shoulder. ‘The guests are returning. What will you tell them?’ She held her hand to her forehead. ‘I can’t bear it, Luke. I am going to my room to lie down. Send Cordelia to me with a light luncheon and a bottle of claret. I want nothing to do with all this.’

Eliza and Luke exchanged weary glances, but before either could speak Angelica and Lavinia burst into the entrance hall.

‘This is a nightmare,’ Angelica said, her voice breaking on a sob. ‘We had to return in the baker’s cart because you abandoned us at the church. If Vinnie catches her death of cold it will be your fault, Luke.’

‘I’ve never felt so mortified,’ Lavinia added tearfully. ‘How could you, Cousin Luke?’ She turned to Eliza. ‘And how can you stand there so calmly when you have been jilted at the altar?’

‘Not exactly jilted,’ Luke said with a wry smile. ‘I saved her from living a lie.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ Angelica demanded, looking from one to the other. ‘You’re very calm, Lizzie. Did you know he was going to carry you off before the ceremony began?’

‘Leave your sister out of it, Angelica,’ Luke said sternly. ‘She is the innocent party in all this. I am the one who is to blame for everything.’

Eliza laid her hand on his sleeve. ‘There will be plenty of time for explanations later. Our guests are at the door. I suggest we put a brave face on it and get them all seated in the banqueting hall with a glass or two of wine. We mustn’t let the food go to waste, and they will see things better after a good meal.’

‘How can you say that?’ Angelica said angrily.

Lavinia tugged at her sleeve. ‘We need to support Lizzie in all this. Let’s take our seats at the table and set a good example.’

‘I’m only doing this because I’m hungry,’ Angelica said, tossing her head. ‘Otherwise, I would walk out in disgust.’ She shot a malicious glance in Luke’s direction. ‘I once thought you were a gentleman. Obviously, I was wrong.’ She marched off in Lavinia’s wake, leaving Eliza and Luke standing in the entrance hall while the rest of the guests headed towards the rarely used banqueting hall.

‘Shall we join them?’ Luke asked, proffering his arm.

Eliza shook her head. ‘No, Luke. You have caused this situation. I was trying to do my best for everyone concerned, but you have made me look ridiculous. To be honest, I don’t want you anywhere near me. I suggest you take yourself off to London to find your cousin. You must sort things out man to man. I can do no more.’

Eliza walked off towards the banqueting hall. It would take all her courage and resilience to enter and take up her seat at the head table, but she knew she must attempt to carry on as normal despite the desperate situation in which she found herself. She did not look back.

Eliza took her seat to a round of applause and she smiled, knowing she was amongst friends, but that did not ease the ache in her heart. She had sent Luke away, knowing that it was the right thing to do, even if it was the

very last thing she had wanted. Now she must put a brave face on a situation that was not of her making. At least it was a comfort to see the friendly and sympathetic faces of those present.

Conversation at first was sporadic and subdued, but Gilbert took it upon himself to make frequent trips to the cellar, and he made sure that glasses were topped up with wine, which had an almost immediate effect. The guests began to relax and the tension in the room faded. When the last crumb was eaten the tables were pushed back. Cecil brought out his fiddle, which he played in competition with Nancy's uncle, Jim Roper, who had closed his grocery shop early in order to attend the wedding. A piano had been found beneath dustsheets in the corner of the hall, and Gaston, who had been kept away from sharp knives and swords, proved to be a perfectly adequate player. If he missed a few notes in one of the country dances there was no one who cared enough to complain, even had they noticed it after a few glasses of claret.

Eliza danced several times, although she managed to avoid being close to Gilbert as she knew that he was intent on persuading her to rejoin the circus. The same went for Magicus, although he was not interested in dancing. He sat with some of the older men, smoking a cigar and drinking rum. Angelica and Lavinia did not lack for dance partners, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves, despite the circumstances.

At a little before midnight, Eliza slipped away unnoticed and made her way to her room. However, she had just reached the first landing when she thought she must be seeing a ghost. Then, as she held her candle higher, she realised it was Mrs Wildblood, wearing her nightgown and frilled nightcap.

'What's the matter, ma'am?' Eliza asked anxiously. 'Are you unwell?'

'Is that you, Eliza?'

'Yes, Mrs Wildblood. It's very late. I was on my way to bed.'

'What possessed my nephew to change his mind at the last possible moment?' Mrs Wildblood said tearfully. 'You know him well, Eliza. Why did he go back on his word?'

'I think you ought to ask him that yourself, ma'am.'

'That's not an answer. You must know what was in his mind when he disgraced his whole family.'

'He was being gallant, Mrs Wildblood. He did not want to put me through the trial of a marriage of convenience.'

‘But that wouldn’t have been the case, Eliza. It’s clear to me that you have been in love with Luke from the very beginning, and his actions today have proved to me that he cares very much for you. I want to speak to him now or I fear I will be awake all night.’

‘He has gone away, ma’am.’

‘You sent him away?’

‘Yes, I did. I didn’t ask him to call off the wedding, but afterwards I told him to go to London and find his cousin. They need to sort the matter out face to face like gentlemen.’

‘You know little of Gregory if you think that, Eliza. My nephew is ruthless when it comes to getting his own way.’

‘Well, he has a wife to contend with now,’ Eliza said with a wry smile. ‘Lady Marianne has a mind of her own and the wealth to make it almost impossible for him to refuse her anything.’

‘She was unhappy here, I know that. Do you really think there’s a chance we can remain in the castle and live peacefully without fear of Gregory descending upon us with an eviction notice?’

‘I think it’s a chance that Luke had to take, ma’am.’ Eliza slipped her arm around Mrs Wildblood’s shoulders. ‘You’re shivering. Allow me to get you back to your room, ma’am. You’ll feel better about things in the morning.’

Mrs Wildblood allowed Eliza to guide her back to her bedchamber, where she helped her into bed.

‘You are a kind and level-headed young woman,’ Mrs Wildblood said, pulling the coverlet up to her chin. ‘Luke could do worse than marry someone like you, Eliza, despite the disadvantage of your upbringing, but your father was a gentleman by birth, even if he did not always act like one.’

Eliza tucked her in, hiding a smile. Mrs Wildblood seemed to see every situation in black and white. However, no matter what he said to the contrary, Luke had been prepared to go through with a marriage of convenience in order to save his inheritance. It was not the way of a man in love, no matter how much she might wish that were true. Eliza blew out the candle and left the room. Tomorrow she would begin again, but this time without hope of making a life with Luke. It was tempting to accept Gilbert’s offer and rejoin the circus. They were her own people, and she could hear their merriment as she went to her room. They would welcome her back

without question. All she had to do was to make her choice, but it was not going to be easy.

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Chapter Twenty-two

Despite the fact that they had been celebrating until the early hours of the morning, the circus folk were up and about and getting ready to return to their camping ground after breakfast, including Gilbert, even though he had done his best to persuade Eliza to accompany him. Magicus had also had his say, but Eliza was adamant that a life touring the country with the circus was no longer for her. Angelica was equally firm in her refusal, although Magicus had suggested she returned to the circus as an afterthought.

‘You were always his favourite, Lizzie,’ Angelica said as they stood side by side, waving to the last of the crew as they left the castle grounds.

‘That’s not true,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘Your heart was never really in the performance, was it?’

Angelica laughed. ‘No, not really. I hated Little Annie with all my being. I never want to see a frilly white pinafore again. I like living like a lady even if I am only Vinnie’s companion.’

‘You will just have to marry a rich man then, Angel.’ Eliza turned and walked back to the castle, letting herself into the entrance hall. She came to a halt. ‘There is going to be such a lot to clean up after yesterday. I hope you’re not too much of a lady to help.’

Angelica gave her a playful shove. ‘Of course I will, but next time you have a sham marriage I hope you have fewer guests.’

‘That’s not fair,’ Eliza protested. ‘It wasn’t my choice.’

‘It was Luke’s wish, but he couldn’t go through with it. Doesn’t that mean something to you, Lizzie?’ Angelica caught her sister by the arm, holding her so that she could not move on. ‘Think about it.’

‘I’ve thought about nothing else.’ Eliza shook herself free from Angelica’s grip. ‘He suffered an attack of conscience, that’s all.’

‘No, you’re wrong. I think he loves you, Lizzie. He couldn’t go through with an arranged marriage because he wants you to feel the same, but you’ve sent him away. It’s obvious what he will make of that.’

Eliza stared at her, frowning. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘You were always supposed to be the clever one, Lizzie. It’s staring you in the face, but you won’t admit it. Luke Wildblood loves you, not Lady Marianne, and unless I’m very much mistaken, you’re in love with him. So, what are you going to do now?’

‘I suppose I’ll wait until he comes home and then I’ll talk to him.’

‘That is not like you, Lizzie. I’ve never known you to be at a loss before.’ Angelica quickened her pace as Eliza hurried off towards the banqueting hall. ‘Stop running away.’

‘I am not running away, as you put it. I’m going to help Nancy and Agnes to sort out the banqueting hall.’

‘I didn’t mean that,’ Angelica said breathlessly. ‘Please stop and think. Are you going to let Luke face Gregory and Lady Marianne alone?’

‘I think he can handle himself, Angel. He’s been through terrible battles in the Crimea, so dealing with those two should not cause him any heartache.’

‘The heartache is of your causing, Lizzie,’ Angelica said firmly. ‘You’re my twin and I love you and I know how you feel about Luke, but he obviously thinks you don’t care. What has he got to fight for?’

‘The castle and the estate, for one thing, and the financial inheritance. That’s what he will lose.’ Eliza thrust the door to the banqueting hall open. ‘This mess needs clearing up. Where are Nancy and Agnes?’

Angelica moved to stand in front of her. ‘Forget boring details like this. What is at stake is also our home, Lizzie. Not only yours and mine, but Mrs Wildblood and Vinnie’s whole futures are tied up in this place. Are you going to let us all down? Or are you going to swallow your pride and go to London to find Luke and help him to save us all?’

Eliza met her sister’s angry gaze with an attempt at a smile. ‘You’re right, Angel. I can’t just stay here and do nothing. I know how much Crow Castle means to Luke as well as the rest of us, and I don’t trust either Lady Marianne or Gregory. My presence might not make any difference, but at least I can give Luke moral support.’

‘At last, you are thinking straight, Lizzie. I will see that everything is tidied up in here. Go and pack a bag and I’ll send for Joe to bring the cart to the door. He’ll take you to the ferry terminal. With a bit of luck, you should be in London by tonight.’

It was very late evening when Eliza finally knocked on the door of Mrs Trumble's house in a side street close to Vauxhall Gardens. It was the only place in London where Eliza knew she might get a bed for the night and possibly for the next few days while she went in search of Luke.

Gertie opened the door, staring through the pouring rain at Eliza.

'What d'you want at this time of night. We don't take your sort in anyway.'

She was about to slam the door, but Eliza put her foot over the sill.

'Gertie, don't you remember me? I'm Lizzie Brown, from the circus. We stayed here in December with our pa, the Great Magicus.'

Gertie opened the door wider, looking Eliza up and down suspiciously.

'You do look a bit like one of them twins,' she said reluctantly.

'May I come in? I need a bed for the night. Perhaps I could see Mrs Trumble. She always liked my pa.'

Gertie stood aside. 'Stay there. I ain't promising nothing but I'll go and ask madam.' She disappeared into the darkness, and the flickering light of the candle went with her, leaving Eliza in almost total darkness. Moments later Mrs Trumble came bustling from the depths of the house carrying an oil lamp, which she held high so that she could peer into Eliza's face.

'Which one are you again, dear?'

'I am Eliza, Mrs Trumble. I was hoping you could put me up for the night. I can pay the going rate.'

'How is your dear papa? Is he likely to be staying here, too?'

Eliza was about to deny this, but she could see a glimmer of hope in Mrs Trumble's beady eyes, and she did not want to disillusion her or put a night's lodging in jeopardy.

'Who knows? He might, but of course he has many demands upon his time. He is ringmaster now, and in charge of the whole show, ma'am.'

'Well, that's wonderful, Miss Eliza. I do have a small spare room, as it happens. Come into the parlour and sit by the fire,' Mrs Trumble said, smiling. 'I'll bring you some tea and biscuits while Gertie gets your room ready. I'll have my cocoa with you, and you can tell me all about your pa – and your sister, of course.'

'Thank you, ma'am.' Eliza followed her to the parlour and took a seat by the fire. She gazed into the leaping orange flames while she waited for Mrs Trumble to return. It seemed far longer than a few months since she had last sat here with Angelica. So much had happened in that time. They had left

from this house to go to Bessborough Gardens and life had changed beyond all recognition. Now she was about to embark on a mission that might also change the course of things drastically. Tomorrow she would set off early and make her way to Lady Marianne's town house. She did not expect to find Luke there but if she could track down either Lady Marianne or Gregory Fox, she would be sure to find Luke nearby.

The door opened and Mrs Trumble bustled in carrying a tray of tea and biscuits and a cup of cocoa, which she placed on a side table. She sat down by the fire and passed a cup of tea to Eliza, offering the biscuits as an afterthought.

'So, what are you doing all alone in London, Miss Eliza?'

Eliza shook her head. 'I need to see someone urgently, Mrs Trumble. It's a personal matter.'

'Indeed. Well, it's your business, I suppose. Will you be staying long?'

Eliza knew exactly how much she had in her purse and it would not run to more than one night here.

'I'm afraid it really is just for tonight. I have to get back to Dorset as soon as possible.'

'Dorset, dear? Is that where your pa is now?'

'No, ma'am. The circus has moved on.'

Disappointment masked Mrs Trumble's lined features, but she took a deep breath and attempted to smile.

'Now, dear. Tell me all about that wonderful man, your pa, Herbert Brown. Is he well? I suppose he has many ladies fawning all over him now that he is in charge of the circus?'

'Pa is too busy to bother with flirtations, ma'am,' Eliza said tactfully. 'He is very loyal to old friends.'

Mrs Trumble's hands fluttered in front of her face as she smiled coyly. 'Does he ever mention me, dear?'

'I'm sure he does, but my sister and I still work for Mrs Wildblood, so we don't see much of him. Although he was with us until yesterday. Angelica spent more time with him than I did, but I will remember to ask her if he mentioned you when I return to Dorset.'

'How did you come to be living in Dorset, Miss Eliza?'

'It's a long story, Mrs Trumble.'

'I'm all ears, dear. I could stay up all night listening to tales of circus folk. Do go on, dear . . .'

Next morning, after a reasonable night's sleep, although the mattress was lumpy and the window rattled with every gust of wind, Eliza was up early in the hope of getting away before Mrs Trumble rose from her bed. Gertie was in the kitchen doing nothing in particular, but she did offer to make tea and toast for Eliza, which she accepted gratefully.

As luck would have it Mrs Trumble was not an early riser, and Eliza made her escape without having to go through another cross-examination about the state of Herbert's romantic relationships. She left a thank-you note for Mrs Trumble, together with the money for one night's lodging and she caught a bus to Piccadilly where she alighted close to Fortnum and Mason, resisting the temptation to enter the emporium in the hope of purchasing something tasty to eat. She knew roughly where Lady Marianne's large town house was situated and she kept on walking until she reached the firmly closed iron gates. She rang the bell and eventually a footman appeared. He stared at her suspiciously.

'What do you want? Can't you read the sign – no hawkers or traders?'

'I'm neither of those,' Eliza protested. 'I came to see Lady Marianne.'

'Her ladyship is not at home.' The footman turned to go away but Eliza reached between the bars and caught hold of his coat-tail.

'No, please. I really need to speak to her or Mr Gregory Fox. Is he at home?'

'I don't know what your game is, miss, but I'd advise you to make yourself scarce, or do I have to call for a constable?'

Eliza shook her head. 'Do you know when Lady Marianne or Mr Fox might be at home? I could call again.'

'And the answer would be the same. I don't suppose you have a calling card to leave, have you?'

Eliza shook her head.

'I didn't think so. Now push off or I will set the law on you.'

It had started to rain and dark clouds hovered above the rooftops as Eliza picked up her valise and walked away. She could sense that the footman was watching her, but she did not give him the satisfaction of looking over her shoulder. It was only now that the recklessness of her actions dawned upon her. She had no idea where she might find Luke, or Lady Marianne and Gregory for that matter. Coming to London had seemed like a good idea when she left Portland, but now she was in a world where people thronged the streets, bustling about their daily business. The incessant

rumble of carriage wheels and clatter of horses' hoofs on cobblestones was almost deafening. Eliza had become accustomed to the peace and solitude of Crow Castle, where the loudest sound was that of waves crashing on the rocks in the cove, or the cries of gulls as they swept low over the clifftops.

She came to a halt in a shop doorway to shelter from the rain, and to think seriously about her next move. She could not return to the castle without something positive to tell everyone, but the rain had already soaked her mantle and she shivered with cold. At home the castle grounds were golden with daffodils and there were still patches of snowdrops in sheltered areas. Here in Piccadilly everything looked and felt grey and wintry, but she must persevere.

Braving the rain, Eliza stepped out onto the pavement again and trudged back to Lady Marianne's elegant mansion, although this time she did not attempt to gain access.

'Violets, lovely violets.' A woman crouched on a stool on the opposite side of the road held out a small bunch of flowers. 'A penny a bunch, dearie.'

Eliza stared at her, shaking her head. 'I'm sorry, I can't spare the money.'

The woman, who was dressed in black from head to foot, rose stiffly. 'Tell you what, dearie. You have a kind face. If you take over my pitch so I can go and get meself a cup of tea and a bun, I'll give you a bunch of violets for nothing.'

Eliza was about to refuse when it occurred to her that if she did oblige the old woman, she could watch Lady Marianne's house without arousing suspicion. She would become part of the background, and she could see for herself if the footman had been telling the truth.

'All right, missis. I'll do it.' Eliza put her valise down on the wet pavement.

'I thought you might. I saw you trying to get into that big house and being sent away. What is it, dearie? Or rather, I suppose it is a man what's caused you heartache. I seen it all so many times.' The old woman thrust the basket of violets into Eliza's hands. 'I know exactly how many I got there, so don't try to cheat me, miss.'

'I wouldn't think of it.' Eliza perched on the stool with the basket on her lap. 'Go and get your tea and a bun. I'll take care of your flowers.'

The old woman waddled off, leaving Eliza to sit and shiver while she kept an eye on the tall iron gates of Nesbit House. Occasionally, if she saw

someone who looked as though they might be a prospective customer, she held out a bunch of violets, imitating the street seller's cry, and to her surprise she made several sales. However, her main objective was keeping an eye on the house. There were a few callers, but no one she recognised. She could hardly walk up to a complete stranger and demand news of the newlyweds without causing offence or, even worse, being arrested for loitering or any of the crimes the servants might accuse her of committing.

When the flower seller returned it was obvious that she had been drinking and it was not tea that had passed her lips. A strong smell of gin emanated from her and she was grinning foolishly.

'So have you sold the lot then, dearie?'

Eliza counted six pennies into her outstretched hand. 'There you are. Six bunches sold.' She stood up, stretching her cramped muscles. She was so cold by now that she could not feel her toes or the tips of her fingers.

'Ta, dearie. You're a good sort for a toff. You can't trust many people these days, but you've got an honest face.' The old woman sank down on the stool and cradled the basket on her lap. 'Now push off, dearie. You're blocking the pavement and I don't want to lose customers.'

Eliza realised that this was all the thanks she was about to receive and now she had no excuse to loiter in front of the iron gates. She was about to walk away when a large carriage drawn by a pair of matched bays came to a halt and a footman leaped down to ring the bell. The grey stone mansion was suddenly a hive of activity. A footman from inside raced out to open the gates and another hurried out to put down the carriage steps and assist the passengers to alight. Eliza stifled a sigh of relief when she saw Lady Marianne, resplendent in blue velvet trimmed with fox fur, as she crossed the short distance to the steps and entered her home. Gregory Fox also climbed down from the coach and followed his wife into the entrance hall.

'Good grief, it is you, Eliza. I thought I was imagining things.'

Eliza had been about to cross the street, but she spun around and came face to face with Luke. Her hand flew to her mouth as she gazed at him in surprise.

'You're here, too.'

A smile lit his eyes. 'It appears so. I thought for a moment the street seller looked familiar and then I thought I was just trying to bring you to London and it was wishful thinking. What are you doing here, Lizzie?'

‘I came hoping to find you, or at least to try to persuade your cousin to give up his right to Crow Castle. I wanted to save our home.’

Luke laid his hand on her shoulder. ‘You’re soaking wet. You’ll catch lung fever or worse. Why were you selling violets in the street?’

‘I had a chance to sit and watch the house. I didn’t know how to find you, so I hoped that you might come along, or Lady Marianne.’

‘Well, you need to get warm and dry before we go any further. Have you eaten anything today?’

‘A slice of toast early this morning. I intended to return to Portland today if I couldn’t find you, and I’ve only enough money for my return fare.’

Luke linked her hand through the crook of his arm. ‘I’m staying not far from here, at Brown’s Hotel. Come with me now.’

‘But what about your cousin and Lady Marianne? You’ve obviously been waiting for them, too.’

‘They are home now, so at least I know where to find them. Come along, Lizzie. Don’t argue. You need food and dry clothes. Where is your luggage?’

Eliza looked around, frowning. ‘I put it down next to the flower seller.’ She glanced across the street. ‘She’s gone and so has my valise. I borrowed that from my sister.’

‘I’m afraid that is the last you will see of it. Don’t worry, we’ll get you sorted and then we’ll come back here and see Marianne and Gregory together.’

‘But they might take exception to that Luke.’ Eliza walked beside him clutching his arm as she tried to stop her teeth from chattering. The cold seemed to have seeped into her bones, and she could barely feel her feet now.

‘Never mind them, Lizzie. It’s time for the reckoning between me and Gregory. I am the rightful heir to Crow Castle and all it entails and he needs to be made aware of it in no uncertain terms.’

‘But you didn’t comply with your grandfather’s wishes, Luke. I would have married you, but you put a stop to the wedding. It’s too late now.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Luke quickened his pace. ‘I’ll explain over luncheon.’

They had reached the street lined with elegant town houses and the famous Brown’s Hotel. The doorman acknowledged them with a polite smile as he opened the door and Luke led Eliza into the foyer.

‘Wait here for a moment, Lizzie. I’ll book a room for you and order a meal brought to mine. You won’t be disappointed.’ He strode over to the desk where he spoke to the concierge and then returned to Eliza’s side. ‘It’s all arranged. I think a nice hot bath is what you need and the maids are filling a tub as we speak. Then we’ll eat.’

Eliza nodded. His thoughtfulness was overwhelming when she considered what he had lost by cancelling their wedding. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured as she followed him upstairs.

An hour later, wearing clean clothes that the housekeeper had produced as if by magic, Eliza went to Luke’s room where a dining table had been set up in the window. She only realised then how hungry she was, having eaten very little since she left Crow Castle. Luke pulled up a chair for her.

‘You look better now. You were blue with cold when I found you.’

‘Thank you again. I must admit I feel like a different person after a lovely hot bath and a maid bringing me warm towels to dry myself. I could get used to such luxury, but I must remember my place. I am your housekeeper, Luke.’

‘Forget about that and enjoy your meal. When we’ve eaten, I want you to stay here and rest while I go to Nesbit House and speak to Gregory.’

‘What will you say to him?’ Eliza took a sip of the wine that Luke had poured into her glass. ‘Will you try to persuade him not to pursue ownership of the castle?’

‘Amongst other things, yes, that is what I will say.’

‘Do you think he will listen?’

Luke speared a slice of roast chicken with his fork. ‘Most definitely.’ He cut the meat into small pieces with the precision of a surgeon. ‘Now let’s forget Gregory and Marianne for the time being and enjoy our food. I’m starving, I don’t know about you.’

‘So am I.’ Eliza smiled and gave up all attempts at conversation until they had both finished eating. The dessert of plum duff with brandy sauce was so delicious that she had to resist the temptation to scrape the plate for the last morsel, but she laid her cutlery down neatly and sat back while Luke ordered coffee.

‘I ordered the pudding last evening,’ Luke said, smiling. ‘I used to dream about such a culinary treat when I was in camp during the war, and I know

the head chef here is a master pastry cook. It was worth waiting for such a tasty dessert.'

'It was delightful. I'm afraid we always ate quite plainly when Angelica and I were travelling with the circus.' Eliza sat back in her chair. 'Thank you for luncheon, Luke.'

'It's the least I can do. I'm afraid I caused you much heartache, Lizzie. You deserve better.'

'I'm still not sure I understand why you called off the wedding. It would have solved so many of your problems.'

He shook his head. 'It would have meant I was using you. I care too much for you to do that, which is why I couldn't go through with such a farce.'

'I don't agree,' Eliza said slowly. 'It meant a great deal to me, if only the fact that I could save your home from being taken away, and it protected me and my sister.'

'But you agreed to my plan out of duty and even self-preservation, not for love.'

'You don't know that, Luke. You didn't ask me how I felt. You only asked me if I agreed to your way out of an impossible situation.'

Luke leaned across the table to lay his hand on hers. 'What about Gilbert? It was obvious that he is and probably has always been in love with you, Lizzie? Why didn't you go away with him and the rest of the circus people?'

She stared at him in amazement. 'I don't love Gilbert. I've always been fond of him, and we were good friends. In fact, we are still good friends, but that isn't love, at least not the sort you are talking about.'

Luke withdrew his hand and pushed back his chair. He rose to his feet. 'That's all I wanted to know, Lizzie. I'm going to Nesbit House now so please stay here and rest. We'll talk when I return.'

'But I should go home. They will worry if I don't return this evening.'

'It's too late to start off now, anyway. Please promise me you will be here when I get back. I have something very important to ask you.'

Chapter Twenty-three

When Luke left the hotel Eliza went to her room, intending to rest until he returned, but the moment she lay down on the comfortable bed she fell fast asleep. She was awakened by someone rapping on her door and then it opened and Luke strode into the room.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you, Lizzie, but I need to talk to you.’

She raised herself on her elbow. ‘Can’t it wait for a while? I was in the middle of a lovely dream.’

He laughed. ‘You’re still half asleep. Lie back and I’ll order a tray of tea to be brought to your room. We’ll talk afterwards.’

Eliza was wide awake now and she sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. ‘No, it’s all right. I’ll come with you.’ She stood up and went over to the dressing table to tidy her hair before following him out of the room.

‘Did you speak to Gregory or Lady Marianne?’

‘I did.’ Luke walked on, heading for the staircase and leaving her little alternative but to follow him. He did not stop until they were in a large airy sitting room with small tables placed strategically apart to give the residents privacy. He signalled to a waiter.

‘We would like a tray of tea and some fancies.’

‘Yes, sir. Immediately.’ The waiter glided off silently, leaving them to find a suitable table and take a seat.

Eliza sank down on one of the chairs, eyeing Luke curiously. ‘Well, what happened?’ She glanced at the brass clock on the mantelshelf. ‘You’ve been gone for nearly three hours.’

‘I had a lot to do.’ Luke took a seat opposite her. ‘I spoke first to Marianne. As I thought, she has no intention of returning to Crow Castle; she was adamant that she would rather die than be incarcerated in a pile of old stones far from civilisation, as she put it. She also told me that one of her elderly aunts had passed away and had left her a considerable fortune to add to her already full coffers. In other words, Marianne is a very wealthy woman.’

‘And yet she married Gregory Fox. She could have had anyone.’

A wry smile twisted Luke’s lips. ‘My cousin can be very persuasive, and he obviously has a way with women. They are married now, he made sure of that, and he has lost interest in Crow Castle.’

‘Did he tell you that himself?’

‘He most certainly did. I have it in writing.’

‘That is marvellous,’ Eliza said with a sigh of relief. ‘All that worry and the situation has resolved itself.’

‘Not quite.’ Luke sat back as the waiter brought a tray of tea with a plate of fancy cakes, which he placed on the table in front of them.

‘You may leave it,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘I’ll pour the tea.’

The waiter bowed and backed away, leaving Eliza to do the honours. She handed a cup to Luke. ‘Well, go on. Don’t keep me in suspense. What more is there to do than to return home?’

‘I called in on my solicitor after I left Nesbit House. He told me that my grandfather’s wishes were merely that, and his condition that I be married before my twenty-sixth birthday is not legally binding.’

‘We didn’t need to be married after all?’

‘Apparently not, although I was led to believe it was true.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Eliza said slowly. ‘It put us all in an untenable position.’

‘But in a way it has set me free, Eliza.’

She replaced her cup on its saucer, frowning. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I can now ask the woman I love to marry me without any terms or conditions.’

Eliza stared down at the plate of cakes, barely seeing the delicate pink icing. She could hardly frame the question, but she took a deep breath.

‘You have someone in mind, Luke?’

He smiled. ‘I first saw her working her fingers to the bone polishing the brass door furniture on a bitterly cold winter’s day, and then she was shovelling snow in the back yard, even though darkness had fallen.’

‘I was so bad at everything then,’ Eliza said ruefully. ‘I’d never done such hard work before. You must have thought I was useless.’

‘I thought I had never met such a brave or beautiful woman in my whole life. I only know a little of what you went through in those days, Lizzie, but I wasn’t in a position to help you then as I wasn’t a free man. But I am now.’

‘I don’t fully understand,’ Eliza said warily. ‘What are you trying to say?’

‘I’m trying to tell you how I feel, Lizzie. I think I fell in love with you that ice-cold day in December and that has never changed. I wanted to marry you for all the right reasons, but I had to be fair to you and that is why I couldn’t go through with the ceremony.’

‘But I agreed to it, Luke. I knew what I was doing.’

‘No, you didn’t. You only thought you knew why I asked you to marry me. I wanted you for my wife because I love you, Lizzie. I will always love you and I want you by my side for ever.’ Luke reached out and took her hands in his. ‘Do you think you could forget what has gone before?’

Eliza bit back the tears that threatened to overcome her. ‘I love you, too, Luke.’

Luke glanced over his shoulder as an elegant middle-aged couple entered the drawing room and took a table by the window.

‘I should go down on one knee, but this is not the time or place. I’ll ask you anyway, Lizzie. Will you marry me?’

The tender look in his eyes made Eliza tremble. ‘I will,’ she said softly.

He raised her hands to his lips. ‘You can’t imagine how happy that makes me. I still have the special licence, and there’s this, too.’ He released her hands and took a small shagreen-covered box from his inside pocket.

‘The time never seemed right to tell you how I really felt, Lizzie. It was as if we were acting out a drama on stage and I couldn’t in all honesty ask you to wear it.’ He took the ring from its velvet bed and held it out to her.

‘It’s beautiful, Luke.’ Eliza gazed at the sparkling emerald set between two rose-cut diamonds. She held out her left hand, and he slipped it on her fourth finger.

‘I suggest we go home tomorrow morning and make arrangements for a proper wedding this time.’

‘Everyone will think we’ve gone mad,’ Eliza said, smiling.

‘Who cares what anyone thinks or says? You and I know the truth and that is all that matters. We’ll rearrange the wedding and you will have the most splendid white silk gown for the occasion. If we can find out where the circus is playing next, we’ll have everyone back, including your father, who will give you away properly. What do you say, Lizzie?’

‘I don’t need a splendid gown or anything else. I want to marry you, of course, but couldn’t we do it quietly, without fuss?’

‘As I said, I have the special licence. We could get married in London, but it seems as though I’m cheating you of the wedding you deserve.’

‘I’m not sure I could go through all that again, and I don’t think it would be fair on the others, but we could still have the wedding breakfast and all that goes with it. My circus friends love a good party, and there would be more time to arrange everything.’

‘I agree, but only if you are absolutely certain.’ Luke grasped her hand tightly.

Eliza smiled and nodded. ‘Crow Castle needs a genuine celebration to clear away the cobwebs and the unhappiness that Gregory caused. Not to mention his previous criminal activities.’

‘We’ll do anything you wish, Lizzie. I just want you to be happy.’

‘I’ve never been so happy.’ Eliza gazed down at the ring. ‘This is beautiful, Luke. I couldn’t have chosen better.’

Luke tucked the empty box back into his pocket. ‘I have an idea for our wedding, but only if you approve.’

‘That sounds exciting. Will we be married in London?’

‘I need to leave you again for an hour or two, but I’ll be back in time for dinner.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’m going to pay a call on the padre of my former regiment. He was a good friend to me when I was involved in the fighting. I’ll ask him if he will officiate at our wedding. Will you be all right here?’

‘I am most comfortable, and I can’t go anywhere until my clothes are dry. They’re in the laundry room now.’ Eliza plucked at the plain grey cotton skirt of the borrowed gown. ‘I refuse to be married in this.’

Luke rose to his feet. ‘Don’t worry about anything. Tomorrow morning we’ll go shopping, but first I have the most important date to arrange.’ He leaned over to brush Eliza’s cheek with a kiss and then he was gone.

She sat staring at the tea tray, hardly able to believe that this was happening, but her happiness was tinged with sorrow that Angelica was not there to share everything. Their lives had been entwined since birth, and this was the first time they had been separated for anything other than a few hours. She comforted herself with the knowledge that Angel would understand, but she needed her sister to know she was safe and she went to the concierge to arrange for a telegram to be sent to Crow Castle. Having done that, Eliza went to her room to await Luke’s return.

A laundry maid returned Eliza’s mantle and gown, dry and neatly pressed. It was a relief to be able to put on her own clothes and she returned

the borrowed gown before settling down to wait for Luke's return. He was gone for the rest of the afternoon, and it was time to go down to the restaurant for dinner when he finally arrived.

'It's all arranged,' he said as they walked towards the staircase.

'Tomorrow afternoon at the Albany Street barracks chapel. The padre will be more than happy to perform the marriage ceremony, even though I've left the army. He was a particularly good friend of mine during my time in the Crimea, and I can't wait for him to meet you, Lizzie.'

'At least I have my own clothes back,' Eliza said, tucking her hand through the crook of his arm. 'I don't mind about having a special gown.'

'I've arranged that, too.' Luke patted her hand. 'We'll visit Swan and Edgar as soon as it opens tomorrow morning. I went into the ladies' fashion department and spoke to the woman in charge, and she is going to set out a selection of gowns that you might like.'

They reached the staircase and descended, still arm in arm.

'I suppose you've found someone to be a best man and another to give me away,' Eliza said, laughing.

'As a matter of fact, I have.' Luke lifted her down the last couple of steps. 'Two of my old friends from the regiment have agreed to do the honours. I couldn't manage to get the band together, but the organist is going to participate. The only thing missing is your family, Lizzie.'

'You are my family, too,' Eliza said with a misty smile. 'Angel and the others will be with me in spirit, and when we get home, we will have the most wonderful party. No one will be left out.'

There was a definite touch of spring in the air when Eliza and Luke left Brown's after breakfast next morning. They took a cab to Swan and Edgar where they were ushered into the fashion department and Luke spoke to the efficient-looking woman who was in charge. She unbent immediately and was all smiles as she sent her minions to fetch the gowns she had selected. Eliza was quite overcome. She could have chosen any one of them without hesitation, but Luke clearly preferred the afternoon gown in ivory watered silk, and she had not the heart to argue. The garment fitted as though it had been made for her, and then there was an even greater selection of charming bonnets, kid gloves and lace shawls to consider.

The attentive staff hurried away to pack up their purchases, leaving Eliza feeling anxious.

‘That must have cost a fortune, Luke. I’m not sure we ought to spend so lavishly on a ceremony that will last less than an hour.’

‘It will be worth every penny, I can assure you of that, my darling. I’m a wealthy man now, thanks to my grandfather. Besides which, you will wear your finery to the wedding breakfast and the party afterwards. Crow Castle will never have seen such a celebration.’

Two days later Eliza and Luke returned home. Angelica met Eliza with a frown. ‘What were you thinking of? We’ve been worried to death wondering what happened to you.’

‘I sent a telegram saying I was safe and not to worry.’

‘That’s not good enough,’ Angelica said crossly. ‘Anything could have happened to you in the city.’

‘I had to follow Luke to London, Angel. He left thinking that I didn’t care and that I was going to marry him out of duty. I knew that he needed me and I simply couldn’t allow him to face Gregory and Lady Marianne on his own.’

Angelica tossed her head. ‘It’s obvious to everyone that you’ve always been in love with him and vice versa,’ she said crossly. ‘Any fool could have told you that. But what I don’t understand is why he called the wedding off at the last possible moment.’

‘He said he couldn’t go through with an arranged marriage. He didn’t know how I really felt and I couldn’t tell him because I knew he would do the gentlemanly thing and call the wedding off.’

‘Which he did in a very dramatic manner anyway. I think the pair of you are in need of a good shaking.’ Angelica beckoned to Lavinia, who had emerged from the morning parlour. ‘Come and listen to this, Vinnie. You won’t believe it.’

Lavinia hurried up to them. ‘So, you’ve come home, Lizzie.’

‘She went to London to save Luke from his wicked cousin,’ Angelica said drily. ‘And she expects us to believe that she isn’t in love with him.’

‘I didn’t say that.’ Eliza looked from one to the other. ‘I need to take off my travelling garments. I’m going to my room.’ She set off towards the wide staircase with Angelica and Lavinia following her.

‘You’re not going to get out of it that easily.’ Angelica caught up with her so that they took the stairs two abreast. ‘I want to know everything. What happened when you arrived in London on your own?’

‘You were very brave,’ Lavinia said hastily. ‘I wouldn’t go anywhere on my own.’

‘I went there with only a vague idea where to find Luke, but when I went to Lady Marianne’s grand house, I was turned away. I didn’t know where to turn.’ Eliza reached the landing and made her way to her bedchamber. She opened the door and went inside.

‘Oh, my goodness, Lizzie. What did you do then?’ Angelica slumped down on Eliza’s bed.

‘You’ll never guess in a million years.’

‘I don’t suppose I will,’ Angelica said with a touch of irritation. ‘Stop prevaricating and tell us what happened?’

‘It was pouring with rain, and I was selling violets in the street opposite Lady Marianne’s house when Luke found me.’

Angelica and Lavinia exchanged astonished glances.

‘You were selling violets in the rain?’ Lavinia clutched her hand to her throat. ‘You are teasing us.’

‘No, I’m not. It is the truth. I was doing a favour for an old woman flower seller while I waited to see if either Gregory or Lady Marianne would return to the house.’

‘So, what happened then?’ Angelica demanded eagerly. ‘Did Luke just turn up at the right moment?’

‘Yes, you could say that. I was soaked to the skin, and he took me to his hotel and booked a room for me. We talked and talked. We admitted our feelings for each other, and he proposed properly this time.’ Eliza took off her gloves and held up her left hand.

‘You married Luke? After all he’s done to you.’ Angelica frowned. ‘He humiliated you in front of all our old friends as well as the people who live and work here. Heaven knows what’s being said in the village.’

‘I don’t care.’ Eliza laid her outdoor garments over the back of a chair. ‘You’re always telling me how I feel about him, and now you know it’s true. We love each other.’

‘If that is true, why did he behave in such a fashion, Lizzie?’ Lavinia leaned forward eagerly. ‘It all sounds very odd but also very romantic.’

‘He stopped the ceremony because he loves me, Vinnie. If you think about it, you’ll understand.’

‘That’s all very well,’ Angelica said slowly. ‘But why did you get married in London?’

‘Stop asking questions, Angelica,’ Lavinia said, clutching her arm. ‘This is such a romantic story. Let Lizzie tell it in her own way.’

‘Thank you, Vinnie, but I think I’ve told you everything.’ Eliza went to the clothes press and selected a clean gown.

‘But what about Gregory and Lady Marianne?’ Angelica eyed her curiously. ‘What happens to the castle and the inheritance? I can’t imagine that Gregory would give up so easily.’

‘He’s agreed that everything should go to Luke, as their grandfather planned.’

Angelica curled her lip. ‘I wouldn’t trust anything that man said.’

‘I agree, but for one thing. Lady Marianne has inherited another and even greater fortune. She is an extremely wealthy woman and everything that is hers now belongs to her husband.’

‘They really did get married?’

Eliza laughed. ‘Yes, they did. Now Gregory has more money than he could ever have imagined, as well as a town house and a couple of country estates. Lady Marianne is welcome to him, that’s all I can say.’

‘You still haven’t told us why you and Luke married in such a hurry,’ Angelica said suspiciously. ‘Why did you do it without your family standing by you, as was planned?’

‘It was so romantic, Angel. You can’t imagine how exciting it was to be married in an army chapel by the padre who had been with Luke in the Crimea, and two of his comrades in arms. They were so gallant and charming. We all dined together after the ceremony, and it was wonderful. His friends are so entertaining, you would adore them, Angel.’

‘That’s all very fine, but it’s clear that none of us mattered to you.’ Angelica sighed, shaking her head. ‘You could have returned home and been married in that beautiful St George’s church.’

‘I know and we would have done so, but the special licence had only a day or two left before it expired. We would have had to come home, and the banns would have been read and that takes three weeks. It was better that way, and I’m glad I had time with some of Luke’s military colleagues. I learned a lot from them. He’s a very brave man, Angel.’

‘He will have to be when he meets up with Pa and the rest of our circus family. They won’t be pleased to learn about your escapade in London.’

‘That’s where you are mistaken. They will be delighted because we are going to invite them all to the wedding breakfast and this time there will be

no skimping.'

Angelica rolled her eyes. 'It will mean yet more work for everyone. We've only just finished clearing up after the last wedding breakfast that turned into an all-night party.'

'We will hire more servants, Angel. Now that Luke has come into his inheritance things will be so much better. Besides which, you should be pleased that Crow Castle is safe. This will be our home for as long as we live, unless, of course, you marry a man who will treat you like a duchess and whisk you away to a castle of your own.'

'That might happen,' Angelica said stiffly. 'I could end up with a title, which you haven't achieved.'

'I'm happy to be plain Mrs Wildblood.' Eliza had a sudden thought. 'Now I have to go and break the news of our marriage to your mother, Vinnie. I don't think she will be too pleased, either. She likes to be in control.'

Vinnie jumped to her feet. 'I'm going to find Mama and tell her what you've done. I'll prepare the ground for you, but I'm afraid she'll be very angry that you've taken her favourite nephew away from her.'

Eliza laughed. 'Don't be silly. I haven't taken him away. If anything, I've prevented Luke from leaving. This will be our home, and she'll see him every day. Better still, as far as you and Angel are concerned, Luke invited his two army friends to stay here for the wedding feast and they accepted.'

'I can't wait.' Lavinia hurried from the room.

'Are they handsome?' Angelica rose to her feet.

'Yes, indeed they are.' Eliza slipped her gown over her head and busied herself doing up the tiny fabric-covered buttons.

'I suppose they are married or engaged.' Angelica eyed her expectantly.

'Neither, to my knowledge. We had a most pleasant evening with them, and they can't wait to come down to Portland and visit the castle.'

'Did you mention me?'

'Yes, of course I did. You and I are indivisible, Angel. We are the heavenly twins, as Sutton used to say.'

Eliza left her sister to digest this. She had something urgent to do and that was to check on Waldo. He welcomed her as enthusiastically when she entered the kennels, rubbing against her and licking her face with his raspy tongue. She gave him a cuddle and assured him she could come much more

often. However, she had to face Mrs Wildblood eventually and she returned to the castle.

When Eliza entered the drawing room it was obvious that Lavinia, whose cheeks were flushed with excitement, had passed on the news.

‘So, you’ve deigned to grace us with your presence?’ Mrs Wildblood said icily. ‘Where have you been, Eliza? You are my housekeeper and you cannot just disappear whenever you feel like it.’

‘She followed Luke to London, Mama.’ Lavinia rolled her eyes. ‘I just told you what had happened.’

‘Maybe so, but I want to hear it from Eliza’s lips.’

‘I went to London because I wanted to help Luke,’ Eliza said firmly. ‘As it happens, we came to an understanding, and we were married in the chapel at Albany Street barracks. It was wonderful. I’m just sorry that none of you could be present.’

Mrs Wildblood’s eyes narrowed. ‘I suppose you are the lady of the castle now and I will be relegated to the dower house. Lavinia and I will be the poor relations.’

‘Of course not,’ Eliza said sharply. ‘The thought never occurred to either of us. This is your home for as long as you want it, ma’am.’

‘Don’t expect me to kowtow to you, Eliza Brown. I know you for being the adopted daughter of a common circus performer, and a bad one at that. Luke has married beneath his position in society.’

‘No, Mama. That’s not fair,’ Lavinia said angrily. ‘Eliza may not have been born into the gentry, but she is a fine person and Luke loves her. Isn’t that enough?’

‘She’s turned you against me.’ Mrs Wildblood fished in her pocket for a handkerchief. ‘You can be so cruel sometimes, Lavinia.’

‘I only spoke the truth, Mama. Don’t you want Luke to be happy?’

‘Please don’t fall out over me.’ Eliza looked from one to the other in desperation. ‘I can see this has come as a shock, but we were to be married before. You didn’t seem to mind then, Mrs Wildblood. What has changed?’

‘That was different. It was done properly for all to see. You deceived us, Eliza. I think you planned this all along. You wormed your way into my nephew’s affections and now you’ve trapped him into marriage. I will never forgive you.’

Chapter Twenty-four

‘No such thing, Aunt.’ Luke had been standing in the doorway, unnoticed but he stepped forward now, his eyes flashing angrily. ‘Eliza is innocent in all this, and I count myself a very lucky man to have married such a beautiful, kind and talented woman. Despite the treatment she received at your hands in the beginning she has been loyal and has looked after you and Vinnie through difficult times.’

‘Well, I suppose I might have been a little hasty.’ Mrs Wildblood dabbed her eyes although there was no trace of tears. ‘You must admit that it looks a trifle odd.’

Luke walked purposefully across the floor to take Eliza’s hand in his. ‘No, Aunt. It’s perfectly clear to all that we love each other, and I intend to make Eliza a good husband.’

‘I was in charge here,’ Mrs Wildblood said faintly. ‘Now I am supplanted by a servant.’

‘No such thing.’ Luke shook his head. ‘No one is being supplanted. I’m sure that Eliza will need your help and advice at times, which I hope will be freely given.’

‘Yes, well, of course, I have years of experience of running a household and managing servants.’

‘You see, Mama,’ Lavinia added hastily, ‘you are just as important now as you were before.’

Mrs Wildblood sighed and looked away.

‘It’s true that I am inexperienced when it comes to such things,’ Eliza said earnestly. ‘I will come to you when I need advice, if you will allow it.’

‘I suppose so, but I do not want to return to the dower house. It is dark and poky compared to the castle.’

‘I think that’s understood, Mama.’ Lavinia stood up clasping her hands, and her eyes shining with excitement. ‘Angelica tells me that we are going to have a big celebration of your marriage, Lizzie. And two of Luke’s comrades in arms will be coming down from London. May I have first

choice of dance partner, before Angelica gets her claws on the most handsome one?’

Luke laughed. ‘Vinnie, you are impossible. I think my friends will want a say with whom they choose to have the first dance.’

‘It will be me,’ Angelica said firmly. ‘I am always the favourite.’

‘We will see who’s right.’ Eliza curled her fingers around Luke’s hand. ‘Now who would like to help me organise the wedding breakfast?’

‘I am no longer the lady of the manor,’ Mrs Wildblood said sulkily. ‘I cannot be expected to undertake such a task.’

‘Vinnie and I will be very busy with visits from the local dressmaker.’ Angelica sent a meaningful glance in Lavinia’s direction. ‘I’m assuming the party will go on for several days this time, so we will need new gowns for each day.’

‘I don’t think we can afford that,’ Eliza said anxiously. ‘Maybe one or even two.’

‘You’re a rich man now, aren’t you, Luke?’ Lavinia fluttered her eyelashes and smiled. ‘You want me to have the best, I’m certain.’

Luke laughed. ‘You girls may have your gowns. I’m sure I can afford the local dressmaker. It’s not like purchasing your wedding gown in Swan and Edgar, Lizzie?’

‘You had a gown from Swan and Edgar?’ Angelica stared at Eliza, frowning. ‘That would have been very expensive.’

Mrs Wildblood held up her hands. ‘Now, girls. It’s very vulgar to discuss such things. I’m sure that Luke will be very generous in the circumstances, especially after the embarrassment that the last fiasco caused this family.’

‘I’m not arguing,’ Luke said calmly. ‘But one thing I want to make clear is that Lizzie is in charge of everything. I expect everyone to help in some way, but whatever you decide you must speak to her first. Is that understood?’ He glanced around at their surprised faces and each one nodded, murmuring her assent. He turned to Eliza with a wry smile. ‘You may take on as many servants as you need, and I suggest we open up the dower house so that the guests have somewhere comfortable to stay.’

‘Are you thinking about your army friends?’ Lavinia asked, suddenly alert and smiling.

‘I might be, or perhaps I was considering the circus people. I’ve sent Joe to find out where they are performing in the next few weeks.’

‘That was kind, Luke.’ Eliza smiled and curled her fingers around his hand.

‘It’s the least I can do, since I put a stop to our wedding ceremony.’

‘Don’t get maudlin,’ Mrs Wildblood said crossly. ‘I’m sure we can arrange something special for your informal wedding in the castle. I can’t say I approve of the hole-and-corner way you two got married in London, but we will have to make the best of things.’ She turned to Lavinia, frowning. ‘Send for that woman who made my gown for the wedding that never happened. We have enough work to keep her very busy.’

‘When do you plan to hold this party, Luke?’ Angelica stood up, brushing the creases out of her skirt. ‘How long do we have?’

‘That is a point,’ Eliza agreed, nodding. ‘We have to order in the supplies we need and hire extra servants. The dower house needs a good spring clean before we can let anyone stay there. I wouldn’t want your military comrades to think we were barbarians.’

‘Hugh and Sebastian are used to bivouacking in worse conditions than you can imagine. The dower house, even in its current state, would seem like the most luxurious hotel, so please don’t worry about that.’

‘Hugh and Sebastian,’ Angelica repeated. ‘They sound quite gentlemanly, don’t they, Vinnie?’ She turned to Luke smiling eagerly. ‘Are they married or anything?’

Luke shook his head. ‘No, both are single and fancy free – as far as I know, anyway.’

‘But are they good dancers?’ Lavinia put her head on one side. ‘We need partners if there is to be dancing at the party.’

‘They are excellent dancers and much in demand at balls,’ Luke said, smiling.

‘Are they good looking?’ Lavinia asked eagerly. ‘Are they handsome and charming?’

‘That’s enough, Lavinia.’ Mrs Wildblood held up her hand. ‘If you’re going to simper and behave like a silly young girl, I will forbid you to attend the party.’

‘But, Mama, I will be eighteen next birthday. I should be out in society.’

‘Then you must act like a well-brought-up young lady. Angelica knows how to behave. Perhaps she ought to give you lessons.’

Angelica smirked and Lavinia nudged her sharply in the ribs.

‘We have so much to do,’ Eliza said hastily. ‘I suggest we aim for the wedding celebration to be held in three weeks. That should give us ample time to organise everything, and by then, hopefully, the weather will have improved to make travelling easier.’

Two days before the celebrations were to begin, the weather took a sudden turn for the worse. The spring flowers were in full bloom, but the skies darkened and a cold wind howled from the east, bringing with it flurries of snow. Hugh and Sebastian arrived in one of these sudden showers, shaking snowflakes off their cloaks as they entered the castle. Luke greeted them warmly and they both embraced Eliza as if they had known her all their lives. She was equally pleased to welcome them into her home. Angelica and Lavinia stood back, suddenly shy and speechless as they gazed at the two handsome army officers, but both Hugh and Sebastian were well versed in social graces and soon put them at ease. By the time they gathered together for dinner that evening there was already a party atmosphere and everyone was getting along well. Mrs Wildblood was obviously charmed by Luke’s friends and conversation flowed.

However, by the time the ladies retired to the drawing room for coffee, leaving the gentlemen to enjoy their cigars and brandy, the snow was falling so thick and fast that Eliza could not see out of the window. She thought of Waldo alone in the kennels and she was worried for his wellbeing. He was an old lion, and the cold permeated the brick-built kennels even though he had plenty of clean straw for bedding. The stable boys would make a fuss of him during the day, but he was on his own now and that would not do at all.

Luke and the others joined them after a while, and he came to sit beside her.

‘What’s the matter, my love? You look anxious.’

‘It’s Waldo. I’m worried about him stuck outside in the kennels. It looks as if the snow has set in and he’ll be so cold and lonely out there.’

‘Who is Waldo?’ Hugh eyed them curiously. ‘Is he a servant banished to the kennels for misbehaving?’

‘Or maybe a very small lapdog put outside in disgrace?’ Sebastian added as he took a seat on the sofa next to Angelica.

‘You won’t believe it when you actually meet Waldo,’ Angelica said, laughing.

‘Is he an aged retainer kept in the kennels because he has lost one eye and a leg, and can no longer work?’ Hugh asked, his lips twitching with amusement.

‘Waldo is Eliza’s pet lion,’ Luke said, firmly. ‘But I agree, Lizzie darling. The poor old fellow should be indoors on a night like this. I wouldn’t be surprised if we were snowed in by morning.’

‘Don’t say that, even in jest, Luke.’ Mrs Wildblood fanned herself vigorously. ‘Don’t forget we have guests on the way here. What will we do if they cannot get onto the island?’

Eliza rose to her feet. ‘I’m going to bring him indoors. I cannot let poor Waldo freeze to death.’

Luke was at her side instantly. ‘No, Lizzie. You stay here. Hugh and Sebastian will come with me. We’ll bring Waldo indoors.’ He kissed her on the cheek. ‘Stay here in the warm. We won’t be long.’ He left the room, followed by Hugh and Sebastian.

‘I wasn’t expecting this. What else have you got tucked up your sleeve, Luke?’ Sebastian said as he closed the door.

Eliza sank back onto her chair. ‘I can’t believe this is happening. Whoever heard of snow coming so late in the year, especially here? I’ve been told it hardly ever snows on the island.’

‘Well, hopefully the snow will be gone by morning,’ Mrs Wildblood said worriedly. ‘If it gets worse, we might have to cancel everything yet again. I couldn’t bear the embarrassment.’

‘It won’t be our fault, Mama,’ Lavinia said hastily. ‘We could still go ahead with the local people who can get here.’

‘And we have Luke’s comrades in arms,’ Angelica added cheerfully. ‘I think they are both splendid.’

‘We will manage something.’ Eliza sighed. ‘It does seem as if fate is against us.’

She had just finished speaking when the door opened and Waldo rushed in with snow still clinging to his fur. He threw himself down at Eliza’s feet and licked her hand as she tried to stroke him.

Luke entered more slowly, coming to a halt in the doorway. ‘Waldo is fine, Lizzie. But look who we found on the doorstep. He stood aside as Hugh and Sebastian manhandled a man into the drawing room. His head was bent and his wide-brimmed hat was caked with snow, as was his cloak.

‘Who is it? He must be frozen,’ Mrs Wildblood exclaimed, peering at the man through her lorgnette.

‘Take your hat off indoors, sir.’ Hugh knocked the hat to the ground and a murmur of surprise rippled around the room.

‘Gregory!’ Mrs Wildblood glared at him in horror.

‘Why are you here, sir?’ Eliza demanded angrily. ‘What do you want with us?’

Gregory shook off the restraining hands of Hugh and Sebastian. ‘That’s no way to welcome the man who allowed you to keep this old pile and the financial inheritance.’

‘What do you want with us, Gregory?’ Luke spoke calmly but Eliza could sense the anger beneath his restrained tone.

‘A tot of brandy wouldn’t come amiss, cousin. I’ve been walking for miles after the cart became stuck in the snow.’

‘Sit down and explain why you chose to brave the weather to come here tonight?’ Luke went to a side table and poured a generous measure of brandy into a goblet, which he handed to Gregory as he sank onto a chair by the fire.

‘I didn’t intend to call upon you, cousin. The sudden change in the weather put paid to a quiet return to the scene. I came to collect the last shipment of claret that you are kindly hiding for me in the caves below the castle.’

‘What are you talking about, Gregory?’ Luke eyed him suspiciously. ‘Your last cache of smuggled wine was taken by the revenue men and the dealer was arrested.’

‘Quite so,’ Gregory said smugly. ‘But I needed a little excitement in my life. Being married to a wealthy woman has its disadvantages in that there is little to challenge my adventurous spirit.’

‘But why would you bother to smuggle wine into the country?’ Eliza asked, frowning. ‘Surely you are wealthy enough to pay the duty without blinking?’

‘I am now, but I wasn’t when the deal was done. It’s as simple as that. I have done well in marriage, as I believe you have, too. You and I are social climbers par excellence.’

‘Don’t insult my wife by comparing her to yourself.’ Luke took a step towards him. ‘You won’t goad me into an argument, Gregory. You are not collecting anything. I will send for the constable in the morning, and he will

inform the revenue men. You will end up in prison, as you rightly deserve. How dare you involve us in your criminal activities?’

Gregory drained his glass and held it up for a refill. ‘I’m beginning to thaw out, but another tot will complete the process.’

‘I reckon you should turn him out in the snow,’ Sebastian said angrily. ‘The fellow is obviously a crook, and he’s trying to drag you down with him.’

‘I agree,’ Hugh said, nodding. ‘Or else lock him up in the dungeon. I hope you have dungeons under the castle.’

‘No, we don’t.’ Eliza patted Waldo on the head as he growled menacingly at Gregory. ‘No one is going to be thrown out in the snow or locked in a dungeon. Gregory is Luke’s cousin and he will be treated like any other guest for tonight only. Tomorrow, weather permitting, we will send for the constable and Gregory can explain himself.’

‘But, Eliza, he will be free to run away,’ Hugh said gently. ‘Surely a locked bedroom is called for.’

‘Or we could put him in the kennels where the lion was housed,’ Sebastian suggested, grinning.

‘He might murder us in our beds.’ Lavinia covered her face with her hands. ‘Take him away, Luke.’

‘Come now, Vinnie,’ Gregory said silkily. ‘You know better than that. I am not a violent man. I might not have much respect for the law, but I am not a criminal, and I have enough money to brief the best barrister in Lincoln’s Inn, so indulge me now, please. This will be my last venture into the criminal world, and after it’s done I will become a pillar of society, I promise you.’

Luke took Gregory’s glass and added another tot of brandy. ‘I think we all need to get some sleep. I’ll put my cousin in the tower room with Waldo to guard the door. I don’t think you will try to escape or do anything rash in that instance, will you, Gregory?’

Gregory eyed Waldo nervously. ‘You don’t have to go that far. You have my word as a gentleman that I will not try to get away. But I am a trifle hungry. I haven’t eaten since early this morning.’

Eliza rose to her feet. ‘I’ll have some food sent to your room.’

‘Thank you,’ Gregory said humbly. He stood up, taking care not to get too close to Waldo as he followed Luke from the room.

‘Well! The nerve of the man.’ Lavinia turned to her mother. ‘How dare he use Crow Castle as a safe place for his contraband?’

‘And he’s not even sorry about it,’ Angelica added. She shot a sideways glance at Hugh. ‘Thank goodness we have brave army officers here to protect us.’

‘Don’t forget Waldo.’ Eliza reached for the bell pull. ‘I will see that Gregory is fed and treated civilly, but I will be glad when he is gone. I don’t want him here for our wedding celebrations. That would be too much.’

‘We can only hope the snow doesn’t get any deeper,’ Sebastian said earnestly. ‘Otherwise, we will be a very small party.’

Next morning, after a night of freezing temperatures, the sun came out and turned the landscape into a wintry fairyland. However, practicalities had to be observed, and Joe was delegated to fetch the constable, but the going was dangerous and he had to give up after a valiant attempt to reach the village. With the sunshine it seemed hopeful that a thaw would set in, and he promised to try again later. It seemed that the Wildbloods were going to have Gregory as a guest for a little longer, and Eliza sent a tray of breakfast up to his room. She was doubtful as to whether anyone would make it to the castle for the wedding party, but preparations were already too far advanced to cancel. Mrs Pearce and her helpers had been working hard for days preparing the food, and it would all go to waste if no one arrived for the celebrations. Angelica and Lavinia had their new gowns ready for the ball in the evening, and the banqueting hall had been set up for days. Luke, Hugh and Sebastian, together with Joe and the stable boys, all worked hard to clear the snow from the carriage sweep and the drive leading up to the castle, but the temperature dropped in the afternoon bringing another heavy snowfall.

‘No one will come tomorrow,’ Eliza said to Luke as they sat by the fire after dinner. ‘We seem to be ill-fated with our nuptials.’

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. ‘Wait until morning before you give up, my darling. If fate is against us this time we will wait for the spring to set in properly and try again. I want the world to meet my beautiful bride.’

‘Let’s drink to that,’ Hugh said, raising his glass. ‘But don’t worry, Lizzie. If the rest of the guests can’t make it, we will have a smaller party, but a celebration all the same.’

Sebastian joined in the toast. 'To the bride and groom, and to the guests who wish they were here now.'

Waldo yawned and laid his head on Eliza's lap as if agreeing with what Sebastian had just said.

'Yes, Lizzie,' Angelica added cheerfully. 'Vinnie and I will put on our new gowns, and we will have a wonderful time, regardless of who is here.'

Gregory, who had been sitting quietly in the corner of the room, raised his glass. 'I'll drink to that, and if the worst comes to the worst I have plenty of good claret down below in the caves. We won't go thirsty.'

Waldo raised his head and growled deep in his throat.

'All right, I won't say another word.' Gregory sank back in his chair and sipped his drink.

A sudden commotion outside made Luke jump to his feet and he rushed to the window.

'Good heavens. Someone has got through, despite the weather.' He hurried out of the room, followed by Eliza.

Downstairs in the entrance hall Nancy was on her way to open the front door with Agnes chattering excitedly behind her. Eliza was almost blown backwards by a gust of icy wind as the door opened and Magicus stumbled over the threshold, followed by Gilbert, Sutton, Gaston, Cecil and Leonardo.

Eliza stared at Magicus in surprise. 'How did you manage to get through the snow? Are there any more to come?'

Magicus took off his wide-brimmed hat and shook snow onto the flagstones.

'It was a battle, but we were determined to get here. We're camped on the other side of Dorchester until the weather improves, so it was not too far to come. Although we didn't anticipate a blizzard.'

'Yes, and we need help,' Gilbert added urgently. 'Mrs Sutton and the twins are in a carriage with Bella. The rest of the crew were following us, but we lost them. They might make it or they might have to put up somewhere for the night.'

Luke called to Hugh and Sebastian. 'We're needed to help rescue some of the circus folk.'

'I'll lead the way,' Gilbert said hurriedly. 'The carriage is stuck in a snowdrift.'

‘We’ll be with you in a couple of minutes.’ Luke took his cloak and hat from a wall peg. ‘Just give us time to wrap up.’

Eliza stood aside as Hugh and Sebastian hurried past her, struggling into their outdoor garments, and once again the entrance hall was filled with cold air as Gilbert opened the door and they braved the cold.

Eliza beckoned to Nancy and Agnes. ‘Nancy, please ask Mrs Pearce to heat up some soup for our guests. Agnes, bank up the fire in the dining room and they can sit in there until the food is ready.’ She glanced anxiously at Magicus. ‘You look frozen to the marrow, Pa. Follow me, and that goes for the rest of you. I don’t know how you managed to make it this far, but you are more than welcome.’

‘Thank you, Eliza.’ Magicus drew himself up to his full height. ‘I braved the weather, even though I am not a fit man. I came because I need to apologise to you and your sister. I know I haven’t been a good father to either of you.’

‘You took care of us in your own way when we were younger,’ Eliza said gently. ‘You were strict but never cruel. Angel and I never lacked for anything.’

Magicus stared down at his snow-covered boots. ‘You are more generous than I deserve, my dear. I let you both down and for that I am very sorry. I abandoned you when I ought to have taken care of you.’

‘I would never have met Luke if you had not given us away, Pa. I think we can put all that in the past now, and I’m sure that Angel would agree. We have a good life ahead of us.’

‘Can you forgive a silly old man, Eliza, my dear?’

She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. ‘Of course, Pa. You’re here now, and Luke and the others will rescue Mrs Sutton, Bella and the twins. I’m glad you all came.’

‘Have you ever known us circus folk to miss a good party, Lizzie?’ Magicus shrugged off his damp overcoat. ‘A tot or two of rum or brandy will set us all to rights.’

‘I’ll second that,’ Leonardo said through chattering teeth.

Eliza glanced up the stairs and saw Angelica and Lavinia peering down at them.

‘Don’t just stand there. Come and help. Our friends have braved the weather to get here.’

At that moment, Waldo came bounding down the stairs to jump up at Leonardo, almost knocking him over. Leonardo responded with equal affection. He headed for the dining room with Waldo at his side. Eliza smiled, it was like old times, and being with her childhood friends made her happier than she could have imagined. She adored Luke, but so much of her life had been involved with her circus family that their struggle to get here and support her meant more than she could say.

The rest of the circus folk arrived shortly afterwards and eventually Eliza managed to settle everyone into the dining room, where they huddled around the fire, sipping their drinks until Nancy brought a tureen of hot soup and Agnes came in with a platter of bread and a large pat of butter. Gregory was put to use, going down to the cellar to bring up bottles of wine, which he uncorked and served without protest, although Eliza noted that he filled a large glass for himself. However, now was not the time for pettiness, and when Luke, Hugh and Sebastian returned with Mary Sutton, the twins, and Bella, the whole process was repeated, although the twins were given hot chocolate instead of brandy. They joined the others at the table, where places were laid for them, and yet more food was brought from the kitchen.

Later, when everyone had eaten, Eliza allocated the bedrooms and made sure that all their guests were settled comfortably. Hugh and Sebastian braved the weather to make their way to the dower house, taking Gilbert with them. Eliza suspected that they would continue their revelry into the early hours, but that was their choice. Gregory was confined to his room in the tower with Waldo once again guarding the door in case he decided to make his escape, although given the bad weather that seemed very unlikely. However, Joe had been instructed to make another attempt to fetch the constable in the morning, if possible.

Eliza awakened next day to bright sunshine reflecting off the snow, although it was still bitterly cold. The circus folk were already up when she went downstairs with Luke, and there was a party atmosphere in the dining room as they ate their breakfasts. Mrs Pearce and Jessie had outdone themselves and the sideboard was groaning with platters of bacon, fried sausages and scrambled eggs. Nancy dashed in and out with racks of toast and plates of bread and butter while Agnes filled cups with coffee or tea. No expense had been spared and the aroma of baking wafted around the

draughty castle. It was only when Waldo wandered into the dining room that Eliza noticed Gregory's absence from the table.

'Luke, you'd better check the tower room. I have a feeling that something is wrong.'

'Gregory is probably still asleep, but I will make certain he hasn't made a bolt for it.' Luke strolled off, returning minutes later with a serious expression. 'He's gone and his bed hasn't been slept in.'

Hugh rose from the table. 'Do you want us to go looking for him, Luke?'

'He could be anywhere, although I doubt if he would get far with the snow being so deep.'

Angelica looked up from the plate of scrambled eggs she had been about to demolish. 'He might have gone by boat. Didn't he plan to escape that way last time?'

Eliza hurried to the window. 'I can't see a ship in the bay, but the sea looks relatively calm. I suppose he could have arranged to take his contraband by boat.'

Agnes burst into the room, pink-cheeked and breathless. 'Constable Pitman is here, ma'am. What shall I tell him?'

Sebastian pushed his chair back and stood up. 'I say we go looking for the feller before he gets away.'

Luke dropped a kiss on Eliza's forehead. 'I'm so sorry, darling girl. This isn't turning out how I wanted our special day to be.'

'Every day with you is special,' Eliza said, smiling. 'Find him and let's hope it will be the end of all the madness on Gregory's part. He cannot play the fool for ever.'

'I'll allow the law to take its course as far as my cousin is concerned, but I intend on giving the constable a helping hand nonetheless.' Luke hurried from the room, followed by Hugh and Sebastian, and the rest of the men rushed after them, leaving Bella, the twins and Mary Sutton staring open-mouthed.

'I'm going too,' Angelica said hastily. 'I don't want to miss anything.'

Eliza was at the door first and she seized her cloak from the row of pegs in the entrance hall. Constable Pitman arrived with Joe, and they went on ahead, with Eliza, Angelica and Lavinia, hurrying after them. The snow was hard-packed, making it difficult to follow the twisting path. The steep steps that led to the shore were slippery, but they reached the cove without accident. A fishing boat had anchored offshore, and Gregory was about to

wade into the water to climb on board the tender, the deck of which was piled with crates of the contraband wine.

Constable Pitman waded in after him, followed by Luke, Hugh and Sebastian, with Leonardo, Sutton and Gaston shouting encouragement from the beach. But as luck would have it a huge wave broke over the overloaded tender and it broached, floundered and overturned, throwing Gregory and the seaman into the foaming water. Constable Pitman, ever resourceful, grabbed Gregory by the scruff of the neck and dragged him to shore. The others pulled the seaman to safety.

Gregory was arrested immediately, and Constable Pitman assured Luke that the crates of wine would be picked up by the revenue men at low tide. Gregory was blue with cold and, for once, speechless.

‘What will happen to him, Constable?’ Eliza asked cautiously. ‘Will he go to prison?’

‘That depends upon the magistrate, ma’am. I assume you are going to press charges, Mr Wildblood?’

Luke took Eliza by the hand. ‘I think he’s learned his lesson, Constable. I leave it to the magistrate, but I won’t be taking any further action if Mr Fox gives me his word that he will never set foot here again.’ He glanced down at Eliza. ‘This is our day, Lizzie. We don’t want it ruined by a greedy fool like Gregory.’

‘I agree,’ Eliza said smiling. ‘I think Lady Marianne will have something to say about his antics, and I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes when he gets home.’

‘You’re too good, Eliza,’ Hugh said earnestly. ‘I wouldn’t be so generous.’

‘This is going to be our special day and no one and nothing is going to prevent the celebration,’ Eliza said firmly.

Angelica patted her on the shoulder. ‘Look up on the clifftop. I think the whole village has turned out. This is going to be the best party and finest wedding breakfast of the century.’

‘Even if it is a bit delayed.’ Luke lifted Eliza in his arms and kissed her, to rapturous applause from all the onlookers. Waldo stood guard in front of them, his tongue lolling out as if he too, was smiling.

‘Back to the castle, everyone. Even you, Gregory. You need a change of clothes before the constable takes you away.’ Luke beckoned to the crowd

on the cliff. ‘The party has just started. Come with us and help to celebrate a new beginning for the Wildblood family and all those dear to us.’

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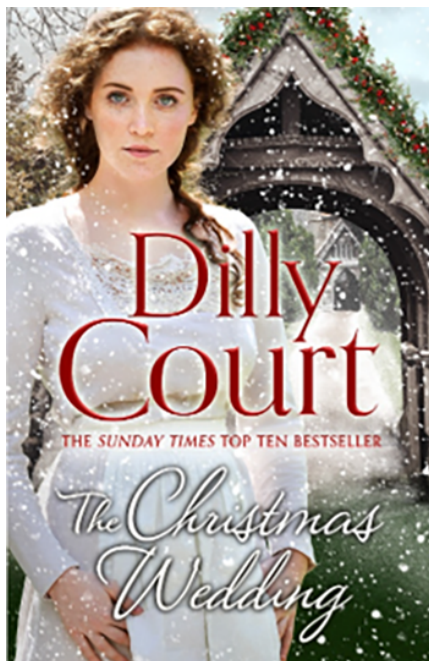
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Dilly Court is a No.1 *Sunday Times* bestselling author of over fifty novels. She grew up in North-East London and began her career in television, writing scripts for commercials. She is married with two grown-up children, four grandchildren and three beautiful great-grandchildren. Dilly now lives in Dorset on the Jurassic Coast with her husband.

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