

*ALSO BY MAUREEN DRISCOLL*

THE KELLINGTON SERIES

NEVER TURN AWAY (KELLINGTON, BOOK SIX)

NEVER DENY YOUR HEART (KELLINGTON, BOOK FIVE)

NEVER RUN FROM LOVE (KELLINGTON, BOOK FOUR)

NEVER WAGER AGAINST LOVE (KELLINGTON, BOOK THREE)

NEVER MISS A CHANCE (KELLINGTON, BOOK TWO)

NEVER A MISTRESS, NO LONGER A MAID (KELLINGTON, BOOK ONE)

THE POLITICAL SATIRE

DATING GEORGE CLOONEY

ALWAYS COME HOME

By

Maureen Driscoll

To my mom.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Road to Wiltshire, December 1822*

Colin Emerson, the Earl of Ridgeway, had forgotten what it was like to travel by mail coach. He didn't like to think he was the typical pampered aristocrat, though he knew his life had been easy compared to most people in the damned, overcrowded coach. He knew he should be grateful that he was seated inside and not on top in the frigid weather like his valet Stemple. He'd felt bad when Stemple had insisted on taking the seat, though at least the air his servant was breathing was less rancid than what he was being subjected to, courtesy of whichever passenger had given up bathing.

Colin was fortunate that he'd been able to secure the fare for even the mail coach. At the age of thirty, he had been the Earl of Ridgeway for three years, ever since his father had been killed after being thrown from his horse. It had not been the animal's fault. The old earl had been drunk, in a rage and had likely beaten his horse one time too many.

More than one person had whispered that the horse had done the family a favor.

Colin hadn't said such a thing, though he'd been estranged from his brute of a father. He'd seen enough death to not wish it upon anyone. Though at least in his father's case, it had been instantaneous, instead of the prolonged suffering he'd witnessed in the war.

Not all of war's devastation could be measured in deaths, of course. Sometimes the damage lasted years or more. His valet Stemple had been badly burned down the right side of his body, including his face. Colin had met him in a hospital shortly after the Battle of Waterloo. He'd been impressed by the young man's bravery and determination. After the war, they'd each been headed to a better life. Stemple to his fiancé, Colin to a life independent of his despot of a father.

Yet, as so often happens, life didn't work out for either as planned.

Stemple's fiancé had cried off within days of his return. And when customers began staying away from his family's country shop because of his injuries, he invented a story about a better opportunity elsewhere.

Colin's life hadn't been that bleak. There were no injuries to bar his return to his former life of indolence. Just a raging lunatic of a father who'd gambled away the estate's fortune, which had never been that hale to begin with. The old earl had hated Colin for defying him and going to war. It wasn't that he'd feared his heir would die. He'd simply believed being a soldier was the duty of the lower classes. An earl's son was too good for the military and it reflected poorly on the entire family. Had it not been for his sisters, Colin would have left England upon his return from battle, never to return in his father's lifetime.

But there were his sisters and he could not desert them.

The old earl had cut him off without a farthing, so Colin had spent a few years supplementing his modest inheritance by gaming and staying with friends for extended holidays. They never seemed to mind. Most of his friends were so wealthy they didn't even think of the cost. And, after all, Colin was known for his wit and way with women. He was welcome as long as he could keep everyone amused and drunk. Which had never been a problem on either front.

However, since taking over the earldom – and responsibility for his youngest sisters – Colin needed a better solution to his financial problems. He'd decided to wed a rich wife and had spent the past few Seasons in search of such a bride.

Unfortunately, he'd been too selective in the beginning, turning away women with more hair than wit. He knew he had to get leg-shackled, but he wanted to at least like his wife. And he couldn't imagine spending decades with any of the simpering debutantes shoved his way by families hoping to turn a daughter into a countess.

But as Colin's finances had deteriorated, he realized he couldn't be all that choosy. He began lowering his standards to the extent where he would be satisfied with a wife who would not make him wish to drink himself to death, as long as she was accompanied by a fat purse that would set the estate and its inhabitants to rights again.

However, the mamas of the daughters he'd slighted had long memories. And this year's crop of debutantes had set their sights on the few available dukes and marquesses. Colin also had to compete with earls who had more money than he, which meant all of them.

As his financial situation had worsened, his valet had quit. Colin couldn't blame the man. He was not the type of peer who believed the honor of dressing him should be payment enough. The man wanted real wages and certainly deserved them.

Shortly after his valet left, Colin and Stemple had crossed paths again. It was impossible to search for a wealthy wife while looking like one had just rolled out of bed, so Colin offered Stemple the job, though he had no prior experience. However, Stemple did have two things going for him. One was that Colin admired the man. The other was that Stemple was so anxious

to find a position that he was willing to overlook the lack of wages. The two had lived together in Colin's small apartment whilst the search for a wife had been ongoing.

When Colin's last hope had married someone else and the landlord had finally stopped extending credit, the earl and his servant set out for the family estate in Wiltshire. They barely had enough money for the fare and only then because Colin had been lucky in one last night of gaming. Colin did not know how he'd pay Stemple or the few remaining servants at home. He had wanted to bring Christmas gifts for his sisters, but that had been far beyond his reach.

So while his arse was sore and his nose had smelled kinder scents near a pig sty, he was thankful to at least be out of London and on his way home again.

Things could be worse.

Then they became worse.

As the coach drew to yet another halt in some small hamlet – a decided disadvantage to riding the mail coach was that it tended to deliver mail – Colin became aware of a disagreement outside that was growing in intensity. Anxious to stretch his legs and to breathe some fresh air, he disembarked, only to find Stemple in the middle of the argument.

Or at least he was the subject of it. For the valet was saying nothing while those around him were arguing.

The loudest of the participants seemed to be a squat man almost wider than he was tall. He was yelling at the coach driver when not spitting out his tobacco, though a time or two he did both simultaneously. "That bloke will give my Grace nightmares, he will," he said, pointing to Stemple. "He shouldn't leave the house looking the way he does."

"But 'e's covered up 'is face as much as 'e's able," said the coachman.

Indeed, Stemple had scarves wrapped around his head. Colin knew they were not there just because of the cold.

"But not enough," said the arse with the tobacco. "The wind blew it back and me Grace went into hysterics, she did."

"It was horrible," said the woman, who was doing her best to look distraught while also preening from the attention.

Colin stepped into the fray. "This man," he said in the coldest tone of voice he'd ever heard his father use, "is my valet. He was wounded fighting for our country. I can find nothing wrong with his appearance."

"You must be daft," said Grace. "He looks like a monster."

“I apologize,” said Stemple, “and shall take more care in keeping myself covered.”

“Stemple,” said Colin. “You are not the one who should be apologizing.”

“’Tis too late for an apology,” said Grace, completely missing Colin’s point. “I have only to look at him and will likely swoon.”

“Then I suggest you avert your eyes,” said Colin, ready to take a swing at the man accompanying her since he would never strike a woman.

“I want him off the coach,” said the man.

“Oi!” said the coachman. “I don’t ‘ave time for this.”

“We paid good money for our seats,” said the tobacco spitter. “It’s him or us.”

“He can take my seat inside,” said Colin. “I shall sit on the roof.”

“I don’t want the likes of him in here,” said the passenger whom Colin had pegged as the non-bather.

Colin turned to the man. “My only regret would be subjecting him to the stench of the coach, as well as the ignorance of those who cannot appreciate his sacrifice.”

“My lord,” said Stemple. “Pray do not bother yourself. I shall disembark and find another way to your estate.”

“My lord, is it?” said the non-bather, with narrowed eyes. “Who are you tryin’ to gull? There’s no way a lord would ride the mail coach. Maybe the both of you are confidence men trying to swindle people by claiming to be toffs.”

“If there was any money in it, I might have a go at it,” said Colin. “But I assure you that I am a genuine earl and this man is my valet.”

“What would a toff be doing on the mail coach?” his accuser demanded.

“Choking down bile, mostly,” said Colin. “But, I am the Earl of Ridgeway. We have paid for our seats and as much as I hate to cause anyone distress, the journey must go on.”

“If you was that worried about causing us distress, you never would have brung him with you,” said the tobacco spitter.

“You wholly misunderstand my meaning,” said Colin. “I am only sorry to have subjected Stemple to, as my odiferous acquaintance put it, the likes of you.”

“My lord...” said Stemple.

Colin turned to the coachman. “We have paid for our tickets, yet my friend has been subjected to cruelty and harassment. What are you going to do about it?”

The coachman scratched his head. Colin did not want to know what vermin might be the cause of the itch. “I need to get back on the road,” said the coachman. “I’ve lost enough time as it is.”

“I am the Earl of Ridgeway. I demand that you re-seat my friend.”

“I never seen no earl ride the mail coach,” reiterated the non-bather. “Throw the both of them off.”

“Yeah,” said Grace. “They can walk the rest of the way.”

“Is this really the way you’d treat an earl?” Colin winced inwardly because that was exactly the type of thing his father would have said. But, damn it, he needed to get home.

By this time, everyone both inside the coach and on top of it was giving the driver his or her opinion. The gist of it was they didn’t give a damn who stayed or went as long as the coach began its journey again.

“I’ll not be thwarted,” said Colin. “You can put this lady and her escort in my place in the coach and I’ll ride up top with my valet. But you’re going to solve this problem immediately.”

Which is exactly what the coachman did when he drove off, leaving Colin, Stemple and their luggage on the side of the road.

“The bloody bastard didn’t even give us our blunt back,” said Colin.

“If I might speak freely, my lord?”

“Stop ‘my lording’ me, Stemple. I have just stranded us in the middle of nowhere. The least you can do is call me Ridgeway.”

“My...Ridgeway. This is what comes from having a gentleman’s gentleman who cannot be seen in public. You should hire someone else.”

“I do not wish to hire anyone else. You have been invaluable to me and good company, as well. I also owe you a fortune in wages. Well, I would if I paid better. As it is, I only owe you the paltry sum I still cannot afford. And now we shall go hungry and, unless I am very much mistaken, be snowed upon. Where the devil are we, anyway?”

He looked around at the small Hampshire village in which they’d just been ingloriously dumped. They were in front of a coaching inn. The village green contained one church and two taverns. Three, if you counted the one at the inn.

“Emerson, is that you?”



Colin turned to find himself facing Edgar Ellsworth, Viscount Clayton, a well-dressed man of middling height and fair, thinning hair. Now Colin's day had truly taken a turn for the worse. "Ellsworth," he said.

"Clayton, as you well know. I'm the viscount until my pater departs this mortal coil, making me an earl. Did I just see you get thrown off the mail coach? How extraordinary."

"They insulted Stemple."

Clayton took a long look at Stemple's face, shuddering just a bit. "Get that in the war, did you?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Forgive me," said Colin. "Victor Stemple, this is Edgar Ellsworth, Viscount Clayton. He and I were at school together. Until he got sent down, what was it...two or three times?"

"Emerson, did you just introduce me to your valet?" asked Clayton, amused.

"Lord Ridgeway," said Stemple, purposely using Colin's title to counter Clayton's lack of respect, "should I inquire about the coach schedule?"

Clayton snorted. "That's right, you're Ridgeway, now. Heard the old earl finally died, though I always thought it would be in a duel of some sort. Word is he left you saddled with any number of debts. No wonder you were on the mail coach. And I can save your man the trouble. There's no coach for the rest of the day. You don't want to stay at the inn, unless you like to be flea-bitten. I'm hosting a little gathering up at the manor. Would you care to join us?"

Colin would rather sleep in the inn's stables than spend another minute in Clayton's company, but it wouldn't be fair to Stemple. And he already owed his valet enough as it was. "It would be my pleasure," he said, hating the way Clayton smirked at the obvious lie.

Colin couldn't afford the flea-bitten inn and everyone in the *ton* knew it.

This was going to be a very long night.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

Ava Conway was not one to give in to pessimism. She could find hope in almost all circumstances. Even when she was keeping the landlord at bay as she was taking care of her father in his final days, she had faith in what lay ahead. Even when she began her post as a governess for two of the most willful girls in England, she looked forward to one day being able to save enough money to travel. She didn't even want to go that far. Brighton would be nice. And perhaps, one day, Paris. Anywhere but the house in which she was now employed.

To be fair, it wasn't always that bad. She had her own bed and enough food to eat. She even had a friend, Maude, who was one of the cook's assistants. She had five months of wages saved up and in just another year, she would have enough to take a short holiday.

If she lasted that long.

For while the worst of her duties usually entailed putting up with the antics of two spoiled sixteen-year-old twins with the dispositions of rabid raccoons, her life had become that much more challenging now that their brother Lord Clayton had returned.

Their parents, the earl and countess, were in London. But with Clayton in residence, the estate had turned into one continuous house party. It was nothing short of scandalous to do so with sixteen-year-old girls at home. But his lordship cared little for propriety and the girls were in alt. Ava herself had never cared all that much about appearances. As the daughter of a university professor, she had not grown up in society, but had been close enough to laugh at its peculiarities. However, she did not want the girls to endanger either their persons or their reputations.

Sometimes she felt like she was the only one in the household who felt that way.

The twins, Angelique and Anastasia, were determined to partake in the festivities as much as possible. Clayton was negligent enough to let them and the staff was in fear of being dismissed without a character if they interfered.

To complicate matters further, Ava didn't have to worry about just the girls. The guests – and Lord Clayton – thought a governess was fair game for amorous adventures. She spent quite a bit of time fending off the advances of over-privileged lords, including the current master of the house. Fortunately, she'd accompanied her father on enough archaeological digs in dangerous parts of the world that she knew how to defend herself. That didn't mean she was safe, of course. But, she was better able to take care of herself than the typical miss.

It was now but a few days before Christmas and Lord Clayton had decided to have one last party. The girls were determined to enjoy themselves to the fullest before their parents returned for the holiday.

“Conway! Come over here and put up my hair,” said Anastasia, who was sitting in front of her vanity admiring herself.

The girls were both beautiful, with long fair hair that couldn't have been more different than Ava's own mousy brown. A fact both of the girls remarked upon with some regularity.

“Anastasia, dear, you know your mama does not like you to put up your hair. There are other styles that will look just as lovely.”

“Of course there are other styles to make me look just as lovely. How could there not be? But dear Mama is not here right now and I want to put it up. Are you going to help me or do I have to tell Clayton you are being disobedient and lazy?”

“Anastasia, when you put your hair up you look older. It could give the wrong idea to some of Lord Clayton's guests.” Or all of them, knowing the type of men who usually frequented these parties.

“Of course it will give ideas to his guests. Why else would I be doing it? You have given up all hope of marrying, but I have not. How old are you, anyway?”

“As I have mentioned before, I am four and twenty.”

Anastasia shuddered. “I cannot imagine being unmarried at such an advanced age. I am sure I would die of shame.”

“Yet, I have muddled through just the same. Did you have a chance to read any of the books I found in the library?”

“Spinsterhood has robbed you of your senses. Why should I read books? That would surely ruin my eyes and it is a known fact that gentlemen cannot abide a girl with spectacles.”

“They are not that fond of dullards, either.”

“I have yet to see evidence of that.”

The girl had a point, Ava conceded. *Tonnish* gentlemen liked their women wealthy and agreeable. Intelligence did not enter into things much, which could explain the growing number of sapskulls in the aristocracy.

Anastasia continued. “Look at what your bluestocking tendencies have gotten you. You have to work for your keep and cannot go to any balls at all, other than to sit on the side of the ballroom with the other chaperones. You would have been better served to have run off with a great explorer when you were in Egypt. But instead, you’re stuck here with no future at all. Now, are you going to put my hair up or not?”

Ava wanted to put the girl’s hair up after first ripping it from her head. But instead she smiled and said, “I am afraid not.”

Anastasia threw her hairbrush at Ava, narrowly missing her. “Ring for my maid!”

Ava did as she was told. Then Angelique entered the room looking deliriously happy.

And nothing good could come of that.

“Guess who Clayton found in the village?” asked Angelique.

“It would be lovely if it were a new governess,” said Anastasia. “One who knew her place.”

“What’s the matter? Is Conway refusing to put your hair up again?” Angelique turned to Ava. “You would do well to remember that you’re to do as we tell you.”

“Actually,” said Ava, sounding calmer than she felt. “I am employed by the countess and she left explicit instructions about how she wanted the two of you to dress and wear your hair.”

“But, Mama isn’t here now, is she?” said Anastasia.

“Stas, be quiet! You can harangue Conway later. You must hear my news. Clayton has brought Colin Emerson to the house, the Earl of Ridgeway.”

“The poor one?” asked Anastasia with distaste.

“The one who must marry,” said Angelique.

“But he’s poor.”

“What does that have to do with anything? We each come with a dowry worth a king’s ransom. And even the wife of a poor earl is a countess.”

“But I want to be a duchess. Or at the very least, a marchioness.”

“Very well, I shall be a countess. And you shall see which old duke is looking for a wife. At least Ridgeway has all his teeth and a fine form. I can only imagine what he looks like beneath that one suit he is always forced to wear.”

“Gossip is unbecoming in young ladies,” said Ava. “Especially when it’s salacious.”

“I don’t know what that word means,” said Angelique. “And before you prose on to explain it, I wasn’t talking to you. Neither of us were. So why don’t you do something useful like take yourself off to the kitchens and tell Cook to make a meal to impress an earl?”

Ava considered staying because she knew that as soon as she left, the girls would change into gowns that were all together too mature for them. The countess was much too permissive in what she allowed the girls to buy. But perhaps that was her way of compensating for never being home.

Ava took another look at the girls, who had their pretty heads together plotting, then took herself off to the kitchens. There was only so much sense she could try to pour into young girls who were intent on flirtation. And her head was beginning to ache from the strain.

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While Colin was grateful to have a warm, dry place for him and Stemple to sleep that night, he knew it would come at a cost. Namely, having to listen to Clayton and his cronies prattle on about their latest curricule race, mistress or curricule race with a mistress beside him. He knew most of the men there, of course. They’d been at school together. The *ton* was a fairly small, tightly closed circle. Admission was granted by birth and its ranks only rarely expanded for outsiders. It was a world Colin had been born into, but he was bored and frustrated to have to play the game for even one moment more.

Especially when he needed to get home.

When the butler showed him to his room, Stemple was already there before him, unpacking his things.

“We shan’t be staying long, Stemple, so you needn’t bother with most of it – what little there is, of course. But I suppose I must dress for dinner.” It was a good thing he hadn’t sold his one set of evening clothes.

“Very good, my lord.”

“Stop ‘my....’”

“In this house, my lord, I choose to ‘my lord’ you at every opportunity. My lord. Was there a reason Lord Clayton would not use your title?”

“Besides his being a horse’s arse?”

“Yes, my lord. Besides that.”

“I think it always rankled him at school that I was more popular than he, better at sports, more successful with women and received higher marks. Not that he ever cared that much about academics, of course. But he did care about losing. Now I am in possession of my title and he’s only a ceremonial viscount. What’s more, his father is young and healthy. There’s every chance Clayton won’t inherit until he’s well into middle age.”

“If I might ask, sir, do you like being an earl?”

Colin considered the question. “I guess there’s not much point to liking it or not, since I have no choice in the matter. It doesn’t help that every time I hear myself addressed as Lord Ridgeway, it reminds me of my father. And the title does come with immense responsibilities, including an entailed estate. If I could simply sell the thing, I could easily provide for my family, at least until the two younger girls married. As it is, I struggle to keep food on the table and to pay the rather exorbitant taxes. But fear not, Stemple, I shall not expect you to follow me to debtors’ prison.”

“I am relieved to hear it, sir. Do you know when we will depart? And what means of transportation we shall employ when we do so?”

“Ideally, the answers to those two questions would be ‘first thing in the morning’ and ‘in a well-sprung carriage with a couple of courtesans.’ But, alas, I fear it shall be ‘some time in the next day or two’ and, possibly ‘on horseback’ if I can convince Clayton to lend us mounts from his stable.”

“Very good, my lord.”

“Is there a bed in the dressing room for you?” Colin had only briefly glanced at his suite.

“I am to stay in the servants’ quarters, my lord.”

“Do they have a proper room for you?”

“I will make do with whatever they offer.”

Colin studied the man who was both servant and friend. “I have a feeling we will both have to make do quite a bit in the coming months.”

Stemple smiled, though, as usual, his scars made the motion uneven. “Very good, sir. I shall come back to dress you for dinner.”

After the servant left, Colin decided to get some exercise by walking through the house. In town, his finances had meant he walked whenever possible. After a long day of travel, it felt good to stretch his legs.

He avoided going downstairs to the billiards room, where he knew most of the guests would be congregated. Instead, he stayed upstairs and strolled to the wing where he guessed the family portraits would be. He would while away half an hour by making sport of Clayton's ancestors.

The wing was gratifyingly cold. Even Clayton's money didn't permit the lighting of fires in areas with few visitors. It was a grey winter day outside, so the portrait wing itself was rather dark. Which was why he didn't see her at first.

But he heard her.

The last thing Colin wanted was to talk to anyone at this party. He turned to leave without being seen by the woman in the gallery, but then he heard something that made him stop.

He heard her curse.

He quietly stepped into the shadows to take a closer look at – and a listen to – the woman he'd just seen. She had brown hair, pulled back in a bun so tight it looked like it hurt. She was dressed in a brown gown buttoned all the way up her neck and down to her wrists. She appeared to have a good figure, though it was dark enough that he couldn't tell for certain. The dress wasn't doing her any favors, either. It was too loose to give him an exact idea of her shape, though what he could see was pleasing enough.

But what was most extraordinary was what this prim and proper woman was doing. For she was stopping in front of each portrait and insulting it. Or, rather, insulting the portrait's living relatives.

Currently she was talking about a woman named Anastasia, whom Colin vaguely remembered as the name of one of Clayton's sisters.

"She is, your ladyship," said the woman to the portrait, "one of the most impatient, ill-mannered, and cruel lackwits I have ever had the misfortune of knowing. She strikes her maid on a daily basis, abuses the poor girl verbally and – it pains me to inform you of this – has never read more than two pages of anything in one sitting. Were it not for the scandal sheets, I believe she would give up reading all together. She is a dullard. Thank you for listening."

Then the remarkable chit curtsied – to a portrait! – and moved on to the next one.

"Your lordship, I regret to inform you that your great-great-great-whatever-granddaughter Angelique is a wretched excuse for a lady, with the musical skills of a deaf elephant. I once witnessed her beating her maid with a hanger for not ironing her gown to perfection. Had I not interceded, the poor maid might have sustained serious injury. As it was, I almost fainted from the effort to restrain myself from boxing Angelique's ears. She will, I fear, become with child if she continues to flirt with gentlemen with whom she has no business conversing. Though, in this case, it is not her fault as much as Lord Clayton's for inviting such men into his home. All of

whom are drunkards. None of whom has a full-sized brain amongst them. As for Lord Clayton...”

In his gleeful effort to overhear more, Colin bumped into a chair, which screeched on the floor. Unfortunately, that brought the woman’s delightful recitation to a halt.

“Who is there?” she asked.

“Please forgive me,” said Colin as he stepped into the light. “And pray do not let me interrupt you. I believe you were just getting to Clayton and I am all agog as to what you will say next.”



### **CHAPTER THREE**

*Damnation!* Ava could not believe she'd been caught behaving in such an inappropriate manner, especially in front of one of Lord Clayton's guests. Hopefully, he was drunk enough that he would forget the entire matter.

It was a fair wager that he was, since his lordship's guests spent little of the day sober.

He must be a new arrival for she would have remembered seeing him. He was sinfully handsome with his wavy black hair that was slightly too long and eyes so dark they could be black, as well.

As much as she might like to stare at the man in different circumstances, it was always dangerous to be cornered by his lordship's guests anywhere in the house, and especially in such an isolated hallway.

"If you will excuse me, sir, I should be going," she said.

"You cannot seriously mean to deprive me of hearing what you were going to say about Clayton."

"It was wrong of me to speak disparagingly about my charges, sir. I certainly shan't exacerbate the matter by speaking ill of Lord Clayton."

"Not even a little bit? What if I started? I have always marveled at the way he tries to stand in such a way as to give himself greater height. Surely you have noticed. Now that I have said it first, it would do no harm in discussing it further with his ancestors."

"I shall not say anything of the sort, sir." Though Lord Clayton's awkward pose had not gone unnoticed by her. He also had a habit of standing near his shorter friends in an effort to appear taller. A failed effort.

"All right, what about the fact he has almost no knowledge of basic geography? When we were at school, he once placed the Andes Mountains somewhere in the Congo."

Ava could not prevent the snort – the snort! – of laughter that escaped.

The man laughed outright. “So you have noticed that.”

Ava schooled her features in what she hoped was a proper, governess-like way. “I shan’t discuss Lord Clayton with you.”

“But I have a feeling you would not place the Andes in the Congo.”

“Of course not. But one’s lack of knowledge of basic geography does not excuse gossip of any sort.”

“Where have you travelled?” The sinfully handsome man was looking at her with head tilted.

“What makes you think I have?”

“The way you said ‘of course not,’ as though only an imbecile would make such an error. An imbecile named Lord Clayton, but that is neither here nor there. Where have you been?”

“I really should get back to my charges.”

“You’re the governess to Clayton’s sister?”

“Sisters. Twins.”

“I am sure they’re delightful. Where have you travelled, Miss....”

“We have not been properly introduced, sir.”

“You have a lot of rules. No gossip, no giving me your name without the benefit of a proper introduction.” He pointed to a portrait of a lady from the last century dressed for court.

“Perhaps her ladyship could introduce us.”

Ava gave in to a bit of laughter. “Very well, I am Miss Ava Conway.” She curtsied.

“It is a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Conway. I am Colin Emerson. Ridgeway, for my sins.”

“You’re the earl Lord Clayton found in town?” she asked. *Oh, dear.* Angelique would take one look at this handsome man and do whatever it took to be his countess.

“I don’t generally define myself in terms of how Clayton finds me, but yes. I just arrived today.”

“And when, Lord Ridgeway, do you plan to depart?”

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*This was becoming more and more interesting by the moment.* Colin had been enchanted by her conversation with the portraits and even more intrigued by her attempts to be a prim governess

when it was obvious she was a warm, intelligent, more-than-passably attractive woman. It was hard to tell just what she looked like, what with the dim light and the buttoned-up dress.

What's more, he could tell she agreed with his assessment of Clayton, though she'd been too well-mannered to say so. But once she'd learned he was an earl, it seemed her whole demeanor had changed. She'd become even more distant. And if he wasn't mistaken, she wasn't just inquiring about his departure as polite conversation. It appeared she wanted him to leave.

Women didn't often have that reaction to him.

"I have not decided when I shall go, though it will be sooner rather than later. I was on my way to my estate for Christmas when my travel plans were disrupted. I would like to resume the journey soon."

"It might be wise to depart first thing on the morrow."

Now his curiosity was truly piqued. "Is there a reason you wish to be rid of me so soon, Miss Conway? Usually someone must know me longer to want me to leave quite this much."

It was hard to tell in the dim light, but it appeared Miss Conway blushed. "I do not mean to be rude, sir. However, might I be frank?"

"Given what I observed earlier with the portraits, there is every indication to think so, yes."

"Lord Clayton's sisters are but sixteen years old. And while some do marry so young, I do not think it would be in either of the girls' best interest and especially not in yours to wed at this time. I believe Lady Angelique and Lady Anastasia require some time to, uh, reach their fullest potential."

Perhaps Colin had misjudged Miss Conway. Mayhap she was an escaped Bedlamite. After all, she had been talking to portraits. "I was not aware that I am betrothed to either of the twins."

"And it would be best if you do not become so. Not that there is anything wrong with them, of course," she quickly added.

"Of course. I was especially impressed by the fact they both beat their servants, which is a trait often wished for in a wife. Miss Conway, I have no desire to wed either of the girls. I have not even met them, but trust the opinions you expressed so delightfully earlier. Furthermore, I would not care to ally myself with Clayton. I know that is ungracious of me since he is providing my valet and me with food and shelter. But we did not care for each other in school and I daresay we would not like each other all that much as adults. However, what I would like to know is what gives you the notion that I would court either of his sisters?"

Her relief was palpable, but it was quickly replaced by something else that looked like discomfort.

“I have said too much already, my lord. I should go.”

“I would rather you did not. Why are you ill at ease, Miss Conway? Unless....” He straightened. “Are you concerned for your safety? We are alone in a secluded area of the manor and I know the type of men Clayton associates with. You would be well served to never be alone with any of them. But I give you my word – I would never harm any woman. I will escort you anywhere you wish to go. However, I am most curious as to why you thought I would be interested in either of the girls.”

She looked genuinely sheepish and he almost told her she didn’t need to reveal the reason.

He almost told her, but did not.

She sighed. “The girls were discussing you. They’d heard Lord Clayton had brought you home and they thought you might be looking for a wife.”

Now it made sense. “You mean, they know I’m almost at *point non plus* and must marry a fortune or risk my sisters’ future, as well as my own?”

“Yes. I believe Lady Angelique in particular would like to be a countess.”

“Refresh my memory, if you please. Is she the one likely to end up with child, according to your earlier speech?”

Miss Conway’s lovely eyes widened.

“Fear not, Miss Conway. I only wish to know what I’m up against. I would hope that no matter how desperate I become for a wife, that I would not sink to marrying a chit still in the schoolroom. The twins are but children themselves.”

“I believe no one would mistake either of the girls for children, Lord Ridgeway. They know how to dress to look older than their years.”

“Then I thank you for warning me about them. Though I will, of course, keep that to myself. You may put your mind at ease, Miss Conway. I am in need of a rich wife, but will not go angling about for one here. I still plan to be on my way on the morrow if at all possible.”

“Thank goodness.”

“A less self-assured man could take that as an insult, Miss Conway.”

“Forgive me. Though I have a feeling you are self-assured enough to not be offended.”

That made him grin. “Touché, Miss Conway. Now, may I escort you back to the main hall? I fear my wit is no match for yours. Say farewell to your friends.” He indicated the portraits.

Then the saucy minx dipped another curtsy to Clayton's ancestors and left with Colin.

\* \* \*

Having dressed Lord Ridgeway and assured him he could get through the evening without murdering their host, Stemple arrived in the kitchen to find all the other servants were already eating.

They had set a place for him at the end of the table.

The butler, Ferguson, looked at him disapprovingly from his seat at the opposite end. "You're Lord Ridgeway's man?"

"Yes, Mr. Ferguson."

"I understand his lordship has his pockets to let," said Ferguson.

That made the others at the table look up from their meal.

"I do not gossip about my master," said Stemple.

"That's not exactly a denial now, is it?" said the housekeeper.

"It is not a confirmation, either," said Stemple. "I do not talk about my master. And it is no one's business what his state of affairs is."

"I guess we won't be getting vales from his lordship," said one of the maids.

"I will do for his lordship," said Stemple. "None of you will have to do any work for him."

"Other than laundering his sheets, lighting his fire and emptying his slop bucket, you mean?" asked the same maid. "That sounds like work to me."

"I will gladly do all of that if it will put an end to this conversation."

"It's obvious his lordship is up the River Tick," said a footman. "He can't even hire a proper valet. Don't walk the halls tonight mates, you might run into this bloke and scare yourself to death."

Stemple's only response was to look at the man.

"That's enough," said Ferguson. "It's no use putting anyone off their food."

"Then maybe he shouldn't eat with us," said a maid.

"Perhaps, he shouldn't," said the housekeeper. "You can eat your meal in the pot room, Mr. Stemple. Someone will bring you your supper."

Stemple remained there for a moment more, looking at those around him.

The housekeeper had the grace to look away, but added, “Go along now.”

Stemple left the room not bothering to look offended. He was used to this treatment. He’d been receiving it – and worse – since returning from the war. It was one of the reasons he looked forward to travelling to Lord Ridgeway’s estate. It would be better in the country. You didn’t encounter as many people there. He could find a quiet corner of the estate and work the land. Or he could work in the stables. He liked animals and they didn’t seem to mind him. He’d had a dog, Max, when he lived with his parents. Max had been a great source of comfort in the months when he’d been recovering from the worst of his burns.

In the early days, his mother and sisters could not look at him without crying. His father’s attempts to be brave were even harder to bear. But Max had been there every step of the way. Sitting on his lap, staying by his side. Licking his hand and even crying with him during the worst of the pain.

It had broken Stemple’s heart to leave home. He knew he would miss his parents, though the only way to save their business had been to leave since his presence had kept customers away. But it had almost killed him to leave Max. However, he could not afford to keep a pet. He could barely afford to survive as it was.

He found the small table in the pot room and waited for his supper. He was thankful to have a hot meal and he once again thanked the good Lord above for leading him to Lord Ridgeway. Of course, his lordship had problems of his own. But he’d provided Stemple with the one thing he hadn’t had in a long time: hope.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d like, so I gave you a bit of everything.”

Stemple looked up to find a woman in her early twenties standing before him, holding two plates. She had dark blonde hair pulled back under her cap and hazel eyes. She looked to be a cook’s assistant. And she was smiling at him. He angled himself so the scarred part of his face was away from her.

Then he remembered his manners and stood. “Thank you, Miss...?”

“Not ‘Miss,’ just Maude. And please, sit down again. You can’t very well eat standing up.” She placed the two plates on the table.

“You brought two dinners?”

“One for you and one for me,” she said, as she took the seat opposite him. “You’re going to want to tuck in. Mr. Ferguson will call an end to the meal soon and any food that’s left will be given to the dogs.”

Stemple watched the girl gather her cutlery.

“Aren’t you going to sit?” she asked.

He sat.

“Your Lord Ridgeway seems to be an interesting man,” said Maude. “He came upon my friend Miss Conway earlier and they had a nice chat. Not that we gossiped about your master at all. Is it true you came on the mail coach? That’s what Lord Clayton was telling his cronies.”

“Miss Maude...”

“Not Miss Maude. Just Maude.”

“Maude. You do not have to eat with me. I would not wish to spoil your dinner.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t tell me you listened to that nonsense. I’ve never worked with bigger fools in my life than in this house. You mustn’t mind them. Unless you’re telling me I should go because you don’t want to eat with me.”

Stemple could hardly comprehend this conversation. Unless...was this some sort of jest?

“Well?” she asked. “Do you not want to eat with me?”

“Of course not. That’s ridiculous.”

“Then like I said. Eat up or the dogs will get it.”

They ate in silence for a moment, Stemple still unsure of what was going on. But now she was staring at him. And the more he tried to hide the right side of his face, the more she craned her neck to look at it.

“What do you put on that?” she asked.

Ah, that was it. The morbid curiosity. Well, at least she was polite about it. “I often wrap a scarf about my face, though it’s more difficult in the summer.”

“I don’t mean that, you daft soul. I meant, what kind of salve do you put on it?”

He shook his head. “I don’t put any salve on it.”

“Then it must hurt terribly. And I imagine it cracks in winter, does it not?”

Stemple spoke to very few people about his injuries, but he nodded.

“What you need is some salve with lavender oil. It worked for my sister. She was badly burned from scalding oil when she was just a tiny lass. But we had a good healer in our village who

immediately began applying salve. It helped with the pain, but it also kept the skin moist. Even after the burn turned into scars, we'd put it on her three times a day. She still does it. I think it could help you."

"The surgeon gave me some salve in the hospital, but it has been several years since then. Is it not too late to start now?"

"I don't rightly know. But it couldn't hurt to try."

And it certainly helped to know someone cared. "Can you write down a list of the ingredients? I'll see if I can make this salve once we get to his lordship's estate."

She blushed. "I can't...I can't write. Ava – Miss Conway – is teaching me. But I could tell her and she could write it down for you."

"I am sorry. I did not mean to embarrass you."

She smiled. "Pay it no mind. And I can make you some before you leave. For your trip."

"Thank you. For everything."

They heard the housekeeper calling for Maude.

"I have to go clean up. Better eat quickly or..."

"The dogs will get it. Yes."

Maude got up to leave, then turned to him. "What's your name?"

"Victor Stemple."

"It was nice meeting you, Victor. I'll get you that list and the salve as soon as I can."

Then she was gone. And Victor was embarrassed to wipe a tear from his eye. For while he'd long ago grown used to cruelty, he had been wholly unprepared for such kindness.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Colin waited as long as he'd dared before going downstairs to dinner. And it still had not been long enough. For as soon as he arrived, Clayton, who was standing next to Nigel Hemsworth – who was a shade under five feet four inches tall – called everyone back into his study for another round of drinks.

“Ridgeway, you remember our old friends, don't you?” asked Clayton.

Their “old friends” consisted of a dozen of the meanest boys ever to attend Eton. If there had been one advantage to having a father who routinely beat his children, it was that Colin had learned from an early age how to defend himself. His father had liked it when his sons tried to fight back, though it had been mostly useless against his much greater size and strength. But after fighting his father, the bullies at Eton had been no match for him. Clayton and the others had even asked him to join their gang. But Colin had known too much violence in his young life and certainly had no desire to inflict it on anyone else. So, instead, he made a point of defending other boys from Clayton's gang.

By the time they'd reached Oxford, Colin had found his own friends, including Edward Kellington, the brother of the Duke of Lynwood, who was two years ahead of them in school.

Even when he'd spent much of the past few years living at house parties, he'd avoided Clayton and his cronies whenever possible. They were now older but by no means grown up. However, now he could not escape their company, at least for the evening.

“Ridgeway, is it true you were on the mail coach?” asked the height-challenged Hemsworth.

“When Clayton told us, we could hardly believe it. Are things that bad?”

“Certainly not. Riding the mail coach brings back memories of being punished at Eton. I figure a certain amount of torture is good for the soul. May I?” he asked Clayton, even as he poured himself a drink.

“How did we ever get through Eton?” asked Ian Maplewhite, the third son of the Marquess of Bromley. “It gives me nightmares even now to think of what the headmaster would do when he was displeased. My eldest brother will send his son off next year. I almost feel sorry for the little bastard.”

“Nonsense,” said Clayton. “It’ll make a man out of him. And if he makes the right friends, he won’t have to worry about punishment, even from the headmaster. These days, a well-placed bribe does wonders. Though in poor Ridgeway’s case, a bribe would be out of the question. Not that he’ll have the chance to send his sons to Eton unless he snags the heiress he’s so desperate to catch. If not, mayhap he can have the vicar teach them. How goes the matrimonial hunt, old boy? I can only assume not well, given the mail coach.”

“I have not yet found the right lady,” admitted Ridgeway. “I will begin again in the new year.”

“And how impressive it will be as you arrive in London on the back of a farmer’s cart,” said Hemsworth, who then laughed at his own jest, after looking to Clayton for approval.

“Yes, well, at least I shall be able to see over the sides of it,” said Ridgeway. His comment drew genuine laughs from everyone except Hemsworth. “Clayton, shouldn’t we go in to dinner soon?”

“Don’t tell me you’re so poor you can’t afford to eat,” said Clayton. “I had planned to linger over drinks, but I wouldn’t want you to swoon from hunger. And if you want to take some food back to your room for your journey tomorrow, pray be my guest. I’m sure we won’t laugh about it above a day or two. Just how are you getting to your estate, Ridgeway?”

“I wanted to speak with you about that...”

But before he could continue, the doors opened and Clayton’s twin sisters entered the room. At least, Ridgeway assumed that’s who they were, though neither of them looked to be sixteen. Miss Conway had the right of it; neither dressed as a young girl should. They wore gowns that showed altogether too much décolletage. He couldn’t imagine what Clayton was about to allow it.

Especially since the girls had the leering attention of every other man in the room.

One of the girls tapped Clayton on the shoulder with her fan. “Aren’t you going to introduce us to your newest guest, brother?”

Clayton smirked. “It would be my pleasure. Lady Angelique, may I present Colin Emerson, Earl Ridgeway. Colin, this is the older of the twins.”

“By only a quarter hour,” she said with a simper, as she held out her hand to him. “But that does make me more experienced than my sister. An admirable trait, is it not?”

Colin took her fingers in his and was startled by the vise-like grip with which she latched onto him. “I am charmed, my lady.” He tried to pull his hand back, but it was as if his fingers were in the jaw of a particularly stubborn dog.

Clayton introduced his other sister, who was looking at Colin with some distaste. At least he wouldn't have to fight off both girls because it seemed Miss Conway once again had the right of it. Only Lady Angelique appeared to be on the hunt for a title.

Colin cleared his throat to divert attention from yanking his hand away from Angelique. "Clayton, you said dinner would be served at some point before Christmas?"

"That's right. I forgot about your empty stomach. Angelique, don't get your heart set on Ridgeway too quickly. He's poorer than a church mouse."

"Yet he still has much to recommend him, I am sure," said the girl as she raked Colin with her eyes.

Colin thought longingly of the mail coach.

As they finally went into dinner, Lady Angelique attached herself firmly to his arm. She also brushed the side of her bosom against him and it was all he could do to keep from shivering in revulsion. She was sixteen years old. And Clayton's sister.

He dutifully held her chair for her, then made his escape three spots down the table. He could almost feel her temper rise. He hoped he would not be the cause of yet another servant being struck by a hairbrush later that evening.

"Where's that governess?" asked Viscount Raffington.

Clayton looked around. "Yes, Ferguson, where is Miss Conway?"

"She asked for a plate to be sent to her room," said the butler.

"Well, we can't have that. Go collect her. Dinner shall not be the same without her."

"If your governess wishes to eat in her room, Clayton, perhaps you should allow her to do just that," said Colin.

"But she's ever so entertaining and I must think of my guests." Clayton waved Ferguson off to retrieve her.

"Wait 'til you hear her beliefs," said Raffington. "She's quite the bluestocking with a wardrobe to match. 'Tis a pity, since she might have a tasty little body beneath those drab clothes."

"Clayton!" said Colin. "Are you going to allow your governess to be publicly maligned?" As an afterthought he felt compelled to add, "Not to mention that Miss Conway's form is in no way a suitable topic to discuss in front of your sisters."

“But we quite agree with the viscount,” said Lady Anastasia. “She’s simply dreadful. You should hear some of the things Conway says to us. She’s always trying to get us to learn sums and read books about history.”

“What about when she natters on about science?” asked Lady Angelique. “She once tricked me into listening to a story about Sir Isaac Newton. I only did so because I thought I might meet him at a ball in London, even if he was only a Sir and not even a baron. But it turns out the man is dead. And has been dead for quite some time!”

“And the way she dresses!” said Lady Anastasia. “It’s like something a charwoman would be buried in. And here she is now.”

A decidedly unenthusiastic Miss Conway entered the dining room. Colin was the first to rise to his feet and he had the strongest desire to have her sit next to him. Unfortunately, she took a seat at the end furthest from Clayton.

He mentally applauded her good sense.

“Miss Conway,” said their host. “How good of you to join us.”

“I do not believe I had much choice in the matter, my lord.”

“Yet it is still nice to see you. You have not yet met the newest arrival to the party, Colin Emerson, Lord Ridgeway. He came by way of the mail coach.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, my lord,” said Miss Conway.

Colin understood why she did not admit to their earlier meeting since it would have been deuced hard to explain what she’d been doing in the portrait gallery. “The honor is all mine, Miss Conway. I understand you are the governess here, are you not?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I am sure it is quite interesting. Do you teach geography, Miss Conway?”

“I have made attempts.”

“We studied quite a bit of it in school. Our host was particularly adept at it. Refresh my memory, Clayton. Where would I find the Andes Mountains, again?”

Unfortunately, Miss Clayton had chosen that moment to take a sip of wine. She was now choking on it. A footman stepped forward to pound on her back.

“Steady on, girl,” said Hemsworth.

“Really, Miss Conway,” admonished Lady Anastasia. “Choking is most unappetizing for the rest of us.”

“My apologies,” said Miss Conway, as she darted a quick glance and a smile at Colin.

He could not prevent his answering grin.

Clayton cleared his throat. “Ridgeway, you never did answer my question on how you planned to travel to your estate.”

“But Lord Ridgeway is not leaving, is he?” asked Angelique. “He has only just arrived.”

“I am expected home for Christmas and I look forward to seeing my sisters.”

“How fascinating,” said Angelique. “Do you also have brothers?”

There was some muted laughter at the question. That was typical when the subject arose. “My younger brother James is in America.”

“Why would anyone want to go there?” asked Anastasia.

“He wanted to make his own way in the world.”

“Have you any other brothers?” asked Angelique. “Why does everyone keep laughing at that question?”

“Alas, dear sister, the answer is not one for young ears,” said Clayton. “But, yes, Ridgeway does have another brother, though it has never been formally acknowledged. However, they are so similar in looks they could be twins.”

“I should like to see America one day,” said Miss Conway, trying valiantly to change the subject. “What does Lord James write of it in his letters?”

“Unfortunately, he hasn’t written many of them. He has lived on the American frontier where mail service is irregular at best. But I wish he would come home and tell us in person.”

“Do you think he has seen a Red Indian?” asked Angelique. “I would certainly hate to come upon such a savage, especially since they are only half dressed.”

“How do you know of such a thing?” asked a bemused Clayton.

“I read a rather scandalous novel about it.”

“Miss Conway,” said Colin. “Was that part of your lesson plan?”

“I hardly think I would sanction any book that describes American tribesmen as Red Indians or savages. I am, however, pleasantly surprised to learn Lady Angelique has read anything at all.”

Angelique bristled. "I shan't make a habit of it, if that's what you're thinking. But at least it was interesting, as opposed to what you try to force upon us."

The rest of the meal proceeded thusly, with Clayton bringing up Colin's money problems at every opportunity and the girls taking turns showing who could be the most outrageous and, sadly, moronic. Colin felt it would be easier to attribute their deplorable behavior to the follies of youth if they didn't take quite so much delight in tormenting Miss Conway.

For her part, Miss Conway shrugged off the insults with admirable aplomb. What was distressing, however, were the looks and comments directed her way by Clayton's other guests. They were getting more foxed by the moment and their comments more and more suggestive. There was no doubt that they were looking for some sign of interest from the lady.

A sign they most definitely were not getting.

When it was finally time for the gentlemen to indulge in their port, Miss Conway excused herself, taking the entire quotient of the table's good sense and witty conversation with her.

Then Clayton's sisters reluctantly took themselves off, but not before some rather pointed hints from their brother.

"Ridgeway, you still have not told me how you plan to travel to Wiltshire," said Clayton. "Do be sure to take your man with you. I hear he frightened the maids with that face of his."

Colin bristled. "Stemple earned his scars on the battlefield. The maids are lucky to be in the presence of the man."

"Such patriotic fervor. I'd forgotten you ran off and fought in the Peninsular Wars. Thought you'd show your father a thing or two by getting yourself killed. I'm so sorry your survival got in the way of your revenge. Forget I said a thing about your valet."

Colin wanted to punch his host. But, unfortunately, he needed a favor. "I am forced to ask for a loan, Clayton. I'm going to see about hiring a private coach to speed my journey along. I would not want to miss Christmas when I have promised my sisters to be there."

"A loan, you say? A loan implies repayment. And there's not much chance of that, is there old boy?"

"Unfortunately, no. Not in the near future. But I will repay you."

"Only if you find the right bride."

"No," said Colin, gritting his teeth. "I promise that I will find a way to repay you, with interest." If by "interest" he meant planting the man a facer.

“Since I am all but certain you have a long list of creditors and I have no wish to be added to the bottom of that list, I will simply give you the blunt.”

“Thank you. Though I intend to repay you.”

“There will be no need, since I plan to exact payment tonight.”

“In what way?”

“There are any number of things I could ask you to do. You could muck out my stables. Or shovel the snow from the drive. I imagine you’d do a bang up job of washing dishes.” At this point, all his other guests were laughing. And Clayton dearly loved an audience. “Now, what shall I do?”

Colin looked at his nemesis, feigning indifference, as he refilled his glass of port. The simple truth was that Clayton could ask him to do any or all of those things and Colin would be forced to go along. He’d happily do them if it meant getting out of there even one minute quicker. And, more importantly, home to his sisters.

“I think I have it,” said Clayton. “You always delighted in having your head in a book at school. Put your knowledge to the test. I’d like you to do the balcony scene from ‘Romeo and Juliet.’ As Juliet. Dressed as a woman.”

Clayton’s friends howled with laughter.

“I cannot wait to see this,” said Maplewhite. “I do hope he wears one of Miss Conway’s gowns.”

“What an excellent idea,” said Clayton. “What say you, Ridgeway? Are you up for a spot of Shakespeare?”

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Ava was relieved that dinner was finally over and one more day of Lord Clayton's house party had almost passed. His guests would depart before Christmas and the arrival of his parents. She only had to be on her guard for just a few more days.

She was in her room, which was on the nursery floor. The girls' bedchambers were on the floor below and Ava was thankful she was not within shouting distance of them. Normally she liked the seclusion, though it was unnerving at times with so many drunken houseguests.

She tidied her room in anticipation of Maude's arrival. During house parties, the two shared a bed as a means of protecting each other. Maude's usual roommate often kicked her out to entertain lords as a means of collecting extra vales. Ava and Maude had become good friends, so the arrangement was pleasant for both of them.

But Maude still had a few hours of work left, giving Ava time to curl up with a book. And to try not to think of Lord Ridgeway.

She'd been thoroughly disconcerted to meet the man in the portrait gallery earlier. It had been a foolish thing for her to do, venting to the portraits. And if he'd said anything to Clayton, she would have been sacked for certain. She'd been wondering if he would try to extract payment from her for his silence. Clayton's other guests would have. Or at least they would have tried. For she would not give payment of any kind to useless lordlings who went about their lives bothering people.

But instead, Lord Ridgeway had thoroughly entertained her both then and in his conversation at dinner. She'd felt sorry for him the way Clayton had continually reminded him of his lack of funds. She'd also been bothered by the cruelty of the other men when hinting at what must be an illegitimate brother. Yet, Ridgeway took their taunts in stride. She liked the way he kept himself above the fray. She would have liked to have seen them all at school, for she got the impression Ridgeway didn't suffer fools gladly. And there was no doubt Clayton and his friends were fools.



A knock on the door put her senses on edge. It was too early for Maude, who would have announced herself. It might be the insufferable Ferguson. Even worse, it could be Clayton, back with another of his indecent suggestions.

She put down the book and picked up a lead figurine she'd acquired on her travels with her father. She went to the door. "Who is it?" she asked without opening it.

"Ridgeway. I have come on an errand and request an audience with you."

She opened the door cautiously. "My lord?" she asked.

"Miss Conway," he bowed. "I have an unusual request. It was something instigated by Clayton, which means it is also asinine."

Her lips quivered from laughter. "I am almost afraid to ask what it is."

"What is in your hand?"

She held up the figurine, a lead statue of a bird. "A precautionary measure."

In an instant, all signs of the affable earl disappeared. "Are you unsafe in this house, Miss Conway?"

"I am not complaining, sir."

"I asked you a question. Do you fear Clayton or his guests?"

"I can defend myself, sir."

"Unfortunately, women are rarely assured of being able to do that, Miss Conway. I am glad to see you take precautions, though a weapon such as that could also be used against you."

"I am aware of that. On nights such as these, my friend Maude stays with me. Fortunately, I am also armed with wit and good sense."

"That makes you unique in this house."

She smiled. "What was your unusual request, Lord Ridgeway?"

"You still have not answered my question about your safety."

"No, I have not. How may I assist you?"

He must have realized she would not be more forthcoming because he frowned at her before continuing. "Miss Conway, as you have heard, I have no money."

"Have you come here for a loan?"

He snorted his laughter. “Do you have money to lend me? Because it may come to that. But in the meantime, Clayton has said he will give me enough money to travel to my estate if I recite the balcony scene from ‘Romeo and Juliet’ wearing one of your gowns.”

“I am surprised by his request.”

“That he would wish to humiliate me in such a manner?”

“No. That he would know of the balcony scene in ‘Romeo and Juliet.’”

Lord Ridgeway laughed a gratifyingly long amount of time. “Ah, Miss Conway, you are the only bright spot in this entire misadventure. Might I prevail upon you? I have, obviously, nothing to offer in payment other than my profound gratitude.”

“Of course,” said Ava, as she opened the door further. “Do come in. I am afraid to say I do not have a wide selection of gowns from which to choose, nor do I think they will fit very well.”

“I am sure they will do nicely,” he said, as he entered the room.

She had no wardrobe, only four hooks on the wall. Her few other things were in a small bureau. “I am afraid I have only one other brown gown as well as one that is grey. I do have my dark green, but I save that for church.”

“The brown or the grey would work nicely, thank you.”

She held both gowns up to him. “I do not think either will fit you.” Especially since he was well over six feet tall, which made him a good five inches taller than she. He had a lean muscled physique, which meant he could probably fit the gown over him, but not come even close to fastening it.

“I will have to remove my jacket and waistcoat. Should I go elsewhere to do that?”

“I believe my sensibilities are such that I will not faint if you do so here.”

She might have spoken too soon. For as Ridgeway shrugged out of his jacket and waistcoat, she could see how the well-tailored shirt fit him as if a second skin. Suddenly she was in need of a glass of water.

“You must want to return home very badly,” she said as she turned toward the pitcher and away from the prime physique in front of her. During her trips to her father’s archaeological digs, she’d seen men without shirts. But somehow this man fully clothed was doing odd things to her.

“My sisters mean the world to me, Miss Conway. I have already failed them in so many ways. But I promised I would be home for Christmas and will not go back on my word. I will play whatever game Clayton devises if it means I can be on my way.”

“They are fortunate to have you as a brother.”

“Are they? Sometimes I am not so sure,” he said as he pulled the dress over his head, careful not to tear it.

“I have no brothers or sisters. But I know that I would certainly appreciate a brother who would go to such lengths to see me.”

The gown barely stretched over his frame and was wide open in back. It was also several inches off the floor.

“How do I look?” he asked with a grin.

“Like a brother who truly loves his sisters.”

There was another knock at the door. Ava opened it partway to find Maude standing there. “I’m glad they did not keep you so late working tonight,” she told the cook’s assistant.

“Actually,” said Maude from the hall, “I’m not done with my work, yet. But I was wondering if you knew which bedchamber was Lord Ridgeway’s.” Then her eyes went wide.

Ava turned to see Ridgeway at her shoulder. “Are you looking for me?” he asked.

Maude could only stare at the man in Ava’s dress.

“Lord Ridgeway,” said Ava, “may I present my friend Maude Anderson? Maude, this is Lord Ridgeway.”

Maude curtsied to him, but was still regarding him cautiously.

“I am participating in Lord Clayton’s entertainment this evening,” said Ridgeway. “Or, rather, I am the entertainment. Was there a reason you needed to find my room?” Then he had a moment of panic. “You’re not going to tell the twins, are you?”

“Of course not, your lordship,” said Maude, bobbing another curtsey for good measure. “I have something for your man. Some salve I made up.”

“Has he been injured?”

“No, my lord. It’s for his scars. My sister had similar burns and this salve used to help her. I made some up for your journey tomorrow.”

“That is very kind of you. I must say I am surprised he discussed his condition with you. Stemple speaks to very few people about his scars.”

“We was eating in the pot room and it just came up.”

“Why were you eating in the pot room?” asked Ava.

Maude scowled. “On account of those useless gits didn’t want their appetites spoiled.”

Lord Ridgeway drew himself up. “Are you saying the other servants banished Stemple to another room?”

“Yes, sir. They’re like that, my lord. I pay them no mind, but they act like that to anyone different. But I took Victor his dinner and we had a nice chat. He’s a much better man than the others. I wanted to give him the salve to show that. And Ava...I mean, Miss Conway, I told him I would have you write down the ingredients so he can get some made up for when he goes home. Can you do that for me, please?”

“Of course, Maude. This is very kind of you.”

Maude shrugged. “It was the least I could do for a man who fought for King and country.”

They were then interrupted by the appearance of Ferguson.

“What are you doing up here?” he asked Maude.

“I asked for a snack,” said Ava quickly. “Maude was kind enough to bring it up to me.”

The butler scowled. “It is not her place to do so. She should be doing dishes.”

“Actually, Ferguson,” said Ridgeway. “I need Maude’s assistance for a few moments, but will send her back to the kitchen when I am through. Is there something you needed?”

“Lord Clayton is growing impatient.”

“I will be down directly.”

“He also requests the presence of Miss Conway. She will be playing Romeo in your impromptu theatrical.”

“I do not believe this concerns Miss Conway,” said Ridgeway.

“But I believe what matters is Lord Clayton’s desire. You are both to report downstairs as soon as possible,” said Ferguson with a smirk. He turned to leave.

“I am an earl, Ferguson. An impoverished one to be sure. But an earl nonetheless. I believe there should have been a ‘my lord’ at the end of that order.”

Ferguson lost some – but not all – of his attitude. “As you say, my lord. Maude, get to the kitchen.”

“When I am done with her. That will be all, Ferguson.”

The butler bristled at being dismissed, but he did leave.

“He’s not going to like that,” said Maude under her breath.

“I am glad to hear it,” said Ridgeway. “Now, shall we repair to my bedchamber so Maude can deliver the salve to Stemple? I am most grateful for your kindness. He is not just an invaluable valet, but also my friend.

When they arrived at Lord Ridgeway’s room it was to find Stemple in a chair reading. Ava had not yet seen him and her heart immediately went out to the man. The burns must have been terribly painful.

Lord Ridgeway introduced them, then Stemple turned with some curiosity to Maude.

“I brought some of the salve,” she said, as she presented the small jar to him shyly.

For a moment, it looked like he would not take it. But it became apparent he was simply overwhelmed.

He cleared his throat. “Thank you, Maude. This is very kind of you.”

Maude grinned, while also blushing. Whatever they’d discussed at dinner in the pot room must have been interesting, indeed.

“A word, Stemple, if you please?” asked Lord Ridgeway.

They moved a few feet away, but Ava’s hearing had always been keen so she did not hesitate to eavesdrop.

“Stemple, I am about to perform what I believe will be a series of humiliating tasks in order to obtain the blunt to get us out of here.”

“It is not worth it, my lord. We can leave in the morning and find another way.”

“I appreciate your optimism, but the money will help and I care not what they think of me. However, I am quite concerned about the unsavory goings on in this household, particularly as they pertain to Maude and Miss Conway.”

Stemple stiffened. “Are the ladies in danger?”

“I believe they might be. Miss Conway will be coming downstairs with me. But I would ask that you accompany Maude to the kitchen, then when she is done with work for the night I would like you to escort her to Miss Conway’s room in the nursery. I will need you to stand a post until I can relieve you.”

“I would do that even if you did not ask me to.”

“Good man.”

Ava moved away so it was not as apparent that she'd been listening.

He was an interesting man, Lord Ridgeway. Flirtatious, but protective. Poor in funds, but rich in honor. He did not hesitate to pull rank on the insufferable butler, but was so concerned about the safety of a cook's assistant that he set his man to look after her.

“Are you ready, Miss Conway?” Lord Ridgeway held out his arm.

“I am not sure how to prepare for such an evening, my lord,” she said, putting her arm through his.

“Picturing our host and his guests devoured by jackals helps.”

She laughed, as they headed for the door.

## CHAPTER SIX

When Colin and Miss Conway arrived in the sitting room, it was obvious that Clayton and his guests had spent the intervening time drinking. They were singing a lewd song which Colin quickly put an end to.

“Clayton, there is no reason for Miss Conway to be dragged into this sordid mess,” he said. “Can we not send her back to her room?”

“And have her miss all the fun? I would never dream of it. Besides, according to my sisters’ complaints, Miss Conway is forever trying to get them to read. I suspect she would like nothing more than to expand our horizons, as well.”

“My horizon is expanding just looking at her,” said Raffington with a leer.

“That will be enough of that!” snapped Colin.

“I say old boy, you’re becoming positively missish,” said Clayton. “Must be the gown.” The others laughed, as expected. “I daresay Miss Conway is not so easily offended, are you, my dear?”

She stood even straighter, which was impressive given her usual ramrod posture. “As a governess, I am pleased any time one’s horizons are expanded, though I daresay in Viscount Raffington’s case, it was a barely noticeable enlargement.”

That set the entire room into gales of laughter – save Raffington, of course.

Clayton looked at his sisters’ governess as if seeing her anew. Colin inwardly groaned. Miss Conway’s excellent setdown of Raffington only made her more attractive to their host. Though Colin could not comprehend how Clayton thought he could escape being the object of Miss Conway’s most excellent wit. And he was most certainly a man who did not like being the butt of anyone’s joke.

Clayton took another sip of his drink, then cleared his throat. “Now, I think it is high time for the two of you to begin the scene. I believe you are in the balcony.” He motioned to a table on which Colin could stand. “Romeo, you may address Juliet from where you stand. I trust the two of you know the scene and do not need the lines?”

“I know it well enough,” said Colin.

“As do I,” said Miss Conway.

“Then have at it,” said Clayton. “We are all atwitter with anticipation.”

Miss Conway moved closer to the table and began the scene.

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east and Juliet is the sun.”

“A son of a bitch,” said Hemsworth, eliciting laughter.

“There is a lady present!” said Colin.

“Ridgeway has the right of it,” said Clayton. “And besides, Hemsworth, I believe the son of the...person...to whom you referred is Layton, not Ridgeway.”

That set the room howling with laughter once again, save for Miss Conway who was perplexed. Colin sometimes forgot that not everyone knew his family’s story.

“You go too far, sir,” said Colin. He would take any amount of abuse, but he would not allow others to speak ill of his family. Even the unacknowledged sibling.

Clayton bowed his head in fake contrition. “Pray forgive me, please continue.”

“I believe I will skip ahead,” said Miss Conway. “O that I were a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek!”

Colin responded. “Aye, me!”

“Not like that, Ridgeway,” said Clayton. “Your voice should be higher. Give it another go.”

Colin raised the pitch of his voice and repeated the line.

Laughter ensued.

“Kiss her, already!” yelled Maplewhite. That was seconded by all the men present.

“Out of the question,” said Colin. “I will not sully Miss Conway’s reputation in such a way.”

“I don’t remember you having such high morals at school,” said Raffington. “I seem to recall you having your way with any number of barmaids.”



“Miss Conway is not a barmaid.”

“More the pity,” declared Clayton. “Tell you what, old boy. If you kiss our Miss Conway, I shall call an end to tonight’s festivities and give you your blunt.”

“No,” said Colin. “Not when it comes at the expense of Miss Conway’s reputation.”

“But we’ll never tell,” said Hemsworth. That was seconded by the others, all of whom would bandy it about as soon as they returned to town.

“Out of the question,” said Colin.

“I will do it,” said Miss Conway.

That elicited cheers and whistles from the men.

Colin shook his head. “Miss Conway, you cannot trust these men.”

“I thank you for your counsel, sir. But I am determined to proceed. However, I would like Lord Clayton to pay Lord Ridgeway before I do so.”

“Don’t you trust me, my dear?” asked Clayton.

“No, my lord, I do not.”

“Smart girl,” replied Clayton.

“Further,” she continued. “I would like your word that Lord Ridgeway will have no other tasks to perform.”

Clayton studied her. “Aren’t you the saucy minx? Ferguson, get a few notes for Ridgeway. However much it would take to rent a carriage for his ride home. Not a first class conveyance, of course. Just one sound enough to make the trip.”

Colin turned to Miss Clayton. “I will not allow you to do this.”

“You sir, are neither father nor husband to me. Or even employer. You have no say in my actions.”

He stepped closer to her and lowered his voice. “They’ll tell everyone. Your reputation will be ruined.”

“I will not allow them to make sport of you all evening. And, hopefully, no one will take the word of men in their cups.”

“Everyone will believe them.”

“My reputation is not your concern.”

Ferguson returned with the money.

“Give it to Ridgeway,” said Clayton.

The butler did as instructed.

Colin surveyed it before putting it in his pocket. As Clayton had instructed, it was barely enough to make the journey. But it would enable Colin and Stemple to leave the next day. Yet he could not take the money without trying to dissuade Miss Conway one more time.

“Please, Miss Conway, do not do this.”

“But I must,” she said. “Are you ready, Lord Clayton?”

“I assure you I am always ready.”

Colin wanted to plant the smug man a facer. He was laying claim to Miss Conway and everyone knew it. Except the lady in question.

“Then I shall kiss Lord Ridgeway.” She then went up on tiptoe and kissed Colin...on the cheek.

There was stunned silence for a moment before everyone broke out into laughter. Everyone except Clayton.

“That was not a real kiss,” he said.

“I believe it was,” she replied. “Lord Ridgeway, did you consider that to be a real kiss?”

“Absolutely,” he said, not bothering to disguise his glee. “And one of the best I have ever received.”

“Only one of the best? I am gravely insulted, sir.”

“The best kiss was bestowed upon me by my dear grandmama on the occasion of my sixth birthday. She also gave me a pony, so you can understand why such an occasion would live on in my esteem. However, that was a very close second.”

Miss Conway had a lovely smile that was very much in evidence.

Colin continued. “Now that I have fulfilled Clayton’s conditions, I bid you all good night. Miss Conway, may I escort you to your room?”

“That would be very kind of you, sir.”

“I didn’t say you were excused, Miss Conway,” said Clayton.

“But you were about to,” said Ridgeway. Then he lowered his voice so only Clayton could hear. “Do not push me on this. I am still a fearsome opponent in a fight.”

Clayton considered the matter for a moment, then tersely waived them off. “Good night, Ridgeway. Adieu, Miss Conway.”

\* \* \*

Colin was uneasy as he escorted Miss Conway to her room. Clayton didn't like to be thwarted. Nor did he like being made a fool. Colin and Miss Conway had neatly done both. And while Colin didn't care that he'd made an enemy of Clayton – it's not like they had ever been friends – he was concerned for Miss Conway. She would have to remain in Clayton's house. And Colin was beginning to have grave fears for her safety.

They arrived at her room only to hear whispers in the nearby nursery. Instinctively Colin placed her behind him as he went to investigate. He entered the nursery only to find Stemple and Maude talking quietly in the far corner. Both jumped to their feet when Colin and Miss Conway entered. And, though it was hard to tell in the dim light, both appeared to be blushing.

“How may I be of assistance, my lord?” asked Stemple.

“I do not need anything. I was simply escorting Miss Conway back to her room.”

“Does that mean the night's entertainment has concluded?” asked Stemple.

“Yes, thankfully. But do not let me disturb you. I believe we should take turns sleeping outside the ladies' bedchamber.”

“Surely that is not necessary,” said Miss Conway.

“I am not willing to take any chances. Stemple, would you like the first shift or the second?”

Stemple looked at Maude, who'd made no move to retire to her chamber. “Might I take the first?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Colin. “I shall see you in four hours.” Colin was thankful that his time at war had given him the ability to awaken when needed.

He walked Miss Conway to her door.

“Mr. Stemple and Maude seem to get along well,” said Miss Conway.

“Yes. And I am glad to see it. Too often Stemple withdraws from the world, though I do not blame him. People can be cruel, as the servants in this house already demonstrated, save your friend Maude.”

“I am afraid Maude is often the target of their cruelty, as well. Life can be especially harsh to unprotected women.”

“Do you speak from experience, Miss Conway?”

“I have been fortunate in many ways, my lord. I have never known hunger or homelessness. And while my father was alive, I knew I was loved. We didn’t have many material possessions, but my life was rich in other ways.”

“Then you have been very fortunate indeed, Miss Conway. You are already well aware of my financial situation, but I am also fortunate to have the love of my family – as unconventional as it is.” He realized even as he spoke the words that they were true. He and James hadn’t seen each other for years, but he knew they still shared a deep bond. Even he and Layton had a bond that was stronger than one might expect of two half brothers who’d never lived in the same house. As for his sisters, words could not describe how much he loved them.

For some reason, he wanted to tell all of that to this woman he’d met only hours before and would never see again. There was something about her that drew him. Part of it was her wit, her intelligence. Her outsmarting Clayton certainly hadn’t worked against her in his esteem. And in the soft light, the features he’d considered merely pleasant before became quite pretty. Beautiful, even.

He shook himself. She was gently bred, the daughter of a loving father. He couldn’t flirt with the lady when he was leaving the next day. And he certainly couldn’t consider her for a dalliance. So it was best to say good night now. He took off the dress and gave it to her.

“I shall be leaving on the morrow, Miss Conway. But I wanted to thank you for what you did for me tonight.”

“Playing Romeo?” she asked with a smile.

“Outwitting Clayton so well.”

“I am afraid that is not a task which requires much skill.”

He laughed. He really liked this woman. “True. Although I must warn you. He is a man for whom appearance means a great deal. He does not like playing the fool, so I suggest taking care with his bruised ego over the next few days. At least until his guests leave.”

“Thank you for your advice, sir. I shall try my hardest to refrain from embarrassing him again.”

“Good luck. Because I fear he will inadvertently give you any number of opportunities to show him up.” He wanted to say more. Do more. What he really wanted was to obtain a kiss from her and not just on the cheek. But, alas, there would be none of that. And it wasn’t because he

was an impoverished earl in search of a rich wife. It was because he was still a gentleman.  
“Good night, Miss Conway. And farewell.”

“Godspeed, my lord. I hope you are able to make it home in time for Christmas.”

There was nothing else to do, but leave her.

Reluctantly.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Someone was at his door. Colin had somehow pushed away thoughts of the delightful Miss Conway long enough to fall asleep so that he might relieve Stemple at the appointed time. But just as the war had given him the ability to awaken when needed, so too had it given him the ability to detect even the quietest movements.

His first thought – his first hope – was that it was Miss Conway come to give him a real kiss. But as he shook the sleep from his brain, he realized that was unlikely. What was likely, however, was that she needed his help. Perhaps Clayton or one of his friends had come to importune her.

The very thought had him reaching for his dressing gown and striding across his bedchamber. The door opened just as he reached it.

One of the twins entered. Angelique, he assumed, since the other one had seemed rather offended by his lack of funds.

She was wearing a dressing gown and little else. He averted his eyes.

“Lady Angelique, what are you doing here?”

“I have come to see you, my lord.”

“I can only assume an emergency has brought you to my door. There can be no other reason for you to be here.”

“It is an emergency,” she said. “I fear I cannot live without you.”

She approached him slowly. Colin turned to her just in time to see her begin to undo the sash that held her dressing gown closed. He grabbed a blanket from the bed and threw it over her, just as she was about to reveal all.

The blanket landed on her head, covering everything down to her feet. For a moment there was no movement, no sound.

Then everything changed.

Colin had never heard as loud of a scream, despite being muffled beneath a large quilt. He might admire the power of her lungs, had he not wanted her gone from his room quite so much.

\* \* \*

It had taken Ava a long while to fall asleep because thoughts of Lord Ridgeway had filled her mind. She'd met any number of gentlemen because of Lord Clayton's incessant parties and she'd been ready to condemn the entire peerage because of their behavior. But Lord Ridgeway was different. Honorable. Interesting. Intelligent.

She'd stayed awake for two hours after retiring. Maude had still not come to bed, but Ava had no doubt her friend was safe with Mr. Stemple. It was some time after three in the morning when there was a knock at the door. Perhaps Ava had accidentally locked Maude out.

She went to the door to find Ferguson there, but no sign of Maude. The butler looked her up and down and Ava wished she'd taken the time to don her dressing gown.

"Why are you here, Mr. Ferguson?"

"It is Lady Angelique. She is in need of you."

Ava reached for her dressing gown. "Is she sick? Shall we send for a doctor?"

"I do not know the details, Miss Conway. I was only told to fetch you at once."

As Ava emerged from her room, Stemple came out of the nursery. "What's going on?" he asked.

Ferguson was shocked. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"Lord Ridgeway asked me to sleep here. Where are you taking Miss Conway?"

"Not that it's any business of yours, but she is to tend to Lady Angelique."

Stemple's eyes darted back to the darkened recess of the nursery, where Ava suspected Maude was. Ava could tell Stemple was torn between wanting to accompany her and not wanting to leave Maude alone.

"Mr. Stemple," said Ava. "Mr. Ferguson will escort me to Lady Angelique's room, then back here again. I shall be perfectly safe."

"I should come with you," he replied.

"Nonsense. I will be fine. Besides, I believe Lord Ridgeway would not wish you to leave."

Stemple hesitated, but finally nodded, though he looked far from satisfied by the turn of events. “Very well, Miss Conway. But I expect to see you back here again shortly.”

“I am sure you will, Mr. Stemple.” She smiled at him, before leaving with Ferguson, who’d already begun the journey to the family wing.

*It was too bad Lord Ridgeway was leaving so soon,* mused Ava as she followed Ferguson through the dark halls. It seemed that Stemple and Maude had formed an attachment. Maude worked very hard and had too few diversions. But at least she would have the memory of talking to a good man.

Much like the memories Ava would cherish of Lord Ridgeway. Colin. She’d learned his Christian name was Colin. It suited him, too.

“You are to go in there,” said Ferguson, as he opened the door to a dark room.

“But this is not Lady Angelique’s bedchamber,” said Ava.

She was rewarded with a light shove into the room.

\* \* \*

Colin needed to get Lady Angelique out of his bedchamber before anyone knew she was there. He did not know how much her desire to be a countess extended, but he had a feeling he could not depend on the lady’s honor to not trap him into a proposal.

Fortunately, judging from the sounds beneath the blanket, it appeared the chit was none too pleased with him at the moment. Of course, that also meant she might try getting him in trouble with Clayton.

“Lady Angelique,” he began, as he watched the girl try to emerge from beneath the blanket. “As much as I am honored by your visit tonight, I should tell you that by allying yourself with me, you would be marrying into a family with an illegitimate sibling.” Technically, there were two siblings with questionable parentage, but he wasn’t about to betray that secret, though it was all but common knowledge. “Not only am I as poor as the proverbial church mouse, but any and all money I do obtain will go to ensure my sisters’ well-being and to shore up the estate for future generations. I expect my own life to be lived in modest circumstances, mostly on my estate and only going to London as often as required for my responsibilities in the House of Lords. Further, I...”

But he was cut off by the wrath of Lady Angelique who’d finally fought her way out from under the blanket and was now furiously tying up her dressing gown. “I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last earl standing and all the princes, dukes and marquesses were dead. Even if I had to choose between you and a viscount. A baronet even. You threw a blanket over my head. A blanket! My head! And I wanted to marry you even though I knew about your brother and your



sister. It's one thing to have an earl for a bastard brother. But if you think I would have allowed that bastard sister of yours to remain under our roof, you..."

"Enough!" Colin could withstand any humiliation regarding himself, but never his family. "Leave my room now and I shan't tell your brother of your deplorable behavior."

"I don't know what that means!" shouted Angelique. "But you have been a beast. In fact..."

Her tirade was interrupted by Stemple entering the room in a hurry, followed by the kitchen maid Maude.

"My lord," said Stemple, barely glancing at Lady Angelique. "Have you seen Miss Conway?"

Colin's attention was immediately captured. "I thought she was in her room."

"The butler came to fetch her a moment ago. He said Lady Angelique needed her."

"What would I want with her?" asked Angelique.

"It's Lord Clayton, sir. It's got to be," said Maude. "He's had his eye on Ava and means to have her. I know he does."

Colin was out the door before Maude had even finished her sentence. He thought his warning to Clayton had been sufficient. But evidently it had not been.

\* \* \*

The door slammed behind her and Ava heard a key turning. Ferguson had evidently locked her in. All of her senses were on alert, even as her eyes were adjusting to the dim light. She was in the sitting room of one of the empty bedchambers in the family wing. She could see candlelight approach from the adjoining bedchamber. Then the person holding the candle came into view.

Lord Clayton.

"How happy I am you could join me, my dear," he said, as he lit a large candelabra.

Ava did not give in to panic. That was what Clayton wanted.

"I was told Lady Angelique was in need of my services. If you will unlock this door I shall go in search of her."

"Did Ferguson lock you in? I am sure that was quite unnecessary." Yet he made no move to unlock the door. "You were very clever tonight. At first, I must admit I was a little irritated by your disobeying my command. But once I thought about it, I understood. You had no desire to kiss Ridgeway. I cannot blame you. The man is hardly a proper earl. But you did look quite fetching performing for all of us. Perhaps you should consider a career on the stage."

“I am happy with the one I have chosen. Now, if you will allow me to do my job and attend to your sister.”

“I believe you know by now that my sister does not require your services. Indeed, I have heard countless times how neither of them wants you around. It is only through my intercession with Mama that you still have a position in this household. What would you do, dear Ava, if you lost your job?”

Ava tried to control her breathing as best she could. If she lost her job, she would be in dire straits for she felt sure she would not get a character reference from Clayton. How would she support herself if that were to happen?

“I can see I distressed you,” said Clayton. “I did not mean to do that. Pray, have a seat. I have taken the liberty of pouring you a glass of wine.”

Ava looked at the glass, but did not touch it. She would not put it past this man to drug her. He was not the gentleman Lord Ridgeway was.

“Sit down, Ava.”

It was a command, rather than an invitation.

She sat in a chair.

He chuckled. “I was hoping we might sit next to each other on the settee. But please be seated wherever you feel comfortable.”

She waited for him to speak again.

“Will you not have any wine?”

She picked up the glass from the table in front of her.

“Ava, it is not enough to pick up the glass. You must also drink from it.”

“I have not given you leave to use my Christian name, my lord.”

“There are a great many things you have not yet given me leave to do, though I like to think that will all change. It must be such drudgery for a spirited woman like yourself to have to work as a governess. For one thing, the clothing is horrid, though you look most enticing tonight in your prim flannel nightgown. How would you like a silk one, my dear? That could be arranged. As could a new position. Several positions. All under me.”

She stood. “My lord, your innuendo becomes tiresome. I have no intention of becoming your mistress tonight or ever. You will unlock that door at once.”

“Or what?” he asked with amusement.

“Or you shall regret it.”

He was on his feet in an instant, but instead of moving to the door, he swept her into his arms. She stomped on his foot, but since she was not wearing shoes and he was in boots, it hurt her much more than him.

“So you like it rough, do you?” Clayton pulled her hair back, exposing her neck, which he began to nuzzle.

Ava swung the heavy crystal wine glass in the direction of his head but was only able to land a glancing blow before she dropped it. It was, however, enough to get him to loosen his hold. She screamed, then ran toward the door. However, he was able to grab her dressing gown.

“You’ll pay for that. But you’ll enjoy it just the same.”

Someone in the hall tried the lock, then pounded on the door. “Miss Conway!”

It sounded like Lord Ridgeway.

“Let go of me, Lord Clayton!”

“Not yet, my dear,” he said as he pulled her toward him again.

Then two things happened simultaneously. The door came crashing open and Ava brought her knee up to Lord Clayton’s groin.

Lord Ridgeway was by her side in an instant, then he pushed her toward Maude. Just as Clayton was able to stand upright Lord Ridgeway planted him a facer that sent him sprawling across the room.

Lord Ridgeway advanced on Clayton. Ava went to Ridgeway and physically pulled him back. “No, my lord. It is not worth it.”

“He had you locked in here against your will! I heard your cry for help.”

“Yes. But, thanks to you, I am no longer in need of assistance.”

“In truth, you were doing quite well for yourself. Did you really knee him in the bal...painful area?”

She smiled just a bit. “Yes, my lord. My father taught me that.”

“Ridgeway!” Clayton was still on the floor. “I think you broke my nose, you bastard.”

“I’m considering calling you out, Clayton. If the worst you end up with is a crooked nose to remember me by, consider yourself lucky.”

“Call me out? I was only having a bit of fun with that lightskirt.”

Lord Ridgeway took two steps toward Clayton, though Ava was doing everything in her power to hold him in place. “Say that again and you’ll meet me at dawn.”

“Gentlemen, please!” said Ava. “I will not have this on my conscience. And you are attracting an audience.”

Most of the houseguests – at least the ones who weren’t passed out drunk – were in the hall gawking at the two men. A few were laying wagers about the outcome of a prospective duel.

Then Lady Angelique stepped into the room, followed by her sister. “Clayton,” said Angelique. “Make Ridgeway leave this house at once! He is poor! And ungrateful! He is ungratefully poor!”

“Get out of my house, Ridgeway,” said Clayton from the floor. “Immediately.”

“I will not leave Miss Conway unguarded.”

“That is none of your concern,” said Clayton.

“Get rid of Conway, while you’re at it,” said Anastasia. “And the next time you hire a governess, make sure you get one with better fashion sense. I cannot bear those dreary gowns of hers.”

“Miss Conway will leave when I want her to go,” said Clayton. “And at the moment I very much want her to stay.”

Lord Ridgeway was still breathing hard. Ava suddenly realized she had been holding him. She stepped away. He caught her arm.

“You will not be safe here, Miss Conway,” he said.

“I managed him once. I can do so, again.”

“Even if that were true, do you really want this constant battle?”

She didn’t. She was terrified as to what would happen. Sooner or later Clayton would catch her. Sooner or later he would have his way. She had to find the means to leave as soon as possible. In the morning, she would send inquiries to employment agencies in London.

She looked at Ridgeway. “I will find a way to persevere.”

“Miss Conway, once again I regretfully must inform you of the obvious. I have no money other than the blunt Clayton gave me last night.”

“And I would like that back,” said Clayton, still from the floor.

Ridgeway ignored him. “I cannot offer you employment at my estate since my sisters already have a governess. Even the invaluable Stemple is working without wages. But I can offer you safe passage with us and you can remain at the estate until you find another position. I will help in any way I can. It will not be luxurious by any means, but it will be better than remaining here. I am sure of it.”

Ava was sure of it, too. “I am not in the practice of asking for favors.”

“By coming with us now, you would be granting a favor. Your removal from this house is the only thing that will prevent me from beating Clayton to a pulp. Though there is a part of me that believes I should do it anyway.”

Ava had to smile. “Thank you, my lord. I would like to come with you.”

And suddenly, it was as if a weight had been lifted from her.

Clayton laughed mirthlessly. “If given a choice between watching that touching scene and being kneed in the bollocks again, I’d choose the latter.”

“And I would be happy to oblige,” said Ridgeway.

Ava turned to see Maude looking at her, stricken. Maude. Her only friend. Maude, who would now be completely unprotected in this house.

Perhaps Lord Ridgeway saw the sadness on Ava’s face. Or the devastation on Maude’s. Or his valet’s despair. Whatever the reason, it made him speak again. “Miss Maude, I do not believe I need to mention yet again my dismal financial affairs. But if you would like to accompany us, I will do what I can to find you a position.”

Maude’s eyes filled with tears and her lips trembled as she bobbed a curtsy. “Thank you, milord. I would like to come with you.”

Ridgeway turned back to Clayton. “I trust you will pay the ladies their wages. You have a house full of witnesses. You wouldn’t want it spread about town that you don’t pay your debts.”

“Well, you would know what that’s like,” replied Clayton. “I will pay them their wages. However, I shall send their earnings to your estate. After all, I wouldn’t want you to rob them on your journey home. Now, if you will all four leave the premises with some haste. I expect you to be gone within the hour.”

“With pleasure, my lord,” said Ava.

She had no idea what her future would bring. But it had to be better than working for Clayton.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

Not quite an hour later, Colin and Stemple, along with the two ladies, stepped out of the manor. This was about as far from a successful conclusion to his overall mission that Colin could imagine. Not only had he failed to secure a rich bride during the last few months in town, but he was now bringing home three additional mouths to feed. But he couldn't have left either of the women behind. He had a feeling Stemple was especially pleased that Maude was accompanying them.

It wasn't yet five in the morning when they set out from the manor toward the village. Clayton had made it clear that his carriage would not be available to take them to town. Thank God the viscount hadn't insisted on having his blunt returned from the night before. At least they would be able to rent a carriage once they reached the village.

"Might I take your valise?" Colin asked Miss Conway. Stemple had already packed Maude's sack into his own bag. The two of them were now walking behind Colin and Miss Conway.

"Thank you, my lord, but is it not heavy and I am well able to carry it."

"Yet it is not very gentlemanly of me to expect you to do so."

"While I thank you for the offer, you are an earl and I am a servant, my lord."

"By some error of birth, that is a correct assessment. But the next day of travel could be difficult. I am better able to bear the physical burden of carrying the bags. And will you not call me Colin? We will be spending a great deal of time together."

"It would not be proper, my lord."

"I am not suggesting an elopement to Gretna Green, Miss Conway. Only that we dispense with formalities, especially since your reputation would still be in peril if people found you were travelling with me, regardless of Maude's presence. So, please call me Colin. You can 'my lord' me to your heart's desire once we reach my estate."

“All right, Colin,” she said, as if trying out the name to see if it fit. “My name is Ava.”

“Thank you, Ava. Now, how much longer is it until we reach the village?”

“About two miles, sir.”

“No ‘sirs,’ Ava. A sir is simply an abbreviated ‘my lord.’”

“Will there be many more rules, my...Colin?”

“If there are, I shan’t hesitate to let you know. Part of me is very earl-like. If only I had the corresponding purse.”

They walked along in silence. Colin could hear the quiet murmurings of Stemple and Maude behind them. He and Stemple hadn’t had much of a chance to speak as they packed, since Clayton’s guests had come in to regale him with their drunken wit. But Colin had a feeling Stemple would be willing to walk across England if he could do so with Maude beside him. And just from a few glances at her face, it appeared the cook’s assistant was not at all unhappy with the arrangement, either.

The light pink of dawn was just beginning to brighten the sky when they reached the village. Though warmed somewhat by the walk, Colin still felt chilled to the bone. His boots had apparently been made for fashion and not long walks in the snow.

“Maude said the inn rents carriages,” said Stemple, pointing to a ramshackle business in the lane. It was still early, but there was smoke coming from a fireplace.

The four of them walked to the inn and Colin asked a sleepy stable lad to fetch the owner. Several minutes passed before the man appeared before them, looking none too happy to be called out into the cold.

“I would like to rent a carriage,” said Colin.

The innkeeper surveyed them, taking note of the cut of Colin’s coat. “I got none to rent you.”

Colin looked at the stable before them. “It appears that you have plenty of horses and more than a few carriages.”

“That I do. But I got none to rent to you.”

Colin could not understand the man’s reticence. He even had coin to pay him. But then he recalled the sound of a rider setting out from the manor as he’d been packing. What had Clayton done?

“I must return to my estate. Surely you have some conveyance to rent me?”



The innkeeper looked truly conflicted. “But you’re the Earl of Ridgeway, ain’t you?”

*Damn Clayton.* “I am.”

“Then I can’t do nothing. Viscount Clayton’s orders. He told everyone in the village the same thing.”

“I can pay you.”

“Not much from what I hear. And if I take your coin now, Clayton will see to it that I never get any business from his estate ever again. He’s got a long memory, he has. Can’t afford to make him angry.”

“He would never know.”

“He would. Got spies everywhere, he does.”

Colin considered going door to door, hoping to find someone willing to help them. But the innkeeper had the right of it. Clayton was vindictive. Anyone who defied him would suffer, and Colin had no wish to be the cause of someone’s punishment at the hands of his old school chum.

“How far is it to the next village?” asked Colin.

“Ten miles or so. But that’s just a small one. If’n you want to get to a town of any size, it’s another six miles after that.”

Colin wanted to groan aloud. He wanted to go back to the manor and break Clayton’s nose again. But he couldn’t do either of those things because he had to find a way to get everyone to his estate in time for Christmas, whereupon he would retire to his nice warm suite and sleep for a good week.

Speaking of sleep, he realized neither Stemple nor, he suspected, Maude had slept at all the previous night. He and Ava had only slept a few hours. It was imperative that he find a carriage to rent. But even before that, they needed food.

“Can you serve us breakfast?” he asked the innkeeper.

The man considered it for a moment. “Well, his lordship’s man didn’t say nothing against it.”

“Excellent.”

“But he didn’t say that I could, neither. And I have a feeling Lord Clayton would prefer it if I didn’t serve you.”

“We shall not tell him if you don’t,” said Colin.

“I guess I can give you breakfast. For a price.”

Maude timidly approached Colin. “Yer lordship?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t think we should do it.”

“Lord Clayton cannot hurt us anymore, Maude.”

“It’s not just that.” She looked around as if not wanting to be overheard. “I just think we should move along down the road a bit. Please, sir.”

There was nothing Colin wanted more than to have something to eat while warming himself at the inn. But Maude seemed adamant and he hardly wished to reward the innkeeper by paying what he was certain would be an exorbitant price. Perhaps they would find a tavern further down the road. It was doubtful, but worth a try.

The innkeeper looked disappointed to be denied a chance to cheat them but he also looked anxious to go back to bed.

Colin and the others continued their journey down the lane.

“We’ve but a little more to walk, milord,” said Maude.

Colin hoped the girl knew something he didn’t because if the next village was truly ten miles away, he didn’t consider that “a little more to walk.”

They continued onward half a mile past the village, then Maude turned onto a path that took them up a hill.

“Maude, where are we going?” asked Colin, hoping she knew of a shortcut.

“There’s a place to make a fire up here. It’s where the farm lads often stop when they take their animals to town. I saw it once from a wagon. I thought it was right curious at the time. But it also gives you a view down the road. I reckon it’s a good place to eat and warm ourselves while we wait for a cart to pass.”

Too many delectable words assailed Colin’s head at once: eat, warm, cart.

“But we have no food, Maude.”

The girl smiled before pulling back her cape and displaying a veritable pantry of items.

Stemple grinned at her. “I thought I was carrying all your things.”

“You’re carrying all my clothing. But I have the food and this.” She pulled out a small cast iron pot. “I always wanted to be a cook. So whenever the gypsies come through I look for items to

buy. I've had this pot for almost a year." She placed the pot on the iron grill over the fire pit dug into the hill.

"Maude, you're brilliant!" said Ava.

"I also took scones this morning for the four of us. 'Twasn't stealing," she quickly added with a look toward Colin. "I reckon his lordship and Victor was guests, while Ava and I worked there. We was all entitled to breakfast. I would've taken more, but this was all there was."

"This is much more than I expected," said Colin. "Thank you."

"I'm not done yet," said Maude. "And if one of you was to start the fire, we could warm ourselves as we wait."

"An excellent suggestion," said Colin. "And one I should have thought of." From her look, it seemed Maude quite agreed on both counts, though she said not a word. "Stemple, do you have any tinder to start a fire?"

"I am afraid not, my lord. But perhaps when the sun comes up we can use my reading spectacles to reflect the rays to light some dried sticks, if we can find any."

"I have a tinderbox," said Ava, pulling out the small silver box. "In my travels with father, we had to be prepared for all eventualities."

Colin had to grin. "Stemple, we are being quite shown up by the ladies and I thank God for it."

Stemple grinned, as well, as he took the tinderbox from Ava. After gathering as many bits of wood as he could, he pulled open the box, then shielded it from wind as the flint lit the tinder within. He carefully transferred the flame to the wood, which readily caught fire. Colin added a few more pieces of dried peat that he found nearby.

"I also have two flagons of cold cider," said Maude, as she lifted two animal skins from around her neck. She timidly gave one to Colin. "Here's one for you, milord. Then Miss Conway and Victor and I can share this one."

"That hardly seems fair, Maude," said Colin.

The girl's eyes widened. "Are you saying you want both?"

"No, Maude. And if I ever become such a tyrant, I hope one or all of you will give me a swift kick in the rear. No, I thank you for the cider, but will share it with Ava, if that is all right with you, Miss Conway."

Ava blushed delightfully and Colin felt a corresponding heat. For he had to admit he wanted to share the drink with her, if only to have the opportunity to place his lips where hers had been. He knew he shouldn't be having such thoughts. She and the others were under his protection and

he would be the worst blackguard to even think of seducing her. Yet, he was freezing cold and losing hope that they would reach his estate with any speed. Could it hurt all that much to warm himself with passionate thoughts of Ava?

Yes. Yes, it could.

He cleared his throat. “Maude, you are the savior of us all.”

“There’s more,” she said. She pulled out two more bags that had been hanging around her waist. “This will likely have to last us at least a day, so we can’t have all of it now. But I have bread, cheese and roast beef.”

The other three stared at her in astonishment.

“Maude,” said Colin, “how were you able to come up with such a feast?”

“It was set aside for the dogs.”

That was not the answer Colin had been expecting. “Excuse me?”

Ava laughed. “Do not be alarmed, sir. Lord Clayton’s dogs eat very well. The food is kept in the cleanest condition. And do not fear that they will not have enough to eat. I assure you the hounds will not suffer.”

“My fear was not for the hounds, Ava.”

“There,” said Stemple, pointing to the blaze which was growing in intensity. “Thanks to Miss Conway, the fire is coming along rather well.”

The others gathered around the warmth and watched as Maude cut off a portion of meat and cheese. She placed them in the pot, then stirred it with a wooden spoon that she had also pulled out from under her cloak.

“You do not happen to have a carriage under there, do you?” asked Colin. “It would seem you have everything else.”

It took only another ten minutes of Maude’s expertise to create a warm breakfast for them all. While it was the most rudimentary of ingredients, Colin swore he’d never tasted anything better. After the meal, Ava helped Maude clean her pot, as Stemple stoked the fire and Colin looked for more wood – a tall order in the midst of snow.

By that time, it was light and they had a good view of the road in both directions.

“How long shall we wait, my lord?” asked Stemple.

“Perhaps another half hour would give us a chance to take maximum advantage of this fire, while at the same time ensuring the morning is just a bit warmer before we begin our trek. Do you really believe we shall encounter a farmer and a cart, Maude?”

“I cannot say, milord,” said Maude. “But one can hope.”

“Yes, Maude. One can hope.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Twenty minutes later, the fire burned its last and the four of them set off down the road. They were passed by two sleepy workers sharing a horse, then a farmer driving a large cart. Unfortunately, they were all going the opposite direction. But within the hour, they finally heard the sound of horses behind them. Colin turned to see a farmer driving a cart filled with what appeared to be hay.

He called out to the man. “Good sir, how are you this morning?”

The man eyed them suspiciously. “Well enough.” He looked Colin up and down, likely noting his lack of adequate winter clothing.

“I am Colin Emerson and we are trying to rent a carriage so we can continue our journey,” said Colin, through chattering teeth. And if he ever met the man who’d made his useless boots, he’d surely kick him in the arse.

“If you want to do that, you’d best turn back,” said the farmer. “The village is but two miles up the road. You could likely rent a carriage at the inn.”

“Unfortunately, they had nothing for us.”

The man cocked his head. “Ah, you’ve got no blunt.”

“I have some, though not much.”

“Then why wouldn’t they rent you nothing? You’re a toff, ain’t you?”

“The Earl of Ridgeway. But Lord Clayton and I had a bit of a disagreement and the innkeeper chose to take his side.” Colin prayed the man was not dependent on Clayton’s goodwill.

“Can’t say I know this Lord Clayton.”

“Lord Ridgeway is trying to return home for Christmas,” said Ava. “His sisters are expecting him.”

“Your sisters, huh?” asked the farmer, softening noticeably.

“Yes, sir. Quite frankly I’ve made a muddle of things, but I would like to make it up to them. We are trying to get to Wilton in Wiltshire. Is there any possibility we can get a ride at least part of the way with you? I can pay you some coin.”

The man took a look at Colin and the others. He must have noted their exhaustion, for he nodded. “No coin is necessary and my name is Carl. I got sisters myself. And you must be desperate if a gentleman like yourself is willing to ride in a farmer’s cart. You can hop in the back, though it is a bit scratchy.”

“But I must pay you something,” said Colin.

“It’s Christmas,” said Carl. “It just seems like the right thing to do.”

Colin could not believe the wave of gratitude that swept over him. He would have kissed the man, though he feared that would get them kicked off the cart before they’d even climbed in.

“There’s two tarps,” said Carl. “I put them back there in case it rained. I reckon you could put one beneath you, then pull the other over.”

“Thank you,” said Colin, as he walked to the back of the cart. It was filled with straw and, fortunately, looked to be fairly clean. Stemple was already laying out the tarp.

“We should place the ladies between us,” said Colin, “to ensure they are warmest.”

Stemple helped Maude into the cart, then sat to the right of her – probably to shield the scarred side of his face.

“Ava?” asked Colin as he held out his hand to help her in. “I am afraid it is not the carriage I thought we would have.”

“But it will be much better than the alternative,” she said with a smile, before placing her hand in his and climbing in next to Maude.

Colin could only laugh at himself as he climbed in next to her. He was an earl. From what his late father would have said, he and his family were better than most, able to conquer the world with only a look. Yet, so far that day he’d been saved by the ingenuity and kindness of a kitchen maid, a governess, a valet and a farmer. It reinforced a belief he’d held for quite some time; a person should be judged on his deeds and not his birthright.

There was no real way to sit up in the mound, so all four of them were in somewhat of a reclining position. He watched as the others began covering themselves with straw.

“It will help to keep the heat in,” said Ava, as she spread it out evenly.

“Yes,” said Colin. “It was a tactic we often employed during the war. We rarely had the luxury of sleeping indoors. A mound of hay was a welcome sight on a cold night.”

Ava nodded. “Plus, we have the added advantage that no spiders are likely to surprise us in the frigid weather.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of spiders,” said Colin, as the cart resumed its journey with a jolt.

“Very much so,” she said, as she tried to get comfortable.

“I would say that anyone who handled Clayton so capably could hold her own against a spider.”

“And I would say both are distasteful.”

He opened his flagon of cider. “Would you like some, Ava?”

She nodded and he watched as she delicately brought the container to her mouth and took a sip. He was lucky the hay covered him because his cock had completely disregarded the cold and was now pressing against the buttons of his trousers. He accepted the cider back from her, took a sip, then restoppered it.

He leaned back, trying to get comfortable. He looked over to see Stemple and Maude already asleep. They had unconsciously turned to each other. Maude’s head was pillowed on Stemple’s chest, while his face nestled in her hair. They looked at peace with each other. He suspected his valet was well on his way to falling in love with the kitchen maid and hoped that Maude returned the sentiment. If so, he believed he’d acquired a new cook’s assistant. And after eating her cooking, he thought that was a very good thing, indeed.

The sleeping couple had also caught Ava’s attention, for she was looking at them, as well.

“I do not think either got any sleep last night,” she said. “Not that Maude was doing anything improper, of course. It had just been a long time since she’d met anyone she could truly talk to. Not to mention such a considerate gentleman.”

“Stemple truly is the best of men,” said Colin. “I only wish I could do right by him.”

“And why do you think you are not?”

“I owe him a great deal in wages for one thing and I do not know when I can make it up to him.”

“But I have no doubt you will make that right when you are able.”

“I will.”

Ava struggled to get comfortable. Unlike the others, she and Colin were not touching. And it appeared like she would like to keep it that way.



Unfortunately.

“Why else do you think you have failed him?” she asked.

“The same way I have failed my family. By not making up for the mistakes of my father and grandfather. My entire family lives in poverty because I haven’t been able to find a solution.”

“You place a great deal of importance on financial matters, my lord.”

“It is Colin, remember? And money is important.”

“I have never had much of it, yet I have not missed it. Though when my father was dying, I wish I would have been able to make his life easier.”

“He had you with him, Ava. I suspect that eased his suffering more than anything else.”

“That is one of the kindest things anyone has ever said to me, Colin.” She was slowly sinking into a hole in her efforts to become comfortable.

“Ava, why do you not do as Maude has done and rest your head on my chest? It would lessen your chances of the hay scratching your eyes and you might avoid that large hole which seems to be devouring you.”

“I could not lay my head on your chest, my lord. It would be most improper.”

“Ava, if you think I’m trying to seduce you, you’re either underestimating my gentlemanly honor or overestimating the ability of my body to withstand the cold.” Though, he had a feeling that if the lady were willing, his body could overcome the cold quite well. “I promise you will always be safe with me. But if we huddle together like Stemple and Maude, we shall be warmer and more comfortable.”

She still looked unconvinced.

“I give you leave to incapacitate me the way you did Clayton, if that helps.”

She smiled, then carefully placed her head on his chest. Without thinking, he wrapped her in his arms. It felt like the most natural movement in the world. He had to stop himself from kissing the top of her head.

“I shall not hold it against you that you appear all too eager to get the chance to knee me in the private area,” he said, warmed through and through.

“A lady does not get such an invitation often, Colin.”

“I daresay the image of Clayton, post-kneeing, is one I shall cherish until I am old and infirm. Indeed, if I am heard laughing in my rocking chair it shall no doubt be at the remembrance.”

Given how aroused he was, and how cold he'd been just a few minutes earlier, it seemed impossible that he would be tired enough to sleep. Perhaps it was the rhythmic swaying of the cart. Or the sheer exhaustion of their early morning trek. Or mayhap, it was the feeling of having Ava in his arms snuggled up to him, but Colin drifted off to sleep. Content for once. Almost happy.

But still worried.

\* \* \*

Ava could not believe that Colin was falling asleep. Perhaps it was commonplace for him to have a woman rest her head on his chest while he held her in his strong arms. It probably was. This was probably how the man always travelled, though in a carriage, of course, and with not quite as much hay.

He was asleep, yet all of Ava's senses were working feverishly. She breathed in the scent of him. Shaving soap and leather. She was warmed by his heat. She wanted to explore the chest that so neatly pillowed her head, though no pillow she'd ever used had been this warm or inviting. She'd nearly burrowed to the bottom of the cart in her effort to create some distance between them. She'd never touched a man this intimately and it stole her breath away.

Maude and Stemple were asleep in each other's arms. That was significant since Maude trusted few people and she suspected the valet was also cautious when meeting others. But they were as at ease with each other as couples who'd been married for decades.

Ava wondered what the earl's future wife would think of him curled up thusly with a governess. Former governess. She hadn't had much time to think of how greatly her life had changed in the past several hours. She had lost the only position she'd ever had. She had to find a new one and that would not be easy. She did believe that Colin – Lord Ridgeway, she reminded herself – would help her. But she wasn't sure how many families he might know in need of a governess. She also hoped that Lord Clayton would follow through on his promise to send her the wages he owed. Without them, she wouldn't be able to travel to a new position, assuming she could find one.

But despite her rather precarious circumstances, she was glad to be out of Clayton's house. And she would not miss the twins. Hopefully, her next charges would be better behaved.

Colin shifted, pulling her closer to him. *Good Lord*, how was she supposed to lie there with him? Her body was now so warm she would have kicked off the tarp if it wouldn't have disturbed the others. But it wasn't just the warmth. Her skin felt tight. Her nipples were hard and there seemed to be moisture between her legs. All from being next to a man who had fallen asleep so easily.

It was rather insulting, really.

She snuggled closer to him and his unconscious response was to erase the last remaining space between them.

She'd long ago resigned herself to never marrying. She had no dowry and it would be inappropriate in the extreme for a governess to hunt for a husband. But for the moment, she imagined what it would be like to lie with the man she loved. Ideally, it wouldn't be in the back of a bumpy cart filled with scratchy hay. But with the right man none of it would matter. She suspected she could endure much in order to be with the man she loved.

He would not be the earl, of course. Even if they weren't from different classes, he'd made it known he had to marry an heiress. She hoped he would find love as well as a fortune.

On that thought, sleep did find her. She drifted off, with Colin's pleasant scent and warmth to comfort her.

\* \* \*

Colin was jolted from sleep by what felt like his arse hitting a stone floor after being dropped from the turret of a castle. While he tried to shake the sleep from him, he became aware of two things. One was that a soft female was lying so close to him she might as well be on top of him. It was a pity she wasn't. She smelled of lemons and her soft brown hair cradled his cheek. He realized it was Ava and thought what a shame it was that they would never be in this position again.

The other fact he was made aware of was that the cart was slowing to a halt. He couldn't see much from his vantage point and did not want to wake Ava by sitting up. He looked over to see that Maude was still asleep, but Stemple was also looking around as best he could. They caught each other's eye. It was a bit embarrassing for both men to be used as human mattresses, but there was nothing for it but to nod and never speak of it again.

When the cart lurched off the path, it was a big enough jolt to awaken both ladies. Colin wondered how long it would take Ava to realize on whom she was lying. It turned out to be about a minute. She jumped up and almost fell onto Maude in her haste to be away from him.

"From your reaction, I can only imagine you saw a spider," said Colin.

"A spider, my lord?"

"It would be too lowering to think you wanted to get away from me with such haste, so I was hoping a spider had braved the cold and given you a start."

"I assure you that had a spider been as strong as you....I mean, as big....I mean...."

"Yes?" asked Colin with a grin.

“I cannot be expected to make sense, my lord. I have only just awakened.”

“You are welcome to sleep on me at any time, Ava.”

She was on the verge of some tart response when Carl spoke to them. “This is where I have to turn, my lord. But I expect you should be able to find some sort of wagon to take you the rest of the way home.”

Colin moved stiffly out of the cart, helping Ava and Maude after him. Stemple had already disembarked and was surveying the small village.

Colin approached Carl. “I cannot thank you enough for the service you have done us, sir. Please let me pay you something for your efforts.”

“Think nothing of it, my lord. It’s nearly Christmas, after all. Besides, how many farmers can brag that he had an earl in his cart?”

“Only one that I know of,” said Colin with a grin. “Then take this for your sisters, for I am sure you are a good brother.” He pressed coins into the man’s hand before he could object again. “Your kindness will not be forgotten, Carl.”

“Thank you, my lord. And a Happy Christmas to each of you.”

They bid farewell to Carl as he left, then it was time to learn how best to continue onward.

“Where are we?” asked Ava.

“We are but eight miles from my estate.”

“Will we walk there?” asked Ava.

“I certainly hope not,” said Colin. “But why don’t we discuss our next steps at the tavern, in case anyone must use the necessary.”

No one opposed the idea, not even Maude, who likely had a keg of ale tucked away somewhere on her efficient person and would no doubt protest the purchase of anything in a tavern. But twenty minutes later, they were gathered around a small scratched table and Colin had ordered them hot soup and bread.

“Before you protest, Maude,” said Colin, “we saved enough by not renting a carriage that we can afford this small meal.”

“Yes, milord,” said Maude, who looked happy enough to eat her soup.

“My lord,” said Stemple, “I took the liberty of inquiring at the stable about possible conveyances to rent. Unfortunately, they do not have any available.”

“Please do not tell me we’ll be walking,” said Colin.

“I do not believe it will come to that. They had two horses to rent.”

“Are you leaving Miss Conway and me behind?” asked Maude.

“Maude, do have more confidence in me than that,” said Colin. “Besides, I was looking forward to more of your meals. We can double up two to a horse as long as we do not go above a trot.”

“I am not much of a rider,” said Ava.

“I promise to not let you fall off,” said Colin. “Unless I grow too cold at the slow pace, then I shan’t hesitate to leave you in a snowbank.”

“You, sir, are gallantry personified.”

Half an hour later, the four of them set off for the last part of the journey.

## CHAPTER TEN

Not two hours later, the horses started up the long, familiar drive of the Ridgeway estate. Colin had mixed emotions as he contemplated what lay ahead. This estate – his estate – was the source of many nightmares. He'd hated growing up here. Eton and Oxford had been welcome respites from the hell his life had been with an abusive father and a cruel, distant mother. But both of them were gone now. They had been for years. Now it was the place where his sisters lived.

His beloved sisters.

He hoped he would be able to do right by them. He would do whatever it took to make it so. He also had an obligation to help Ava, Maude and Stemple. There were times when his responsibilities seemed almost overwhelming. But he couldn't think that way now. Quite frankly, right now he was most interested in seeing his sisters, followed by a hot bath and sleeping in a soft bed.

He reined his horse to a halt in the grand circular drive. He was a bit surprised his sisters weren't there to greet him. But it was a cold winter day. He hoped they were warm beside a fire.

However, he became even more curious when no footman left the house to come to their aid. He knew they didn't have many left. Most had chosen to find employment elsewhere and he hadn't blamed them. But he thought at least one would be there.

Finally, the door opened and their longtime butler, Marvins, came outside. Marvins had been at the estate for decades. He was in his late fifties and had been a favorite of the old earl. The butler had even held Colin down for more than a few beatings. When Colin's father had died, he'd wanted to dismiss the man. He'd looked forward to doing so for years. But, when Marvins could not find other employment, Colin had kept him on for two reasons. One was that he hadn't wanted the man to starve – he didn't want anyone to starve – and the other was he wanted Marvins to see that Colin was not his father.

“Marvins,” said Colin, still atop his horse. “As you can see, I have brought guests. As soon as I've introduced them to my sisters, do be so good as to send up hot baths and have dinner ready soon thereafter.”

“My lord,” said Marvins with the smallest of bows. “There is something...”

“Where are my sisters? I hope they are not from home.”

“No, my lord. They are at home.”

“And they have not at least appeared at the window? I would take this as a personal insult were I not too tired and frozen to be affronted.”

“My lord,” said Marvins, raising his voice just a bit. “As I was saying, they are at home. But not here.”

“I do not take your meaning.”

“They are at their new home. The dower house.”

“I do not understand. Are they to live there while I take up residence here alone?”

“No, my lord. You and your sisters live at the dower house. The new tenants now live in the manor.”

“But I did not arrange for tenants.”

“No, you did not. I suggest you speak with Lady Rosemary.”

Colin stared at the butler, not comprehending what was happening. Perhaps the cold had frozen his brain. But then he felt a light touch on his arm.

“My lord,” said Ava, from in front of him. “Perhaps we will get more answers at the dower house.”

Had it really come to this? Had his sister taken matters into her own hands and now Ava was guiding him as if he were one of her charges? He wouldn’t contemplate it further. He simply turned the horse around and set out again.

His three companions were maddeningly silent for the ten minutes it took to reach the dower house. And all the while Colin could not quite comprehend what was happening. He had any number of questions he wanted answers to. No, needed answers to.

But finally, the dower house came into view and even before they’d reached the end of the drive, his two sisters had run outside, gratifyingly excited by his arrival.

Rosemary was eighteen years old. She had the Emerson black hair and dark brown eyes. Her hair was curly, and as a girl, it had been impossible to tame. Now as a young woman she wore her hair up, but tendrils were continually escaping to float about her face.

Leticia, known to everyone as Letty, was eight. And unlike every other Emerson, she had bright red hair and dark blue eyes. She was, as their mother had boasted to anyone who would listen,

not the late earl's get. She had been conceived during a period when Colin's parents had lived on different continents. He believed his mother had deliberately chosen a lover so different in looks from her husband that there would be no doubt as to the child's parentage. Indeed, the old earl had had little use for Letty, often ignoring her existence all together. But their mother had neglected the girl, as well. All she'd wanted was to use the child as a weapon against her husband. Once that became boring, she simply moved on.

However, Colin loved Letty. Everyone did. He did not know if she yet understood why she looked so different from her brothers and sisters. But Colin and his siblings were resolved that she would never know anything but love from them.

Colin had barely dismounted when Letty raced across the drive to hug him.

"You're finally here!" she said. "I was so afraid you wouldn't make it home in time for Christmas. Rose didn't know what to do with me because I kept running to the window searching for you. But you have finally come and it shall be a happy Christmas because of it. Who are your friends?"

"Dear Letty," he said, as he bent to kiss his sister. "You are a sight for sore eyes. But do let me greet Rose before you ask too many questions."

He hugged Rosemary, as Letty grinned at the visitors.

Rosemary held on to him tightly. "I am so glad you have come, dear brother. But let us get all of you inside before you freeze."

Colin looked at his sister. She'd grown into a beautiful young woman and he was gripped with guilt again because he knew she should have a Season. But he just couldn't afford it. He motioned to the door. "Is there no footman to come help or groom to take our mounts?" He reached up to help Ava dismount.

"Here are the grooms now," said Rose, smiling at the two servants on horseback, who must have followed Colin from the manor. "Gordon and Miller, how nice of you to come take his lordship's horses. Please take them back to the main stables. I'm sure his lordship can give you instructions on what should be done with them later."

The two servants bowed, then took the horses from Stemple.

"Rose?" asked Colin. "Where are the footmen? And why did Gordon and Miller come from the manor stables and not the ones here? For that matter, what are you doing in the dower house?"

"Let us all go inside. Then you can introduce us to your guests."

"Rose?"



“There are no footmen,” she said quietly. “And we have no animals in the dower house stables.”

Colin’s heart fell. He’d left his sisters alone, without even footmen to help them. He turned away, unable to face her. He tried to find his luggage, only to see Stemple and the others had already taken everything inside. He took Rose’s hand, then entered their new home.

The dower house was of Tudor design with eight bedrooms on the upper floor and a sitting room, dining room and library on the first floor, with the kitchen and servants’ quarters in the back. It had been unoccupied since Colin’s grandmother had passed away when he was ten. He had often taken refuge there after one of the earl’s beatings. It had always been a welcome sanctuary.

As he looked around, he saw that much of the furniture was still under Holland covers.

“Rosemary, what is going on?” asked Colin.

His sister hesitated, not knowing where to begin.

Ava broke the silence. “My lord, perhaps you would like to introduce us to your sisters, lest they think their home has been invaded by wrinkled travelers. I mean, it has been. But, at least they will know what to call us.”

“Of course,” said Colin. “Forgive my rag manners. Lady Rosemary, Lady Leticia, please allow me to present Miss Ava Conway, formerly a governess for Viscount Clayton’s sisters.”

“Welcome to our home,” said Rosemary, as she and Letty made their curtsies.

“Thank you. It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Rosemary and Lady Leticia.”

Colin turned to the others. “This is Maude Anderson, formerly a cook’s assistant in Lord Clayton’s household and my valet, Victor Stemple.”

It was obvious when Rose and Letty got their first look at Stemple’s scars. Colin wanted to kick himself for not preparing them.

Rosemary quickly averted her eyes from where she’d been staring, while Letty took her sister’s hand and moved closer to her skirts. It was a reminder of just how young she was.

Stemple bowed, turning his scarred half away from them.

“Welcome to our home,” said Rose with a smile.

“Thank you, my lady.”

“Stemple served in the war,” said Colin quietly.

Rose regarded the man for a moment, then extended her hand to him. “Thank you for what you did for King and country, sir.”

Stemple hesitated before extending his right hand – the scarred one. But Rose took it tenderly and shook it, smiling gloriously. Then Letty stepped forward and did the same thing. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Colin had never been so proud of anyone as he was of his sisters at that moment.

He cleared his throat. “It has been a long journey – a tale I’ll tell you as soon as I’ve changed. I believe there are one or two things you have to tell me, as well. All in all, there should be no shortage of conversation. Can you please have Cook prepare a meal for us?”

Letty looked at her sister.

“Colin,” said Rose. “There is no Cook.”

“Pardon me?”

“There is no Cook. Just as there are no other servants. We let out the manor house to an American family and all of the servants chose to remain there.”

“Do you mean to tell me you have no one in this house, save yourselves?”

“We do not.”

Colin was hit with intense anger at his servants for deserting his sisters. For would it not have been possible for even one of them to remain? He would have done anything to make it up to the man. He was also angry at his forbears for being so careless with the family fortune. But most of the anger was directed at himself for not realizing it had come to this.

“What about your governess?” he asked. “Surely she did not go to the manor.”

“I dismissed her,” said Rose.

“Why would you do that?”

Rose darted her eyes at Letty, who was occupied with their cat, Jasper. “I do not need a governess since I am eighteen. Letty and I get along quite well on our own.”

“How long has it been this way?”

“For a week.”

“Have you been eating at the manor house all this time?”

“No, I have been cooking, though I confess I am not very good at it. It has mostly been meat and cheese.”

“I think she’s a wonderful cook,” said Letty loyally.

“I am sure she is,” said Colin with a smile for Letty. Well, at least this was one problem for which he had a ready solution. “Maude, I have no money to pay you now, nor do I know when that will change. But I would be even more indebted to you than I already am if you would consider being the new cook here, even if it is only until you find a better paying position. Which I assume would be anywhere else.”

Maude’s eyes widened and her jaw dropped. “My lord, I cannot be your cook. A cook needs to know how to read.”

“Maude, a cook needs to know how to cook. And you are learning to read, are you not?”

“Yes, sir, but I have much to learn.”

“As do we all. Miss Conway, you will help her, will you not?”

She smiled. “As long as I remain in this house, I will.”

“I should also like to be of service,” said Rose.

“Excellent,” said Colin. “And Stemple, I assume you’d be willing to step in when necessary?”

“Of course, my lord,” said the valet, who looked, frankly, elated by the thought that Maude would remain at the house. “Perhaps, Maude and I should go to the kitchen now to see what we can make for a meal.”

“An excellent suggestion,” said Colin.

Rose smiled at them. “Letty, can you please show them where everything is?”

“Are we really going to have a cook again?” asked an excited Letty. “Not that your meals aren’t good,” she quickly added.

“It looks like we shall have a cook at last, thanks to Maude,” replied Rose. “And I shan’t be that disappointed to relinquish the task.”

As Letty led the two servants to the back of the house, Ava spoke. “I should leave you two alone. Perhaps I can be of assistance in the kitchen, as well.”

“No, please stay,” said Colin, as he put his hand on her arm to keep her from leaving. He knew the coming conversation with Rose would be difficult. But somehow it would help to have Ava by his side.

Rosemary didn't miss the gesture. She looked from one to the other, then said "Please stay, Miss Conway. I wish I could offer you tea, but despite Letty's kind words, I am not even good at boiling water. But let us retire to the sitting room. At least we shall be comfortable as we discuss what has happened."

Once they were situated, Colin briefly summarized the events of the past few days – leaving out the more scandalous details, though he had a feeling Rose knew she wasn't getting the full story. His sister had always been bright and he suspected the adult responsibilities she'd taken on had only made her more so. "Now tell me, Rose, how you came to live here."

"There is not much to tell and it all happened so quickly. The bills were mounting and the servants were becoming more and more impatient for their back wages – and I could hardly blame them. It was also becoming more difficult to obtain credit in town."

"Why did you not come to me? You spoke of none of this in your letters."

"I knew you were doing your best to help us and I did not want to worry you unnecessarily."

"Unnecessarily? As the head of this family, it is my responsibility to take care of such matters."

"Dear brother, do you not realize I am well aware of just what you have been doing for us? What you're willing to sacrifice? I thought it was time for me to help the family in my own way. After all, I am quite capable, do you not agree?"

Of course his sister was capable. That wasn't the point. Colin was about to say as much when he once again felt Ava's light touch on his arm.

"My lord, Lady Rosemary has done an admirable job of looking after your sister, has she not?"

He was still being managed. But perhaps he did need some assistance. "Yes, Miss Conway. Rose has done quite well."

His sister beamed and he was thankful he'd followed Ava's lead. "Pray continue your story, Rose. I shan't interrupt again."

Once again, Ava's light touch was on his arm. This time it was accompanied by a grin. "My lord, perhaps you should not make a promise I am almost certain you cannot keep."

Rose laughed. "Oh, Miss Conway, I believe you and I will get along famously. As I was saying, when the servants complained of the back wages not being paid and we lost our line of credit in town, our solicitor Mr. Stevenson came to me with a plan. He'd heard there was an American family looking to rent a manor house for Christmas and the winter. A six month lease would allow us to pay the servants their back wages as well as get our credit restored in town. They were looking at houses in the county and Mr. Stevenson was hoping we might be amenable to the possibility of leasing it."

Colin grunted. "I have no great affection for that house, as you well know. But it is odd to think of someone else living there."

"I feel the same way. I wanted to consult you, of course, but there was no time to send word to you in London, since the Babcocks were just passing through the county. I had to make a quick decision, so I did what I hoped was right and said we would move to the dower house. And with the rent paid in advance, I was able to pay off the servants, as well as the merchants in the village. There is even some left over, which I am hoping can go a long way toward paying off father's debts."

Colin hated to tell her that their father's debts far exceeded what they would reap from a six-month lease. Besides, that was his responsibility, not hers. Although so far she'd done a better job of digging them out of the hole than he had. "You've been very clever Rose. I'm quite proud of you."

She smiled and Colin could see that while she was most certainly a young lady, Rose was also still a girl who valued her brother's approval. He felt all the better for bestowing it. "Now, tell me why you had to dismiss the governess."

Rose glanced at Ava.

"Miss Conway can be trusted to not tell tales." He'd not known her long, but he was sure of that.

Rose sighed. "Miss Patton was a dreadful woman, but I put up with her because I knew we needed someone here for appearance's sake. She had no use for books and only truly cared that I practiced my needlework and singing." She turned to Ava. "And I'm not very good at either. But it was the way she treated Letty that made me turn her out. She made assumptions and treated her accordingly."

Colin tensed. "Miss Conway, as you no doubt noticed, Letty's looks are quite different not only from Rosemary and me, but from our other sister and our two brothers, as well. There have always been rumors about her parentage and she has been treated most cruelly because of it."

"I have always found the mistreatment of children especially abhorrent," said Ava. "And I certainly cannot comprehend how someone could be cruel to a child about something wholly beyond her control."

"My thoughts exactly," said Colin. "My only regret in this case was that I wasn't the one to turn the old bat out. I hope you sent her off with a flea in her ear."

"I believe I used language that was most unbecoming for a young lady," said Rose.

"Unfortunately, she did not go far. She has been employed by the tenants as a chaperone to their daughters."

"And exactly who are the tenants?" asked Colin.

Rose's smile was guarded. "That, dear brother, is a story unto itself."

"Miss Conway," said Colin. "It occurs to me that the position of governess has recently become available. It usually pays a wage, though not a very good one. At the moment, it pays nothing. Would you be interested in taking the position?" A part of him knew it wasn't the smartest decision to prolong Ava's stay in his house. Yet, he could not keep from hoping she would remain.

"Lady Rosemary does not need a governess, my lord. And I am certain you do not need the added expense."

"But I do need a governess," said Rose. "If I'd had a proper one, I would not have cursed at Miss Patton."

"If you'd had a proper governess, there would have been no need to curse," said Colin.

"Actually, it sounds like colorful language was warranted," said Ava.

"Miss Conway, are you telling my sister to curse like a sailor?"

"In this case, I believe I am. It is understandable that Lady Rosemary would have used strong language in dismissing a woman who'd been cruel to her sister. I quite applaud it. I can only assume that you are now retracting your offer of a moment ago."

There were many offers Colin wanted to make to Ava, almost none of which could be mentioned in front of his sister. "No, Miss Conway, the offer still stands. If you are unwilling to take the position, you are perfectly free to refuse, although my sisters are in dire need of your assistance."

"If you were not a gentleman, sir, I would tell you that in Lady Rosemary's case you have almost certainly told a falsehood. She has ably demonstrated her independence. And, as for needlework and singing, I have no discernible skills in those areas myself and would be unqualified to teach her."

"Then you simply must take the position," said Rose. "And think of poor Letty. She deserves a good governess. Please say you'll stay, Miss Conway."

Colin held his breath. If need be, he would call for Letty and have his youngest sister charm Ava into staying. He simply did not want her to leave.

Fortunately he did not have to resort to begging any more than he'd already begged. For Ava said, "Very well, Lady Rosemary. I will stay."

Colin suddenly felt more hopeful about his world.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Mr. Marvins,” said Edmund Babcock, as he tried once again to get comfortable in a chair in the sitting room of the Ridgeway manor house. “Why is the furniture so old and hard? I know this earl is desperate for blunt, but you’d think he’d at least have been able to buy a chair that wasn’t in such bad shape. I daresay my arse will get splinters from the wood beneath this so-called cushion.”

“Mr. Babcock!” admonished his wife, Mabel, who was perched rather precariously on the edge of the equally threadbare settee. “There is no cause to use such rough language. And, as I have reminded you time and time again, it is not ‘Mr. Marvins.’ It is simply ‘Marvins.’ Is that not correct, Marvins?”

The butler dutifully bowed to her, though the bend in his back was barely perceptible. “That is correct, madam.”

“I do not see why we have to learn so many rules,” said the youngest of the Babcock children, Myra, who was nineteen and had her father’s light brown hair. She was picking biscuits off a piece of the earl’s china. “None of this will matter when we return to Boston.”

“If mother has her way, we might not return to Boston,” said her brother Richard, who was twenty and also had his father’s coloring. “If Nora makes the right marriage we’ll likely be living in bloody old England for the rest of our lives.”

“Language!” said Mrs. Babcock. “We would not want people to think we’re not civilized.” Here, she glanced at Marvins, whose face was devoid of expression, though it wouldn’t take much to discern his thoughts. “Nora can marry whomever she chooses. But if it happens to be a prince or a duke, then so much the better.”

Nora, a beautiful girl of three-and-twenty, smiled demurely at her mother and sipped her tea. She had fair hair and light blue eyes. She’d been ardently pursued by any number of men in Boston, for her beauty was unsurpassed. Her papa was also disgustingly wealthy, so that hadn’t exactly worked against her, either. Yet she remained unmarried at an age when other girls had

not only been wed for a few years, but were also in the process of adding to their families. It vexed her mama exceedingly.

But Nora was now an American heiress on the British marriage mart. And the entire family was expectant of her making an excellent match.

“Who was that at the door earlier today, Mr...er, Marvins?” asked Mr. Babcock. “I only glanced at the horses, which were veritable nags. Were they part of some sort of gypsy caravan? Should I be arming you to chase them off?”

“I do not believe that will be necessary, sir. That was only the Earl of Ridgeway and his servants.”

“The Earl of Ridgeway was here?” asked Mrs. Babcock. “Why did you not tell us, Marvins? Was he here to call on Miss Babcock?”

“No, madam. He was under the misapprehension that this was still his residence. Evidently word of the move had not reached him in London.”

“That is most queer, is it not?” asked Mr. Babcock. “I assumed he was the one who arranged to move out of this drafty monstrosity of a house.”

“I believe, sir, that his local solicitor arranged for the move at Lady Rosemary’s request.”

“And who is this Lady Rosemary?” demanded Mrs. Babcock. “I do hope she is not his wife. It would be most vexing to learn of the earl’s visit, only to discover he has a wife.”

“Lady Rosemary is his sister,” replied Marvins.

“Oh, that is such a relief,” said Mrs. Babcock. “We should invite the earl and his sister for Christmas dinner.”

“As long as we don’t invite the other one,” said Myra.

“The earl has two sisters?” asked Mrs. Babcock. “Would one of them do for Richard?”

“Leave me out of your matchmaking, mother. I shan’t be marrying for quite some time.”

“I don’t see why not,” said his father. “Marriage doesn’t change a man’s life all that much. I daresay you have no more freedom as a bachelor than I do as a married man.”

“Be that as it may, father. I want nothing of the earl’s sisters. Either of them.”

“One of them is barely his sister,” said Myra. “Miss Patton told us the youngest girl’s father was not the old earl.”



“Perhaps the countess remarried,” said Mrs. Babcock, though it was said in such a way that one could tell she hoped the countess had done no such thing.

“No,” said Myra. “Apparently, the countess was a wicked woman who had any number of love affairs, then bragged about them. I’m quite sure it serves her right to be dead, so her family does not suffer from her wickedness anymore.”

“You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, Myra,” said Mrs. Babcock. “Though in this case, I think it would be impossible to avoid it. Well, we certainly won’t invite the youngest child to dinner.”

“But I do not see how we could avoid it, Mama,” said Nora. “I believe Miss Patton said the girl is but eight years old. Surely she could not be left alone at Christmas, especially with no servants in the house.”

“But Marvins just said the earl arrived with servants. Surely one of them can stay with the girl.”

“I’m just surprised he has servants,” said Richard.

“Perhaps his financial situation is not as bad as they say.”

“Of course it isn’t,” said Mr. Babcock. “Not after all the money we’ve spent to rent this dreadful place. I’ll be shocked if we don’t all die of the ague by the end of January.”

“Hush, Mr. Babcock,” said his wife. “You can certainly afford the money and I will not permit any of us to get sick. It would interfere with our plans for Nora. Just think, she could marry this earl fellow and be a countess.”

“Who says I won’t marry the earl?” asked Myra.

“It is not your turn, dear,” said her mother. For once she did not add that Myra was not as well favored as her sister, though still quite pretty in her own right. “Now, Mr. Babcock, you must send an invitation to the earl at once. And invite the older sister.”

“Both sisters, Mama,” said Nora.

“If you insist. Though I cannot think to have such a creature at my table.”

Mr. Babcock snorted. “If I have to have an impoverished earl at my table, then you can tolerate the creature. After all, if he marries Nora, not only would I be giving him my eldest daughter, I’d be expected to refill his coffers, as well. I can never understand why the aristocracy think they’re better than us, just because they were born into titles. If you ask me, it’s more impressive to make your own fortune. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Marvins?”

The butler, who looked quite pained, merely nodded the slightest amount. “As you say, Mr. Babcock.”

\* \* \*

Maude and Stemple, with Letty's able assistance, had accomplished a miracle in just under an hour. Maude had put together sandwiches of bread and cheese and even cooked a thin broth. Stemple had attempted to prepare the dining room for the meal, though Letty had told him that she and her sister had taken all their meals in the kitchen.

"I am sure that was quite nice for you, Lady Leticia, since there were no footmen to serve you in the dining room. But I am here now and will ensure there's a proper table set."

Despite Stemple's best efforts, however, the earl had intervened. He'd decided that for now, at least, they would continue eating in the kitchen.

"Is he always like this?" Maude asked Stemple before the others joined them for the meal. "I can't imagine Lord Clayton ever eating in the kitchen, unless he was tugging one of the kitchen maids whilst he was doing it."

"Lord Ridgeway is a regular bloke for an earl. And a very good man."

"I can tell he's a good man. But, I never seen any toff act like this."

"Do you think you'll remain here?" he asked. "There's no telling when he'll be able to pay you, though I have no doubt he'll make right on his debt to you as soon as he's able."

"Money is important," she said. "But I believe there are other advantages to staying." She stole a glimpse at him, then blushed a crimson red. "Will you remain here?"

Stemple smiled. "There is no other place I'd rather be."

The family and Miss Conway chose that inopportune moment to enter the kitchen. Stemple and Maude stepped away from each other.

"Forgive me, my lord," said Stemple. "I have not yet set the table."

"I believe we can muddle through ourselves," said Colin, as he carried plates to the table, while Stemple set out the tureen of broth. "Maude, where are you going?"

"To stand in the corner, my lord."

"Were you bad?" asked Letty.

Maude smiled and curtsied to the girl. "No, Lady Leticia. I just wanted to be close at hand in case anyone needs something."

"Come eat at the table, Maude," said Colin. "You must be starving. And it is because of your efforts that we have this meal."

Stemple set a place for Maude and him at the end of the table. She took her seat across from him, though she still seemed ill at ease to share a meal with the others.

“I’m so glad you’re home, Colin,” said Letty, as they all began to eat. “I cannot wait for you to open my Christmas present.”

Colin’s heart fell. He hadn’t had a chance to buy gifts and now there was neither time nor money. “My dear girl, I hope you have not spent your pin money on your old brother.”

“We made your gifts,” she said. “Rose helped me, but I did much of it myself. I hope you like it.”

“I am sure I shall love it.” He didn’t want to disappoint either of his sisters by telling them he had no gifts for them. He knew Rose would understand, but Letty would be so disappointed. “Letty, I have some rather bad news...”

“Oh, dear!” said Miss Conway, as she spilled some of her cider. “I am so clumsy,” she added as Colin sopped up the spill with his napkin. “Lady Rosemary, Lady Leticia, I have a most irregular request.”

“Then you must tell us,” said Rose. “For we are always especially interested in irregular things.”

“When I was growing up, it was just my father and me. We were often in parts of the world where we did not have ready access to shops. So, we began a tradition of making gifts for each other for Christmas. They required a great deal of thought and ingenuity, and we valued them all the more because of it. I see that you two have already adopted such a tradition. But I believe the earl might like to make his presents this year, as well.”

“That is a splendid idea,” said Rose.

“I think so, too!” said Letty. “But I did not know he could knit. Because that’s what Rose and I did.”

“Unfortunately, I lack that skill,” said Colin, grateful for Ava’s intervention. He suspected Rose seized onto the idea to help him, as well. “But there are other attributes I could put to good use in such an endeavor.”

“Really?” said an excited Letty. “Like what?”

Colin realized he’d spoken too soon. Most of the skills he possessed would be best used in either a gaming hell or a bedchamber. He had a gentleman’s education and wholeheartedly lacked a tradesman’s skills. “Well, I could...”

“Sing a song?” suggested Ava hopefully.

“That doesn’t seem like much of a present,” said Colin.

“But Lady Rosemary and I have already admitted to a lack of skill in that area. You might be our only source of entertainment.”

“Unfortunately, lack of musical skill runs in the family.”

“Perhaps you could draw a picture?”

“Not if you want it to resemble anything.”

“What about writing a story?”

Colin was about to object again, though he realized his options were becoming limited. Perhaps he could teach the girls to play faro, after all.

“Colin, writing a story is a lovely idea,” said Rose. “I remember when you would tell me stories in the nursery. I especially liked the ones you made up.”

“They were but children’s stories.”

“I’m a child,” said Letty. “I would love to hear one of your stories.”

“As would I,” said Rose. “Miss Conway has hit upon a marvelous suggestion. You should write a story to tell us on Christmas Day. You can think of one as we cut greenery in the forest tomorrow.”

“We are going on a forest expedition tomorrow?” asked Colin.

“Of course. How else can we decorate? I wanted to have the house done for you upon your arrival, but we have been busier than I anticipated. We can spend the morning in the woods cutting greenery, then you can write in the afternoon as the rest of us decorate. It shall be so much fun, do you not agree, Miss Conway?”

“I am sure you will have a splendid day.”

“Oh, do not think to exclude yourself,” said Colin. “After all, Miss Conway, it was your idea that we make our presents. If we are doing this, then surely you are, too.”

Before Ava could object, Letty spoke up. “Please, Miss Conway! It will be ever so much fun.”

“Very well,” said Ava. “I look forward to it.”

Colin turned to his new cook. “Maude, I hate to ask, but did you see anything in the larder that might do for Christmas dinner?”

“I am afraid there is not much, milord. Though Victor and I have given it some thought.”

The valet spoke up. "If those are your woods, my lord, I would like to go shooting. I was thinking we might have a few game hens."

"An excellent idea," said Colin. "Although we should probably coordinate your outing in the woods for a time that does not coincide with ours. I would hate to return home only to be shot the next day."

"That would be terrible!" said Letty.

Colin smiled at his sister. "Fortunately Stemple is an excellent shot and I have not angered him overly much as his employer. Is that not right, Stemple?"

"Not overly much, my lord."

Rose giggled. "Since our credit has been restored in the village, I believe we shall have a truly delicious feast, which will be most welcome after my rather feeble attempts in the kitchen."

"I love your cooking," asserted Letty again.

"Thank you, dear. But I suspect we shall be much indebted to Maude and Stemple before long."

"I believe this will be a most memorable Christmas," said Colin, who couldn't quite keep his eyes off Ava.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

At the end of the meal, Rose showed Ava to her bedchamber.

“Is there no nursery?” asked Ava.

“There was never a need for one since this is the dower house. There are just the eight bedchambers on this floor. Colin, of course, has the main suite. Letty’s room is down the hall and will have a grand view of the garden once spring comes. And I am at the end.”

“Which view do you have?”

“Nothing to speak of,” said Rose turning away. “I was thinking you might like to have this bedchamber.” She opened the door to a room not two doors down from the master suite.

“This looks a bit grand for a governess,” said Ava, as she looked at the charming room with yellow wallpaper. “I can sleep in the servants’ quarters. Or, at the very least, I should be closer to Letty.”

“I believe Letty enjoys feeling like she is on her own, though she is close enough to me that I would hear her call out in the night. I hope you will enjoy this room, though we must give it a thorough airing. The house has been unused for quite some time. I apologize that we were not prepared for your arrival.”

“Lady Rosemary, I am a completely unexpected addition to your household, and a servant at that. And this is a lovely room. The nicest I have ever had.”

“Please call me Rose.”

“While I appreciate that very much, your sister has been on the receiving end of some rather abhorrent rudeness. I should like to call her Lady Leticia, so it would be odd for me to call you anything other than Lady Rosemary.”

“Thank you for your kindness toward Letty. And you are right about her treatment from others. Very well, we shall do it that way, except for when you and I are alone. Then I shall be Rose. I will not take no for an answer.”

“And I will be Ava. I look forward to our outing in the woods tomorrow. It has been quite some time since I was able to gather greenery for Christmas. It will be a treat.”

“I am glad you think so, Ava.”

Then the girl impulsively hugged her before departing.

There was no fire in the hearth and Ava suspected there was little fuel to waste. Fortunately, there were several blankets on her bed. Though she'd be living in an earl's household, she'd best find a way to make do with less.

Ava still found it hard to believe how much her life had changed in the past few days. She had a new position – though it paid nothing. But she already liked Rose and Letty very much. She would be a good teacher to Letty and a confidant to Rose. She imagined Rose's life had been a rather lonely one in the country, caring for her sister and without the funds to travel. But both girls were extremely good-natured, much like their brother Colin.

Colin. Or, as she must refer to him now that he was her employer, the Earl of Ridgeway. She was immensely relieved to have a new position, especially since she was not at all sure that Viscount Clayton would make good on his promise to send her the wages he owed her. But it would be a challenge to live in the same household as Colin – Lord Ridgeway – and not develop feelings for him. Or, more accurately, to not see her feelings deepen.

There was some consolation to the fact that he would likely have to return to London soon to continue his search for a wealthy bride. She would remain in the country with his sisters. And, perhaps, by the time he returned with the lucky woman in tow, Ava would have found another position elsewhere.

But in the meantime, she would be spending Christmas with him. And she could not help the smile that came to her at the very thought.

\* \* \*

*It was such a relief that Colin was finally home*, thought Rose as she made her way to her room. The last few months had been difficult due to their dire financial straits. She was opposed to Colin selling himself in marriage and had been particularly keen to do her part to help wipe out their father's debts by leasing the manor. She hoped it would be enough to dissuade Colin from making a disastrous marriage.

She was almost nineteen and knew enough of the world to realize how important love was. Her elder sister Winifred never spoke of her marriage but Rose did not think it was a happy one.

How could it be? Their father had arranged it when Win was barely eighteen. While Win might have welcomed it as an escape from the old earl at the time, six years later it appeared she was in a prison almost as bad as the one she'd left. But it was hard to know since she saw Win so infrequently and received letters from her only sporadically.

Rose dearly wanted Colin to marry for love. She knew he was giving little thought to that, but he should. They would find a way out of their financial troubles without his sacrificing himself. They were already on their way, were they not?

She thought about his interaction with Ava. There was something between them, whether or not they themselves recognized it. It was one of the reasons Rose had so readily accepted the idea of hiring Ava as a governess. Rose knew she had no need of one – she was, after all, almost nineteen. But with Ava in the house and so close at hand, who knew what might happen between her and Colin?

Rose grabbed a quilt from the bed and wrapped it around her, then sat in the wingback chair that was positioned in front of the window. This was the smallest bedchamber in the house. But it did have one thing to recommend it: an excellent view of Castle Bancroft. Rose settled into the chair and thought about the castle's residents. Well, mostly one resident. She wasn't even sure if he'd arrived for the holidays, though he was due any day. And he would likely be gone again as soon as he was able. If she were lucky, perhaps she'd catch a glimpse of him in the village.

She laughed. She was being extremely foolish. The man wasn't even aware of her existence – not as a woman, at any rate. She was simply Colin and James's younger sister to the great marquess. She knew she had to get over her girlish infatuation sooner or later

But it wouldn't be tonight.

\* \* \*

The enormity of Colin's challenges was slowly becoming clear to him. The dower house was ice cold and dark. After living in his small rooms in London for so long, he'd forgotten what was required to heat and light a home as large as this, though it paled in comparison to the manor. At least he wouldn't have to worry about that monstrosity of a house for now. However, he would have to take stock of their basic supplies the next day, for he couldn't have his sisters – or anyone else – starving on Christmas Eve. Or on any day, for that matter. Thank God he'd brought Stemple, for he knew his capable valet would be an enormous help with the challenges ahead.

He made his way to the kitchen, where he found Maude and Stemple finishing the dishes. From the looks of it, they were having more fun doing that chore than he'd had in two months of London balls. Hell, he wasn't sure he'd had that much fun in years.



He cleared his throat to announce his arrival. Unfortunately, he startled Maude so much she almost dropped the dish she was holding. But Stemple reached over to save it, brushing his hands against hers. If Colin wasn't mistaken, Maude blushed.

"Good evening, milord," said Maude as she bobbed a curtsy and quickly dried her hands. "Do you need something?"

"I wanted to thank you for doing such a superb job in preparing dinner, especially since I have a feeling the larder had little to offer. I also wanted to make sure you and Stemple are settled in your rooms. Stemple, I trust you have already been your usual efficient self?"

"I do not know about that, my lord, but I can show you what I've found so far." The three of them went through a short hallway to the servants' quarters while Stemple explained. "There are a few servants' rooms in the attic, but it appears that the quarters for the cook, butler and housekeeper are down here. I believe this one was used by the cook." He pushed open the door to the room closest to the kitchen. Though small, it opened into a sitting room, with an adjoining bedchamber.

Colin looked at the room, which appeared to be fairly clean, though it contained little furniture. Had it always been this way? He'd never spent time in the servants' quarters checking on their comfort before. It had always been someone else's job.

"Do you like this room Maude? Or would you prefer the housekeeper's suite?"

"Milord, I couldn't take that room. Where would the housekeeper sleep?"

"Maude, there is no housekeeper. And there may not be one anytime soon. If there is to be one advantage to working here now without wages, I daresay it should be to pick your room. Which one would you like?"

"The cook's room is grand enough," she said. "I've never had a bedchamber to myself before and it even has its own sitting room. Are you sure this is just for me?"

"I am quite certain of it."

In the end, Maude thought it would be most practical to be close to the kitchen, so she chose that room. Colin made a note to himself to find a small table and chairs to move into her sitting room. The least he could do was make her comfortable. He already felt guilty enough not paying her.

The butler's suite, while still small, was twice the size of Maude's. The girl seemed astounded by the grandeur of it, making Colin wonder about the condition of Clayton's servants' quarters. Even Stemple was walking about the room reverently.

“But my lord, since I am your valet, would it not be better for me to sleep in your dressing room?”

“You deserve the extra space down here with all the additional duties I am afraid will be coming your way. I will make do as well as possible without you up there.” Besides, if he ever did have the good fortune to find Ava in his bedchamber, it wouldn’t do to have Stemple in the next room.

He stopped himself right there. He could never have Ava in his bedchamber and there was no use thinking it would happen. He was roused from his unsettling thoughts by Maude.

“So, Vic...I mean, Mr. Stemple will be sleeping down the hall from me?” she all but squeaked.

Colin blinked. “Is that a problem?”

Maude reddened. “In Lord Clayton’s house, the male servants are on different floors from the women.”

“I can certainly sleep in his lordship’s dressing room, if it will put your mind at ease,” said Stemple quietly.

“No, I didn’t mean that!” said Maude. “You should have the butler’s suite. I can sleep in the attic.”

Stemple looked extremely disappointed. Colin could not blame the man. He certainly wouldn’t want Ava trying to distance herself from him. And he was fairly surprised Maude was doing so, since it seemed she was as interested in Stemple as the valet was in her. “Maude,” he asked gently, “would you feel unsafe with Stemple sleeping down the hall?”

“Of course not! He would never harm me, nor any woman. And, truth be told, I would feel safer having him near me. You never know when a bloke will try to break into the house.”

“Then what is your concern?”

“Well, it’s not quite proper, is it? I wouldn’t want you or the ladies to get the wrong impression of me, sleeping on the same floor as an unmarried man.”

“Maude, I can assure you that the only impression any of us have of you is that you are an excellent cook and already a valued member of our staff. But the choice is up to you.”

In the end, Maude said she would like to remain in the cook’s suite and that Stemple should take the butler’s quarters. She blushed so much when she said so that Colin was reassured that Stemple had already won the lady’s heart.

At least that was going well. What wasn’t so hopeful was his perusal of the larder. Colin gave Stemple and Maude the last of the coins he’d acquired from Clayton to replenish their supplies in

the village. He knew the two servants would do their best, but as Colin climbed the stairs to the family wing, he was overcome with worry.

Circumstances were so much worse than he'd thought. Thank God Rose had rented out the manor house. But what would have happened to his sisters had his return been delayed even more? The girls had been living alone with no servants, with little food and precious little heat. He hated to leave them again, but he would have to set off for London early in the new year. And this time he had to find a rich bride. There was no other choice.

He was so lost in thought that he didn't know how he found himself at Ava's door until he got there. His fear for his family was almost overpowering. And while she could do little to help, he knew he'd feel better just seeing her one last time that night. Besides, he hadn't even checked to see if she needed anything, had he? No one had. He would be a negligent host by not checking on her, even though he knew he was her employer and not her host. Nevertheless, he wanted to be polite.

He knocked on her door.

A moment later, it was opened by Ava, wrapped in a practical dressing gown. Her hair was already braided for the night. How he wanted to undo the plait and run his hands through...

"My lord?" she asked. "Is something amiss?"

"No, Miss Conway, I just wanted to make sure you were settled in. Is everything to your liking?" He peered behind her, trying to get a glance of the room. He vaguely remembered it from his time exploring the dower house as a child.

"It is lovely," she said, pulling her dressing gown tighter.

"Are you cold? I can bring more wood for your fire."

She shook her head. "I am quite well, and have enough quilts on the bed to withstand the coldest of nights." She hesitated a moment. "Are you well, my lord? You look...." She bit her lip.

"Yes, Miss Conway? I am all aflutter wondering how I look from your vantage point."

"You look tired, my lord. And not just from the journey."

Her earnest observation caught him off guard. He'd wanted to flirt with her, to perhaps coax a kiss out of her, as ill-advised as that was. Any other woman of his acquaintance, any lady he'd flirted with, any mistress he'd ever had would have known how to play this little game. She would have told him he looked handsome or in need or naughty or some other stupid thing. But Miss Conway had avoided the trivial and moved straight to the heart of the matter.

He looked tired. And not just from the journey. In truth he was very tired. He was tired of the responsibility that seemed so overwhelming at times. He was tired of failing. He wanted to wake up in a world where all those problems had been solved. Refreshed, able to start anew with a fresh slate.

But there were no easy answers in life.

He wished he could answer Ava flippantly, but her truthful observation deserved an honest response.

“I am tired, dear Ava,” he said softly. “And not just from the journey. But, somehow, I believe you will give me the strength to see this through. I think you have enough for the both of us, and the generosity to share.”

He could tell that was not the answer she’d been expecting, for her eyes widened and her lips parted. He wanted to kiss her gently, as much to thank her for her presence than as an expression of his affection.

But he knew that if he kissed her, his senses would inflame and that one kiss would lead to much more. Too much.

So instead, he grinned rakishly, bowing slightly. “If you need anything in the night, Miss Conway, do not hesitate to call out for me. I should love to hear that above all else.”

She smiled at him, at ease once again. “I assure you my lord, I shan’t be calling out your name this or any other night. Now, if you will excuse me, we have an early morning planned in the woods and I for one would like to be well rested.”

With a pert curtsy, she shut the door on him.

And he forced himself back to his room, somehow feeling better than he had all day.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

Though it had not been easy to get out of her nice warm bed, Ava could not stop grinning as she set out for the woods with Colin and his sisters. Earlier in the week, Rose had gone through the trunks in the attic, finding warm winter clothes since the temperature inside the dower house was not that much warmer than outside. That morning, Rose had supplemented Ava, Maude and Stemple's winter clothing. She'd even given Colin boots that were good for something other than a grand appearance.

Though he looked quite nice in these warm ones, as well.

Sufficiently bundled up, Ava had marveled at the beauty of the grounds. The dower house and the manor were but a mile from each other. The woods formed a ring around both, and Ava admired the tall, dense trees as they trekked into the forest.

She watched as Colin pushed an empty wheelbarrow. "Why did we have to get up quite this early?" he asked. "It is not as if we had to catch the trees while they were still sleeping."

Letty laughed. The little girl adored her brother and Ava realized that he was both brother and father to her. She only hoped his future countess would want to be mother and sister to the girl.

Ava did not think Colin truly minded the early hour. "I believe, my lord, it is so we can get our work done here now, enabling Stemple to hunt this afternoon."

"I think I would have preferred taking my chances getting shot."

"Oh, no, Colin!" said Letty.

"Don't worry, sweeting," said her brother. "I was only hoping for a superficial wound that would have allowed me to go back to my nice warm bed."

Once they had walked into the woods for a quarter mile, Rose spoke. "We have much work to do, so I suggest we split apart. Colin, I trust you can cut down boughs without slicing off any fingers?"

“I believe my chance of success would have been greater had you let me sleep another hour, but, yes, I can probably remain intact.”

“Excellent. Miss Conway, can you please gather up the boughs he cuts and place them in the wheelbarrow? And pray, do not let him stop after only one or two dozen.”

“One or two dozen!” said Colin.

“I can do whatever task you’d like, Lady Rosemary,” said Ava. “But would you or Lady Leticia not like to accompany him instead?”

“The boughs may be a bit too heavy for Letty and me,” said Rose.

Now that was a clunker if Ava had ever heard one. Rose was a young woman in vigorous health. Ava could not imagine that picking up boughs would be arduous for Rose or Letty. But as Rose quickly ushered Letty away, Ava found herself alone with Colin.

“Trying to get away from me, Ava?” he asked.

“I just wanted to give you an opportunity to spend time with your sisters,” she said. She was secretly glad to have the time alone with him, but she certainly wasn’t going to tell him that.

“Truth be told, I am glad you and I are alone,” said Colin, as he pushed the wheelbarrow deeper into the forest, examining boughs as he went along. “It occurs to me that sooner or later I will come upon you talking to my ancestors’ portraits and I was curious as to what you might say.”

“I shan’t talk to your ancestors’ portraits.”

“To borrow your own words, you should not make a promise I am almost certain you cannot keep.”

“Perhaps the first thing I would tell them is you have a lamentably good memory.”

“Rest assured, Ava, that I will always remember everything about you.”

His words warmed her soul. Then she realized how very much alone they were. Perhaps she should lighten the mood. “If I were to speak to your ancestors’ portraits, it would only be after fastening a bell to you so you could not catch me unawares again.”

“A true rake would ask on what you would hang it.”

“Your swelled head, my lord.”

He laughed. “I may have deserved that. Very well, assume I am belled. What would you tell them?”

“I would tell them how very much I like Lady Rosemary and Lady Leticia.”

“They’re wonderful, are they not?” Colin finally found a suitable tree and began sawing through a limb.

“I can see why you wanted to come home so badly.”

“I shall always come home, as long as someone I love is waiting.”

“That is a very good attribute, my lord.”

“It’s Colin. Now, what would you tell my ancestors about me?”

“That it was very kind of you to bring Maude and me along with you. And that you were quite resourceful in getting Carl to give us a ride in his cart.”

“Will you also tell my ancestors about using me as a mattress?”

“Certainly not! I would not want them to think less of me.”

“From what I know of my illustrious ancestors, I can only assume the gentlemen would like you even more for doing so. As for me, when I think of that portion of the journey, I shall do so fondly.”

The look he gave her was so heated, Ava felt it could melt snow. She nodded toward the branch.

“Do pay more attention to what you are doing, sir. You would not want to lose a finger after promising Lady Rosemary you would not.”

“If it gets me out of cutting dozens of boughs I might seriously consider it.”

“My lord, hush! You would not want your sisters to hear you complain.”

“Did you just hush me, Ava?”

“Most deservedly so.”

“I did not say it wasn’t deserved. I was just surprised you’d done so. You are a minx. I should garnish your non-existent wages and make you pay me.” The bough he was sawing finally fell to the ground. “Do you think we have enough?”

“My lord, we have only just begun.”

\* \* \*

Colin was enjoying himself immensely, though he’d had the devil of a time getting out of bed that morning. The house had been like an ice box. And he usually only saw the dawn while coming home from a night’s entertainment.

But here he was in the clean, frigid air, delighting in the company of his sisters and matching wits with Ava Conway. She was wearing a grey gown today, not that any of it was currently visible. But he'd glimpsed it at the house before she'd wrapped herself in layers of clothes. Her eyes were the only part of her he could see and they had a special light in them. Or maybe they were just tearing up from the damned wind.

However, they were crinkled up at the corners, so she seemed to be enjoying herself as much as he was.

They moved to the next tree and he began sawing again. "Did you always wish to be a governess, Ava?"

"Not at all," she said. "I loved assisting my father in his work. I'd hoped to go on for many years doing so, perhaps even finding a place for myself in the world of archaeology. But he developed a wasting disease and died years before his time. I was devastated."

"I am so sorry."

She nodded and he sensed that this time her eyes watered not from the cold.

She finally spoke again. "He would have liked you. He was a man who also valued family and honor."

Colin could think of no better compliment. "Did you try to attain a position on a dig after his passing?"

"Some of his colleagues had expressed interest in my joining them, but I do not believe it was for honorable reasons."

Colin narrowed his eyes. Those bastards would have tried to take advantage of her. Just thinking of it made him angry. If he knew who they were...

"Colin, your thumb!"

Colin looked down to see he had, indeed, been close to cutting his thumb. All because he'd been thinking of Ava. "Do you think we have enough greenery now?"

"I believe, my lord, that fewer boughs would be better than a nine-fingered earl."

Ava had been piling the branches into the wheelbarrow. He took the armful she was carrying, accidentally brushing his fingers against her breasts as he did so. "Pray forgive me," he said, before quickly turning away to deposit the branches and to hide the erection that had been instantaneous from the contact. She was wearing a good six layers of clothes and yet he'd become that hard that fast.

Her eyes seemed even brighter. "Tell me about the stories you used to tell your sister."



“They were nothing, really. I’d even forgotten about it until Rose reminded me. I believe I first started making up the stories as a way of drowning out the sound of our parents fighting. But then, fortunately, they began spending more and more time apart, so there wasn’t as much need for the distraction.”

“Yet you continued to tell her stories.”

“It was a way of spending time with her. When I was home from school, she was usually in the nursery. It was only at night when I had the chance to be with her. So, I would tell her stories, then we would sit and talk. There is almost a twelve year age difference between us, so we were not as close as James and I were. But I enjoyed being with her.”

“What of your other brother?”

“My other brother. That is a more complicated story. He is Nicholas Chilcott, the Earl of Layton. We do not formally acknowledge the relationship for obvious reasons. We are the same age and he was the result of a liaison between my father and Nick’s mother. She’d already borne the heir and the spare, so it was considered a minor infraction of society’s rules when Nick was born and had the Emerson looks. However, when the heir and the spare both died of illnesses, the old earl was outraged that my father’s get would one day inherit. Old Layton made Nick’s life as bad as my father made mine. It was one of the reasons we became friends at school.”

“Are you close?”

“There is still a bit of awkwardness. Neither of us wishes to embarrass his family, so we keep a bit of distance. But he makes a point to see the girls whenever possible.”

“I am not sure there is a polite way to ask this next question.”

“Since we just spoke of my half-brother who was conceived in an adulterous liaison, I cannot imagine what could be a more sensitive topic. Unless, of course, it concerns my finances.”

“I must be an open book, my lord.”

“Not particularly. Though you do have an attractive cover.”

Ava’s face warmed from the compliment. “Can the Earl of Layton help you with your financial difficulties?”

“Nick has offered to lend me money, but his coffers aren’t as flush as they could be, either. And he has problems of his own. His current heir is his cousin, who believes he should be the earl, not Nick.”

“What of your brother James?”

“I haven’t heard from him for almost three months, which is worrisome. He went to America to find his fortune. I just want him to come home. We can all be poor together.”

“I have never had much money, but have been happy enough. Now I have yet another question.”

“You are an inquisitive sort, are you not?”

“Embarrassingly so. Have you always made up stories?”

“I was required to do a certain amount of writing at school,” he said, as he hefted the wheelbarrow and they headed off to find his sisters. “I was never very good at it.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Are you accusing me of lying, Ava?”

“No. I am simply in disbelief that you would not be good at something.”

“Yes, I am a veritable genius at everything I put my hand to. Hence the life of luxury in which you find yourself.”

“You did not let me finish, my lord.”

“I do wish you’d stop ‘my lording’ me.”

“You are my employer.”

“Actually, I am the one who owes you money. I should be ‘Miss Conwaying’ you and you should call me Colin.”

“That will not happen. At least not in front of anyone else.”

“Ahh, I am finally getting you to soften your steely resolve. Excellent. Now, you were just telling me how difficult it was to believe that I could have human failings.”

“Not exactly, Colin. I was simply expressing my disbelief that you would not be good at writing stories at school when you did so well inventing them for your sister.”

“My sister was a young girl and a generous listener.”

“Perhaps. But I believe there is a difference between tasks you want to do – like making up a story for your sister – and those you are assigned to do, like completing a composition at school. With the right motivation I believe you could accomplish a great deal.”

Colin turned to her. “Perhaps you are the right motivation, Ava. Perhaps I could write stories for you.” He wanted to kiss her. Right there in the freezing woods. In another moment he would kiss her.

“Colin!” Letty’s infectious laugh reached them as the girl ran up. “You would never believe how many pine cones I collected. But then I dropped one and poor Rose sat right upon it when she fell over in the snow.”

“Letty!” said Rose as she joined them. “I cannot believe you would tell such a tale. What will Miss Conway think of us?”

“I shall think that I am fortunate, indeed, to have come to such a fine family. Now, Lady Leticia, where are all the pine cones?”

“Over here,” said Letty, tugging at her arm. “I could not carry them all.”

“Then I shall help you,” said Ava, setting out with the girl at a run.

Colin watched Ava run off with Letty hand-in-hand. It was a good thing his youngest sister had interrupted them because he’d been about to kiss Ava. There’d been something too comfortable about gathering Christmas greenery with her. Something that made it seem too much like they were a family. It was unsettling.

It was also ludicrous that he could have romantic thoughts when he was freezing his bollocks off.

Then he realized Rose was staring at him.

“Is there something you would like to say?” he asked, hoping she could not read minds.

“I like Miss Conway.”

*Damn it.* Perhaps she could read minds. “She is an amiable lady. I confess I do not know her qualifications for being a governess other than she had the position for Clayton’s sisters. I regret not beating the man before we left.”

“He was unkind to her?”

“Yes. But he was always one who deserved a good beating from time to time just on principle.”

“You rescued Miss Conway from him.”

“I did no such thing. And I cannot imagine she would like that assessment, either. She is quite capable, I can assure you.”

“Yet, you knew she needed assistance and brought her home. I suspect you helped Maude and Stemple in a similar manner.”

“Is there something you wish to say, dear sister?”

“Nothing more than the obvious.”

“Which is?”

“That you make it your business to solve the problems of others, often at the expense of your own happiness.”

“On the contrary, bringing Miss Conway, Maude and Stemple home will contribute to my happiness since I will now have excellent servants to replace those who are no longer here.”

“But you had no way of knowing that when you first offered them a home here. You are a sentimentalist and I love you all the more for it.”

“I’m a sentimentalist? You sat on a pine cone and I cannot imagine it was anything other than to make Letty laugh.”

“She has too few excuses to laugh. And please do not tell her. She’s having a great deal of fun at my expense and I wouldn’t want to deprive her of that. But I worry about you, Colin. I do not wish for you to do anything that cannot be undone. I want you to be happy.”

“And I will be. As long as I know you and everyone else are taken care of. Now, shall we return to the house?”

“Is this your way of getting me to stop talking about your future?”

“It is primarily a way of getting my frozen body to a warm bath. But, if it should also put an end to your worrying about me then I will accept that as a boon, as well.”

“Colin!”

Letty ran up to them, grinning. “You must see what Miss Conway is about! She’s making snow angels.”

So that was how Colin came upon Miss Conway: lying in the snow, moving her arms and legs back and forth, as happy as, well, a madwoman lying in the snow. Did no one feel the effects of the cold except him? But he could not deny that she was especially beautiful when she was laughing. And he wanted nothing more than to fall upon her and kiss her senseless.

“Miss Conway!” said Rose. “I cannot allow you to make a choir of angels all by yourself. I must join you.” Rose then fell back into the snow and proceeded to make her own angel.

Letty giggled again. “May I join them, Colin? May I?”

“It’s awfully cold, sweeting. I would hate for you to take ill.”

“Please? Please!”

Colin could not deny his youngest sister such a dubious treat and it did appear that the ladies were enjoying themselves immensely. “Very well. But only one or two.”

The words were barely out of his mouth before Letty was on her back by her sister, making her own angel.

“Colin,” called Rose with a laugh. “Do you not think we should have a male angel?”

“I did not know angels had genders.”

“What’s a gender?” asked Letty.

“That’s something Miss Conway can explain to you one day,” said Colin.

Ava lifted her head to wrinkle her nose at him before falling back again. At least he assumed that was what she’d done. It was hard to see with the scarf wrapped around her face. “I believe, Lord Ridgeway, that it would be a good deal better to have four angels, rather than three.”

“Feel free to make another if you insist, Miss Conway.”

“But I believe this calls for a lordly touch. An earl angel, as it were.”

“Yes, it does!” exclaimed Rose. “How clever of you, Miss Conway, to express the need so succinctly. Will you help us out, dear brother? Or are you not as hardy as Miss Conway, Letty and I?”

“Is my male honor being assailed?” he asked.

“Most assuredly.”

“Well, I cannot allow that to stand.”

Which was how Colin Emerson, Lord Ridgeway, found himself lying in the snow, flapping arms and legs like a fish out of water. If fish had limbs. He was too cold to even think of a good metaphor. However, there was one advantage to the endeavor. It gave him an opportunity to touch Ava’s hand in passing. Though his frozen arse would say it was not nearly consolation enough.

After sufficient flailing, Rose stood, helping Letty do so, as well. Colin did the honors for Ava, holding onto her hand much longer than he should have. Though both wore gloves, he could feel the heat from her hand as well as if they’d touched bare skin to bare skin.

He was interrupted in his musings by a joyous Letty, who innocently came between him and Miss Conway, taking their hands.

“This is the best Christmas ever,” she said. “Colin has come home, we live in a new house and have a new friend, as well.”

“Do you like your new home?” he asked her.

“Very much. Now my bedroom is much closer to yours and Rose’s. And we’re rid of Miss Patton.”

“It sounds like that was a long time in coming,” said Colin. “I am sorry I chose so poorly when I selected your last governess.”

“You did much better this time,” she said with a smile for Ava.

Ava squeezed her hand. “I hope you still think so when I have you doing maths and geography and composition.”

“As long as we don’t spend all our time on needlework,” said Letty.

“I confess I have as little desire for that as you or your sister.”

That made Letty laugh, then she and Ava continued to talk about future lessons. Rose held Letty’s other hand as Colin once again hefted the cursed wheelbarrow. He watched Ava and his sisters from behind. All three were laughing and enjoying themselves. His sisters had taken to Ava quickly. Almost as quickly as he had.

For a moment Colin allowed himself to wonder what it would be like if he didn’t have to marry for money. If he could simply find a woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, without regard to her fortune or how they would all live.

Rose’s smart thinking had saved the estate a great deal of money. He’d gone over the books the night before and at least now they did not owe their servants back wages – save the three he’d brought with him, of course. Colin even had enough for taxes on the estate.

However, there were still the substantial debts their father had incurred. Not to mention Rose deserved a Season, which would not happen without outside assistance. At this rate, he might not even have enough money saved for Letty to have one several years from now. He could not let them suffer.

It was a lovely dream to think of following his heart into marriage.

But only a dream.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

Victor Stemple's life had taken an extraordinary turn in the past few days. But in some ways, he was worse off now than he had been before.

*That wasn't fair*, he chided himself. His life had changed immeasurably for the better since he'd become Lord Ridgeway's valet. They'd shared bachelor quarters in London that his lordship had called cramped, but were more luxurious than anywhere Stemple had stayed in years. It was indoors for one thing. And it had come with the incredible luxury of sharing the books Lord Ridgeway took out from the subscription library.

Before taking the position, Stemple's ability to find work had been erratic at best. His scars had scared off even some of the lowliest employers in the stews. So, it had been a challenge to find enough work to ensure he could eat and obtain shelter. Whenever possible, he'd tried to send money home – though the only jobs that paid him that well tended to involve illegal acts.

The only part of his position with Lord Ridgeway he hadn't liked had been the errands he'd run, often to areas like Bond Street and Mayfair. He'd long ago grown used to the stares of others and the children he frightened. But he didn't like to think he might taint his lordship by association. Of course, Lord Ridgeway had laughed off that concern. He truly did not seem to care what others thought of him.

When Lord Ridgeway had first decided to leave London after his unsuccessful bid to find a rich wife, he'd told Stemple he would be unable to take him along. He'd understood Ridgeway's position. The man did not want to become indebted to anyone. But Stemple would gladly work for Ridgeway for free if it meant having the chance to continue in his employ.

He knew he'd been responsible for them being kicked off the mail coach and he'd felt terrible because of it. He hadn't liked seeing his employer humble himself before that ass Clayton. But two miracles had occurred during their brief stay at the viscount's home. The first was that Lord Ridgeway had found the woman he would eventually marry. Despite the fact that Miss Conway was definitely not an heiress, only a fool would not recognize that she and his lordship were made for each other. Of course, currently, both of them appeared to be fools.

The other miracle had been making the acquaintance of Maude Anderson. He knew there was no hope of romance. Maude was beautiful inside and out and could have her choice of husbands. She would not choose a man with his scars. No woman would.

But she was his friend. And he had very few of those. In some ways, he and his lordship were friends, as well. But Stemple and Maude were from the same class. They had experienced the harsher side of life. One that his lordship could never quite comprehend, though his life wasn't easy compared to some toffs.

Stemple and Maude had stayed up talking that night at Clayton's. At first, he'd spoken very little of himself, he'd simply listened. Maude had grown up in a small village where she'd worked in the kitchen of a local tavern. But once the owner married, his wife didn't want her working there. He could well imagine the woman wouldn't want to be compared to Maude.

Her parents already had more than enough mouths to feed so she'd set out to find employment. Unlike him she hadn't made it all the way to London, but she'd been placed at Clayton's parents' country estate, where she'd been dodging wandering hands for two years. It made his blood boil to think she'd been so mistreated. He would like to address the issue with Clayton and his pals. For if there was one thing Stemple had taken away from the war – aside from his scars – it was a familiarity with violence. Normally, he did everything in his power to avoid it. But it angered him to think of anyone hurting Maude.

The two of them were walking to the village, which was a mile away.

“Did you sleep well, Victor?” she asked.

“I did, Maude,” he lied. For his room was just down the hall from hers and he'd lain awake thinking of that very fact. He would never cross the hall to see her – it would devastate him to have her reject him. But he'd certainly thought about it.

“I've never had such a nice room in my life,” said Maude. “And I don't even have to share it. It's the first time that's ever happened. His lordship is very generous. He's a good one, the master, isn't he?”

“The very best of men. Do you think you will like working there?”

“I cannot see how I wouldn't. I know it will be a great deal of work with no one to help me, but I won't have to worry about being cuffed by the cook – since I am the cook. Nor would I ever do such a thing if I ever get an assistant.”

“Were you struck at Clayton's?” Stemple could not keep the tension out of his voice.

“Only by the cook when she was very drunk. Though the other girls could be nasty as well. They'd pull your hair if they thought you had your eye on a footman they liked.”



Stemple's heart fell. "And did you? Have your eye on a particular footman?"

Maude laughed. "Lud, no. My mother and father raised me better than that. No good can come from a courtship like that. It's more likely you'll ruin your reputation and be sacked without a character. And I worked much too hard for that."

"But would you like to marry one day?"

She thought about that for a moment and Stemple wondered why he was pouring salt on his own wounds. Just the thought of her married to someone else was painful. He had to make sure he was gone from the estate before that happened.

"I haven't given it much thought. Too busy working, I guess. I suppose most girls think about finding a good man and having a babe or two. But you need to find the right man. And he has to have a way of supporting a family. 'Twould do no good to have three mouths to feed and no means to do it. That's why I feel sorry for his lordship, despite his being an earl and all. He wouldn't just have a wife to support, but two sisters and that big estate to run, as well. It's too bad because I think him and Ava would rub along quite nicely together, don't you agree?"

"I do not talk about his lordship's private life," said Stemple kindly.

"Oh, you can unbend with me," said Maude as she playfully touched his arm. "I won't repeat it. I never was one for gossip, not to mention there's no one to repeat it to. But don't you think Ava would make an excellent countess?"

"I do. Miss Conway seems to be a remarkable woman."

"She is at that. She's the first friend I ever had in the gentry, but she's really nice in spite of it. I want her and the earl to be happy. With each other, if that's possible. I think all good people should have the chance to be with their true love and be happy. Don't you agree?"

"I do, Maude. I do."

They continued their journey in companionable silence.

"Do you think about getting married, Victor?" she asked quietly. "Did you have a sweetheart in London?"

Victor froze, thinking she was making a jest at his expense. But it didn't seem like something Maude would do, so he stole a look at her and could detect nothing but genuine curiosity. How could she even ask the question? Was it not obvious?

"No, Maude, I didn't have a sweetheart in London."

"I imagine his lordship would hate for you to get married and leave him. And I know how most great houses don't let their servants marry."

“I have no idea whether Lord Ridgeway allows his servants to marry. But that wasn’t the reason I did not have a sweetheart, of course.”

“What do you mean, ‘of course?’”

Stemple turned to her again but still could not detect anything other than genuine curiosity. “My scars, Maude. Most people cannot bear to look at them. I cannot imagine a wife wanting to sleep next to them.”

“Then you don’t know the right type of women. Your wife will be lucky indeed and care naught about the scars. Mark my words.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“You’re not planning to marry a ninny, are you?”

“I wasn’t planning on marrying anyone. But I cannot imagine I would marry a ninny, no.”

“Lots of women would fancy you, I’m just sure of it.” Then as if she’d said too much, she changed the subject to what she hoped to purchase in the village and how they would make a Christmas dinner worthy of Lord Ridgeway and his family.

Stemple did not say much, other than to agree with her choices when she asked his opinion. He was too caught up in the earlier discussion. She thought women would fancy him? Could she ever fancy him or was she simply being polite? He didn’t know what to think, other than he began to wonder whether or not Lord Ridgeway allowed his servants to marry.

\* \* \*

The dower house was truly beginning to look like Christmas. Ava, Rose and Letty had been working for hours to decorate in time for their Christmas Eve dinner. They’d dusted and removed the Holland covers throughout the first floor in order to make the house their home.

There was not a great deal of furniture. Ava suspected some of it had been sold to pay bills. The little which did remain was of high quality, though the fabrics were threadbare and some of the wood was in need of restoration. But she could see that this had once been an elegant retreat. The Persian carpet was exquisitely made. The mantel was of the finest marble. The library was well-stocked, though Rose had remarked that it paled in comparison to the selection in the manor house.

It was obvious that Rose wanted to make this a comfortable home for everyone. And Ava very much wanted to help her. The Emerson family deserved it.

“What do you think, Miss Conway?” Rose stepped back from the fireplace mantel, where she’d rearranged a bough for perhaps the twentieth time.

Ava stood next to her and studied her work. “I believe Carlton House does not have such magnificent greenery.”

“And I believe you are only flattering me to keep me from adjusting it yet again,” laughed Rose.

“Perhaps. But I do believe the house looks magnificent.”

As Letty ran after their cat Jasper, who seemed rather determined to avoid having a ribbon placed around his neck, Ava and Rose readied the dining room for dinner.

“I admire the way you took charge of the situation these past few weeks,” said Ava. “It must have been hard for you to move into this house all alone. You looked out for your sister quite well.”

Rose blushed. “I just took the logical course of action when the opportunity presented itself. My brothers have tried to shelter me, but I am almost nineteen. I know the dire situation my family is in financially and am determined to do my part. After all, Colin shouldn’t be the only one to make sacrifices.”

“I believe your brother would do whatever is necessary to take care of you and Letty and the others. He loves you very much.”

“He is an excellent brother. We may be poor in money – though I know it is vulgar to speak of such things – but we are rich in family. Do you have brothers and sisters, Miss Conway?”

“No, I am an only child.”

Rose reached out to squeeze her hand. “I am terribly sorry to hear that. I don’t think any of us could have survived without each other. My family is rather unconventional, but we love each other very much. Though the brothers would never admit to such a thing.”

“Do you have many friends in the area?”

“More acquaintances than actual friends. When one has handsome older brothers, there are always plenty of ladies who visit, especially when two of them are earls. Oh, dear.” Rose looked up from placing goblets on the table. “That was most indiscreet of me. Did Colin explain to you the, uh, entire circumstances of our family?”

“He did. It must be lovely to have brothers who are so connected, despite the delicate nature of the relationship.”

Rose laughed. “Oh, Miss Conway, I do appreciate how tactful you are. I am afraid I can be a bit too outspoken. Perhaps, I need a governess after all. But to answer your earlier question, I have several female acquaintances in the county who would like nothing more than to be my sister-in-

law, though, admittedly, that number has dwindled a bit now that the extent of our financial predicament is better known.”

“I cannot imagine many ladies turning away from Lord Ridgeway, despite his lack of funds,” said Ava.

“Oh, really?” asked Rose with a smile.

“I only mean that your brother is quite amiable,” said Ava quickly. “But tell me, is there no one else in the county with whom you are friends?”

Rose did not answer for so long that Ava began to think the girl hadn’t heard her. Finally, Rose spoke.

“There is Lord Grayson, the heir to the Duke of Bancroft. His family lives in the castle on the hill. It’s not like Grayson and I are friends now. But he was friends with Colin and James, and I used to see him often when I was a girl.” She became inordinately diverted by lining up the goblets along the table.

“And now?” asked Ava.

“Now, I only occasionally catch a glimpse of him when he’s home – which isn’t often. I cannot say we are truly friends.” She hesitated as if she would say more.

“But?”

“You are too perceptive by half, Miss Conway. But at least I know Grayson likes me for me and not as a way of getting to my brothers. I mean, not that he likes me. He liked me. When I was a girl. I do not know what he thinks of me now.”

Ava waited to see if more would be forthcoming. Rose was a lovely young woman and Ava had a feeling the girl had lost her heart to this Lord Grayson fellow. She only hoped he was worthy of her.

They continued setting the table.

As he’d been doing once every quarter hour since returning from his shoot, Stemple approached them.

“Please allow me to do that, ladies.”

“Absolutely not, Stemple. Miss Conway and I are enjoying ourselves, and you and Maude are doing more than enough in the kitchen.”

“I stand ready to do whatever I can to assist you.”

“If you insist on helping, I suppose you could assist Letty in tying the ribbon around Jasper’s neck.”

Stemple paled. “Is there anything other than that I can do for you? I do not believe Master Jasper likes me very much.”

“Jasper doesn’t like anyone very much, Stemple. But since he reserves most of his animosity for mice, we let him be. You may return to your Maude.”

Now Stemple blushed. “She is not ‘my’ Maude, my lady.”

“Did I say that? Pray forgive me. I must have misspoken. Thank you for your offer, but we are fine on our own.”

Stemple looked at her dubiously, then returned to the kitchen.

“You did say ‘your Maude,’” said Ava.

“Yes, I did,” grinned Rose. “They make a lovely couple, do they not? Even in the short time they’ve been here, I can see how much they care for each other. But men can be very stubborn. I need look no further than my brothers for proof of that. I reckon the more I hint at how well they’d do together, the more likely Stemple will finally bring himself to the point and kiss her.”

Ava laughed. “Lady Rosemary! You are direct and I must say I like that about you very much.”

“And it is a trait I admire in others, as well. I cannot abide ladies who talk for hours and never say anything. What do you think of my brother?”

Ava nearly dropped the plate she was holding. “I was not wrong when I said you are direct.”

“I also believe you said you liked that. What do you think of him?”

Ava went up the table straightening the place settings. “The earl is a very kind man. I hesitate to think of what might have become of me had I remained at Lord Clayton’s estate. I likely would be in the local gaol for striking a viscount, for one thing. It was also kind of him to bring Maude with us. I believe he is probably a good earl. I do not know much about his politics, but I imagine he takes his duties in the House of Lords seriously.”

“Yes, yes, I know my brother is kind and that he is a good earl. But what do you think of him as a man?”

“I do not think of your brother as a man, Lady Rosemary. He is my employer.”

“Who is also a man.”

“My lady, it would be highly improper of me to even think of your brother as anything other than my employer. I cannot think of the Earl of Ridgeway as a man.”

“Then what do you think of me as?” asked Colin, as he entered the room with Letty. “Perhaps I should not ask such a question for I might not like the answer. Letty, if Miss Conway does not think of me as a man, do you think she thinks of me as a cat?”

Letty giggled. “Maybe we should put a bow around your neck.”

“Oh, dear. I think I would like that as little as Jasper.”

Though Letty had succeeded in putting the bow around the cat’s neck, Jasper was now growling and doing his best to get the unwanted decoration off him.

Colin continued with a rogueish gleam in his eye. “If you don’t think of me as a man, Miss Conway, what do you think of me as?”

She took a breath to respond.

“And don’t say I’m your employer. What do you think of me as?”

“A pest, my lord.”

That set Colin and his sisters laughing.

“I think of him as my brother who went into hiding as soon as we began decorating,” said Rose.

“That is unfair! I was working on estate business. And I knew you ladies had everything under control. Jasper really hates that ribbon, does he not?”

Jasper had succeeded in getting the ribbon off his head and was now shredding it with his claws.

Stemple ducked into the room again. “My lord, my ladies. Dinner shall be served in one hour.”

“Excellent,” said Colin. “We shall meet back here in one hour, then Miss Conway shall tell us what she thinks of me.”

“And I shall still think of you as a pest, my lord.”

Colin could not help but laugh as he went to change. Life’s worries could wait. For now there was laughter and Christmas Eve.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

Colin entered the dining room first to find Stemple lighting the candles.

“There are only four place settings,” said Colin. “Will you and Maude not be joining us?”

“We thought it only proper for the family to have this night alone, my lord. It is Christmas Eve.”

“But you are more than welcome to join us.”

“Thank you, my lord. But, to tell the truth, I do not believe Maude would be able to relax in such a formal setting.”

“Well, you must do what is right for your Maude.”

“She is not ‘my Maude,’ my lord,” said Stemple, almost knocking over a glass.

“Pray forgive me, but she seems to be your Maude.”

“No, sir. She is a good girl.”

“I did not mean to imply otherwise.”

“Of course not, sir. I shall serve the first course as soon as the ladies arrive.”

“That I cannot allow. I will help you bring the courses to the table all at once, then you can go enjoy your meal with your...I mean, with ‘no one’s’ Maude.”

Stemple chose to ignore that comment.

A quarter of an hour later, Miss Conway arrived in the dining room.

“I see we are to eat family style,” she said.

“Well, we are a family,” said Colin, as he admired how she’d dressed her hair for the occasion. At Clayton’s, her hair had been pulled back so severely it had been as if she’d been punishing it for something. But now, it was softer, more relaxed. The style was still simple. He imagined it

would be difficult to do a more elaborate hairstyle without benefit of a maid. But the simple chignon at her nape suited her. As did the tendrils which floated down, framing her face. She was wearing one of her brown gowns, but unless he was mistaken, she'd left one or two buttons undone. She still looked more covered up than a nun. But it was a start.

However, something had brought her up short. He forced his eyes to return to hers. "Is something the matter?"

"Would you like me to eat with Stemple and Maude? I would hate to intrude on a family dinner."

"I would like you to remain where you belong, dear Ava."

"Miss Conway, my lord. Your sisters will be down at any moment."

"Miss Conway, if you insist. You still have not answered my question from before. Do you think of me as a man?" He knew he was pressing her, but could not resist.

"Yes," she whispered.

Colin felt his breathing hitch. All he wanted to do was ruin her pretty hairstyle by running his fingers through it. And the only thing he wanted to feast on was Ava.

"Colin!" cried Letty as she bounded into the room, with Rosemary just behind her.

"Everything is beautiful! And it smells so good and we're to have a real dinner tonight. And best of all when we wake up tomorrow it will be Christmas!"

"And so it will, my sweet," said Colin, trying valiantly to turn his thoughts from devouring Ava to celebrating Christmas. He seated Letty and Rose, but Miss Conway was too fast for him. His smile clearly told her he knew she was avoiding him, but that she couldn't do it forever. Her smile back to him said "Watch me try."

The meal before them was simple: potato soup, game hens, freshly baked rolls and roasted turnips. Colin compared it to Christmas dinners of the past, when the table had overflowed with roast goose, vegetables, puddings and desserts. Yet, Maude had somehow turned this simple repast into an elegant meal. And there was no doubt that the company was better than the years when they'd had to suffer through outbursts from one or both of their parents.

"Maude has done an excellent job," said Rosemary. "And we have Stemple to thank for the game hens, do we not?"

"We do," said Colin, as he reached for a platter.

"Should we not thank the Lord first?" asked Letty.



Colin put down the platter. "Of course we should. Would you like to do the honors?"

"Me?"

"I can think of no one better."

Letty beamed and bowed her head. "Dear God, thank you for this Christmas Eve dinner. Thank you for bringing Colin home and for having him bring Miss Conway and Stemple who was hurt in the war and Maude, who's a very good cook. Thank you for looking after James in America and Win in London and Nick wherever he is."

Colin nodded. "That was a very good..."

Letty continued. "Thank you for this house and for Jasper who's been hiding ever since I put the ribbon on him. Please look after him wherever he's at. Please bless Kathleen..."

Colin mouthed "Kathleen?" to Rose, who whispered back "her doll."

"Please bless Miss Patton, who I hope is done being cross with me..."

Colin frowned. "I don't know why Miss Patton deserves a blessing."

Letty looked up. "The ones who don't deserve blessings are usually the ones who need them most. And I'm not done with the thanks."

Letty bowed her head again. Rose could barely keep from laughing and Ava was biting her delicious lips.

"Dear God, thank you for this meal. And now that you've brought Colin home again, please keep him here. Amen."

Colin wondered what Letty would think if she knew he planned to return to London in the new year. He hated the thought of it himself, but he had no choice. "Are you done, sweeting?"

"Amen is the end, Colin. You should know that."

"Perhaps it has been a while since our brother was in church," said Rose. "But that will change tomorrow when we all attend services."

"How early do they begin?" asked Colin.

"Early enough, brother," said Rose.

The next few moments were filled with joyous silence as they all tucked in to the meal. The food was excellent and Colin hoped that when Stemple finally did get around to marrying Maude, he wouldn't take her away from the house.

“What are the tenants like?” asked Ava.

“We have not yet met them, though we have heard a thing or two,” said Rose. “I know we should have gone up there to welcome them to the estate, but we’ve been quite busy getting settled in. I expect we’ll see them tomorrow at church.”

“How early is the service?” asked Colin again.

“My lord,” said Ava. “I believe we can all look forward to celebrating the meaning of the day in the company of family and friends once a year without thought to lost sleep.”

“Are you scolding me again, Miss Conway?”

“A tiny bit, my lord.”

“Good for you!” said Rose. “Colin, as soon as you begin to actually pay Miss Conway, can you give her a raise in wages? I do believe she has earned it.”

“Colin?” said Letty.

“Yes, my dear? Are you going to tease me, as well?”

“Oh, no. But I just remembered that I forgot to thank God for my lovely room. Should I start the blessing again?”

“I believe you can just add that as an addendum, silently.”

As Letty bowed her head in silent prayer, Colin whispered to Ava. “Are you going to scold me for that?”

“If given a chance, yes.”

Colin looked up to see Rose grinning at the two of them. *Great*. The last thing he needed was for Rose to get the notion into her head that he should court Ava. Especially since he wanted to so very much.

After dinner, they cleared their plates – positively horrifying both Stemple and Maude, who ushered them out of the kitchen as quickly as possible. Of course, Colin had a feeling Stemple would do every chore on the estate if it meant he could spend time alone with Maude.

“Colin!” said Letty, once they’d repaired to the sitting room for coffee. “What shall we do tonight?”

“Whatever you would like, sweeting.”

“Will you sing for us?”

“I would much rather have you sing for us. It has been an age since you have done so.”

“And she’s quite good,” said Rose. “Much better than I could ever hope to be. Please, Colin, sing a duet with Letty.”

Given Rose’s request and Letty’s subsequent enthusiasm, Colin could hardly refuse.

\* \* \*

As Ava listened to Colin and Letty sing, she was filled with what could only be described as a joyful sadness. Colin had a very good voice, despite his earlier protestations to the contrary, and Letty was quite impressive for her age. But it was the obvious love between them that touched Ava. She could understand why Colin would make sacrifices for his sisters. They obviously meant the world to him.

This was Ava’s first Christmas without her father and she missed him a great deal. She’d lost her home when he left this earth and she had not thought she’d ever find another. This certainly wasn’t her home. But she could borrow it for a while as she watched this family overcome the obstacles before them. Perhaps she could even help them do so.

She also wondered about Rose and Lord Grayson. Ava did not want to alert Colin to her suspicions yet, but she had a hunch Rose’s feelings for her neighbor were more than nostalgic affection. Ava might not be the girl’s governess, but she would keep an eye out to make sure this lord was worthy of Colin’s sister.

“Miss Conway!” said Letty. “You must sing with us now.”

“Lady Leticia, I thank you for the invitation, but I am quite without talent. I would much rather listen to you and your brother sing.”

“Oh, no,” said the earl. “I must insist you join us. And you, too, Rose.”

“But you know I am terrible at it,” said his sister.

“Nevertheless, you both shall join us in some carols. What did you say earlier, Miss Conway? Something about enjoying the meaning of the holiday without thought to my loss of sleep? Well, you both can enjoy it without thought to carrying a tune.”

Rosemary groaned, but joined them at the pianoforte. “If you insist. Come, Miss Conway, I cannot be expected to embarrass myself alone.”

“But...”

“That is an order, Miss Conway, or I shall cast you out in the snow,” said Colin.

Letty was horrified. “Colin, you wouldn’t really!”

He looked at Ava, but stage-whispered to Letty, “No, but do not tell Miss Conway that.”

“Fine,” Ava said, joining them. “But I have given you fair warning.”

“And so you have.” He began playing Good King Wenceslas, looking at Miss Conway in disbelief once she began singing, for she was truly terrible at it. But since Rose was, too, and Letty didn’t seem to mind, they continued singing for the rest of the evening, laughing heartily.

Even Jasper joined in, though from the sounds of it, perhaps more in protest than in enjoyment.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, after reading Letty a story before Colin tucked her into bed, Ava entered the sitting room to admire the Christmas greens. The fire was banked since everyone else had already gone to bed. She thought about how excited Colin’s sisters would be the next day. Not for the presents they would get – for even young Letty knew the family’s finances were not good. But because their brother was finally home.

Ava had to admit she looked forward to seeing Colin the next morning, as well. She knew she should not lose her heart to him any more than she already had. He was an impoverished earl who needed a rich wife. But while she had not found a future husband in him, she had found a friend.

She heard the creak of the door and looked up to see Colin standing there. He wore no waistcoat, jacket or cravat. His shirt was unbuttoned just enough to show a hint of skin. Suddenly the room seemed much warmer.

He was a remarkably handsome man. She did not know how he’d remained unmarried this long. While she did not know how many heiresses were on the marriage mart, she had to think at least a few of them would have taken one look at this man and done everything in their power to bring him to the altar. Had he really tried to find a wife?

His breeches hugged his legs and his shirt was as fitted as she’d remembered the night he’d tried on her gown at Clayton’s. But this was the first time she’d seen him with so few clothes since they’d arrived at the dower house, thanks to the warmth of the fire. If this was her reward, Ava would make it her personal mission to keep every fire in the house blazing, even if she had to cut down every tree in his grand forest to do so.

In the few short days she had known him, Ava had been looking for any weakness in his character. After all, no one could be as perfect as Colin Emerson appeared to be. But so far, all she’d learned was that he loved his family and that protecting others was second nature to him. He must have faults. Everyone did. And if she stayed in this house long enough, she was certain she would see them. But right now, all she saw was a good, honorable man who would sacrifice anything for those he loved.

And he looked very nice in breeches.

\* \* \*

As Colin had listened to Ava read to Letty, he'd thought about what it would be like to one day have his own daughter or son. He vowed to be the kind of father he never had. His children would always feel loved, safe and wanted. He wasn't even sure he could bear to send a son off to Eton, knowing what he did of that institution. And he needed a wife who would be the kind of mother his children deserved. Not like his mother. Though from what he'd learned from friends, few ladies in the *ton* took the time to truly raise their children, leaving most of the work to servants.

In his case, it hadn't just been the work that had been delegated, but also the love and encouragement. What little love he'd had in his life growing up, had been from his siblings and his nannies and nurses. When he'd left for school, he'd been sad to leave them behind, but not his parents.

He had to marry wealth for the sake of his sisters. But he also wanted to marry the right woman for the sake of his children. And, ideally, he would like a wife he could grow to love. A woman like Ava.

She was rarely far from his thoughts. In the short time he'd known her, she'd seeped into his soul. He'd had more than a few fantasies about what it would be like to remove one of her plain brown gowns to find the bounty beneath. Of course, with as cold as the dower house was, he'd also have to remove a few shawls, scarves and woolen socks. But he was confident he could persevere until he had her where he wanted her: naked in his bed.

Just the thought of it warmed him enough that he could take off his jacket and waistcoat, which was how he was dressed when he found her in the sitting room.

"Are you here to check on Father Christmas's arrival?" she asked when he entered the room. "I fear he has not yet come."

"That is just as well, since I might plant a facer on the man for not doing better by my sisters. I fear the only present they shall have is the story I wrote for them."

"They will cherish it."

"But how I wish I could give them something more. Though these days I often find myself wishing life could be different in so many ways."

She looked at him with her soft brown eyes. "It is Christmas Eve, after all. I believe everyone can dream a little tonight."

"Do you dream, Ava? How I wish you would dream of me."

He approached her slowly. He'd wanted to kiss her ever since she'd lent him her gown. No, it was before that. When he'd come upon her speaking to the portraits at Clayton's. Actually, as odd as it sounded, he thought he'd wanted to kiss her before he'd even met her. Because somehow, some part of him knew there was an Ava in the world. And, oh, how fortunate he was that he'd finally found her.

She watched him approach and he wasn't sure if she would turn and run. But she didn't. She remained as she was, and for all the world it looked like she wanted to kiss him as much as he wanted to kiss her. Though that was impossible. Surely no one had ever wanted a kiss this much.

He bent toward her and slowly brought his lips to hers. He knew there could be nothing more between them. But perhaps it was enough to just have this moment. Mayhap this memory would last a lifetime.

Who was he trying to fool? He wanted more than a kiss. Then a miracle happened as she put her arms around his neck. He pulled her against him, deepening the kiss.

Unfortunately, it ended all too soon, courtesy of someone entering the room. He pulled back from her and the look of disappointment on her face was almost worth breaking the kiss. Almost. He could see when she realized they were not alone. A very embarrassed Stemple was standing in the doorway holding a candle.

"Did you need something Stemple?" asked Colin, whose voice sounded a good deal deeper than normal.

"I was just checking to ensure the fire was banked," said Stemple, who was looking at everything except Colin and Ava.

"The fire is contained," said Colin. "At least the one in the grate is," he added for only Ava to hear.

"Excellent," said Stemple. "Then perhaps I should go on about my duties."

"You can do whatever you'd like, Stemple," said Colin. "As long as it is elsewhere."

"Very good, my lord. Good night."

Stemple quickly left, closing the door behind him.

Colin turned back to Ava. "Where were we?"

"Unfortunately, I was leaving. Happy Christmas, Colin."

He wanted to hold her to him and never let her go. Instead, he said, "Happy Christmas, Ava."

It was only after she left that he added, “my love.”

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

It was still dark when Ava's door opened and Letty ran in. "Miss Conway! It's Christmas!"

Ava opened bleary eyes to look at the girl who was jumping up and down near the bed. She was obviously quite excited, though given the temperature in the room, perhaps it was also her way of keeping warm.

"Rose told me to stay up here while Colin lights the fires." She leaned forward to whisper. "He also said a bad word when he stubbed his toe after I woke him up, but he thinks I didn't hear. And Stemple and Maude are getting things ready in the kitchen!"

"So I am the last one to arise. Aren't I the lazy bones?" said Ava, as she reached for her dressing gown and shawl. "Are you warm enough, sweetheart?" Then she took a good look at the girl. "Your feet are bare! We must take care of that immediately."

Ava took Letty back to her room and found woolen socks for her, while the girl chatted merrily about Christmas. Ava hoped she wouldn't be too disappointed by the lack of presents.

When they reached the sitting room, Ava caught her breath in surprise. There were candles everywhere and a fire burning. Maude and Stemple had brought in a pot of chocolate, as well as coffee and scones. Everyone was in their dressing gowns, and there were presents on the table. But Letty didn't seem to notice them. She simply went around the room, hugging everyone – including a surprised Stemple and Maude.

"Will that be everything, my lord?" Stemple asked Colin.

"No. I would like the two of you to join us."

"Us, milord?" asked Maude.

"Yes. For one thing, I have gifts for both of you."

To Ava's astonishment, he pulled out a small package for each.



“But milord, you don’t have any...” Maude stopped herself. “I mean, you shouldn’t waste your money on us.”

“Actually,” said Colin sheepishly, “I did not purchase either of your gifts, but I hope you like them.”

Maude opened her package to find a flagon similar to the one they’d shared on the road. Except this one was made of fine leather with a sterling silver cap. “My lord, you cannot give this to me.”

“Of course I can. I bought it during my university days. If you ever find yourself stranded on the road with weary travelers again – and I do so hope you won’t – you will have another flagon for your use.”

Stemple opened his package to find a silver pen. “My lord, I cannot accept this. It must be a family heirloom.” The earl’s crest was on the cap.

“And as the earl, I can do with it as I wish. I have long thought that avid readers are but writers waiting for the opportunity. You have your pen. You will find empty journals in the library. Explore your inner author. Please take it, Victor. I insist.”

Stemple was deeply touched by the earl’s gift, and Ava felt tears in her eyes. Colin was truly a thoughtful man.

Rose cleared her throat as if she, too, had been on the verge of crying. “Our brother James sent a package for Letty and myself, along with this note for Colin.”

Colin took the sealed letter reverently and placed it in his pocket. He’d mentioned he’d heard from his brother in America only infrequently. Ava wondered what news James had sent him.

Letty very carefully opened the large package, which was for both her and Rose. “It’s beautiful!” she cried as she lifted up two bolts of fabric.

“He sent a card,” said Rose. She read the enclosed note: “To my dear sisters. I thought you might like to make gowns with this material from America. I only wish I could see you in them. Perhaps one day soon. With love, your brother James.” Rose ran her fingers over the parchment as Letty spread out the fabric. One bolt was a green muslin, no doubt meant to complement Letty’s hair. The other was a bolt of white silk, suitable for a come-out ball.

“How beautiful,” said Ava.

Rose carefully examined the fabric. “Oh, Letty, I can make you a beautiful gown with this.”

Rose gave her sister two lengths of dark green ribbon, one for her hair and the other to trim a gown. Letty gave Rose a picture she'd drawn, though the subject matter wasn't quite apparent. The two girls gave Colin a knitted scarf and a handkerchief with his initials embroidered on it.

Ava could see just how touched he was. Colin was, for once, at a loss for words and his eyes were filled with tears. He had to clear his throat twice, but was still unable to speak.

So Ava stepped in. "Lady Rosemary, I believe I have caught you fibbing."

"How so?" asked Rose.

"You said you were not skilled at needlework, yet anyone can see that only a dab hand could have produced that handkerchief."

"Letty helped me," said Rose, while the girl beamed happily. "And I did take my time with it. I also believe tasks are easier to do when there is a purpose to them, rather than just an exercise to pass the time. Colin, do you truly like it?"

"They are the best gifts I have ever received," he said, as he hugged his sisters.

Ava felt like an intruder at the intimate family gathering, yet she was glad she was there to see this side of Colin. But she wanted to give them their privacy, so she began to steal away.

"Miss Conway," said Rose. "You cannot think of leaving. Letty and I have not forgotten you." She handed Ava a small package.

With trembling fingers, Ava opened it to reveal another handkerchief.

"I am afraid we were only able to embroider the 'A' in time," said Rose. "And it is a bit lopsided. But we will have time to fix it, if you do not mind giving it back to us for repairs."

Ava shook her head, not sure she had the words to convey what the gift meant to her. "No. It is perfect as it is."

"Just like its recipient," said Colin softly. "Now, I believe I owe Rose and Letty a story, though it will pale with what I was just given. Are you sure you want me to tell it?"

"Yes!" said Letty, sipping her chocolate. "Please, Colin. I want to hear the story."

"Very well. But you may change your mind at any time and put us out of our misery."

"I'm sure we'll enjoy the misery," said Rose, as she curled up in a chair by the fire. "Read us your story, Colin."

To Ava's surprise, Colin gathered several sheets of paper with writing on front and back. He must have spent quite some time on it.

“Once upon a time,” he began.

“I like it already,” said Letty.

“Thank you, sweeting. And it gets even better. Hopefully. Once upon a time...”

For the next quarter of an hour, Colin read the story to his sisters, though Ava, Stemple and Maude were also kept spellbound. It was the tale of a princess named Leticia and her journeys in a fairy land, complete with a wicked witch named Patton. Letty was enraptured and while Colin might not think so, he’d certainly given his sisters the very best of presents.

Finally, the story grew to a close as the happily ever after was ensured. Letty and Rose both hugged their brother. Ava caught Colin’s eye over his sister’s shoulder. It warmed her through and through.

“Look how late it is,” said Rose. “We must all dress if we are to make it to church on time.”

Half an hour later, all of them were walking to the village. It was a brisk day and Ava was glad she’d worn so many layers. Colin once again wore his warm boots.

“Are you eyeing my boots, Miss Conway?” asked Colin as he walked beside her.

“I am just pleased to see you have more practical footwear, now that we are in the country.”

“Yes, one must be practical in the country and fashionable in town, though often I am neither. I am sorry I was unable to give you your present at the house, Ava,” he said softly. “But here it is now.” He gave her an envelope bound by his seal.

Ava’s mouth was suddenly dry. “You’ve given me a present, my lord?”

“Not much of one. Just a poem. I thought you’d prefer to read it while you are alone.”

*A poem.* For her. One he thought she would prefer to read while alone.

“I do not know what to say, my lord.” The paper seemed to glow in her fingers. Letty glanced back to say something and Ava put the envelope in her pocket. How was she ever to pay attention in church when she had a poem in her pocket? “Thank you, my lord.”

“It’s Colin, Ava. And you should not thank me until you’ve read it. I’m not much of a poet.”

“I’m beginning to think you simply cannot recognize good writing. Your story was wonderful this morning. Your sisters loved it, as did we all.”

“My sisters are young, polite and easy to please.”

“And I am not so young, not always polite and quite discerning. You have a real talent for writing. Have you ever thought of pursuing it as a career? While I realize men of your class do

not have professions, it would be one way to earn money for your family without..." She hesitated, not knowing how to complete the sentence tactfully.

"Without having to sell myself in matrimony? I wish it were that easy. It would have to be an extremely good story because the family is very much in debt. And who would think of paying me for it? I do not believe Rose and Letty have much blunt, though I could probably shake it out of them if need be."

"There are publishers who would likely be interested in a book by an earl."

"Even if that were true, a book takes time to write. And time is one thing I do not have."

"What about writing for one of the broadsheets?"

"Like a common reporter?" Colin wrinkled his nose so much Ava had to laugh.

"More like an editorialist. You could write essays on the world according to the Earl of Ridgeway."

"And who would read this tripe?"

"Many people. I would."

"I suggest reading the poem first. You might discover I have less talent than you think."

Ava touched the envelope in her pocket once again, barely able to keep from reading it there and then.

\* \* \*

They weren't late for church, but they were among the last to arrive. Colin escorted all of them up the aisle, including Stemple and Maude. At first, people stared at Stemple's scars. But then the villagers turned their attention to Colin.

He should have expected it. It had been several months since he'd been home. He returned greetings, trying not to notice the calculating looks in the mamas' eyes. He hadn't thought he would still be sought after as a husband now that he and his family had retrenched to the dower house. But apparently even an impoverished earl had some appeal.

They finally reached the pew reserved for the family of the Earl of Ridgeway, only to find it occupied by strangers. And they seemed just as surprised to see him as he was to find them there.

"I do not believe we have met," said Colin, bowing.

“Edmund Babcock,” said a balding man of middle age. He spoke with a distinct American accent. “And you are?”

“The Earl of Ridgeway. But I see the vicar is waiting for us to be situated before he begins the service.”

Mr. Babcock looked slightly uncomfortable. “We thought since we were leasing the house, the pew came with it. We’re certainly paying enough.”

“Yes, well, I’ll see about boxing up the pew and having it delivered later today,” Colin said smoothly. He looked back to see that the ever efficient Stemple had found space for all of them in a pew toward the back of the church. “Until later, Mr. Babcock. Happy Christmas to you and your family.” He nodded to what appeared to be Babcock’s wife, son and two daughters. He could not be sure, but he thought the younger daughter winked at him.

Americans.

Colin escorted his family back down the aisle and into the pew, located as far from the small fireplace at the front of the church as possible. He took off his scarf and wrapped it around a protesting Letty. And thought again of how he was failing his family.

He remembered the vicar as a pompous, long-winded man who liked to hear himself talk. And nothing from his sermon contradicted that. He did take the time to acknowledge Colin’s presence, so that the few parishioners who hadn’t already stared at him could now get the chance. Those who already had took a second look.

Colin had nothing against a Christmas service – other than he was incredibly tired from spending much of the night finishing his story and rewriting Ava’s poem. He waited anxiously for her reaction. He hadn’t been too flirtatious, but it was impossible to think of the woman in any other way than romantic. He had bared a considerable amount of his soul and if she didn’t like it, well, the thought was more disturbing than it should be.

He also thought about the letter from James. He hadn’t wanted to open it in front of the girls in case it was bad news, so he’d read it quickly as he dressed for church. The letter had been short, as if written in a hurry. James had apologized for not sending him a present, but he knew Colin would rather have him spend the money on the girls – which was true. He said there was a legal matter which had come up about a small parcel of land he’d purchased and that he might need the family solicitor to look into it. He promised that another letter would be coming soon.

James was a proud man and rarely asked for help with anything, so Colin knew this land matter must be significant. He hoped things were going well for his brother. But more than anything, he wished James would come home.

Colin looked over to see that Ava had removed the envelope from her pocket and was running her fingers over it. Would she open it in church? He could see one finger rubbing against the seal, a little bit more each time. Finally it opened and she began to unfold it.

Letty must have heard the rustling, for she turned to Miss Conway and looked up at her. Letty wasn't admonishing her, exactly, but it was obvious that his sister thought everyone's full attention should be on the pulpit, regardless of how the man was droning on.

Miss Conway sheepishly put the envelope back in her pocket, then met Colin's eye. She blushed, then turned her attention to the vicar, as if her very salvation depended on it.

When the service finally came to an end – even Letty looked ready to leave – Colin escorted his family outside to greet the villagers who were likely curious about his return. But he didn't get the chance to speak with many of them since he was almost immediately hailed by Mrs. Babcock, who was escorted by her husband. There were, fortunately, no winking offspring in sight.

Mrs. Babcock curtsied to him. "Lord Ridgeway, it is indeed an honor to meet you. Mr. Babcock and I have been most anxious to make your acquaintance, have we not, dear?"

Mr. Babcock looked not all that anxious. "Of course, Mrs. Babcock. We have all been agog at the very notion." He shook Colin's hand rigorously, as if it were a dead limb in need of separation from a tree.

Colin turned to his sisters. "Lady Rosemary, Lady Leticia, may I present Mr. and Mrs. Babcock?" The girls curtsied dutifully.

Mrs. Babcock turned to Rose. "Lady Rosemary, it is such a pleasure to meet you. I'm sure you and my girls will have much in common. And Richard, of course, might interest you very much, indeed. And I see you have brought the youngest of you to church, as well."

Colin could feel Rose stiffen beside him for, judging by Mrs. Babcock's tone of voice, there was no doubt that she had heard rumors of Letty's parentage. The girl herself simply smiled, delighted to be included with the grown-ups and no doubt anxious to meet new friends.

Colin did not share her enthusiasm. "You must excuse us, Mrs. Babcock, for I do not wish to keep the ladies out in the cold any longer than necessary."

"But you have not yet met my daughters! I believe they are off with their friends. They are quite popular girls and are mobbed wherever they go. But I am sure they are not talking to anyone as important as you."

"Yet, I would hate to interrupt them just the same. Perhaps another time?"

“Do you have plans for tonight? Our cook has promised to make a veritable feast. And she is really quite talented, despite being British. But you would know that already, wouldn’t you? She was, after all, your cook.” At that point, Mrs. Babcock seemed to remember the somewhat awkward situation they were in. However, that did not stop her mouth for long. “Would you and your sister care to join us tonight?”

Colin could barely contain his temper at the snub of Letty. “Which sister would that be, madam?”

Mrs. Babcock seemed to realize she’d gone a bit too far, for she hastily added, “Lady Rosemary, of course. I assumed Leticia would be in the nursery. Is that not the custom in England?”

Unfortunately, it was, so Colin had to give the woman the benefit of the doubt, as distasteful as it was. “Our family is a bit unconventional. Lady Leticia accompanies us everywhere.”

“That is unconventional. Well, you and your two sisters must come to dinner tonight.” Though she looked like she’d just ingested a hothouse lemon.

Colin was wracking his brain for an excuse not to go and from Rose’s cool look, he imagined she did not want to attend, either. But poor Letty was excited, so he had little choice but to accept.

“Excellent!” said Mrs. Babcock. “We shall look forward to it.”

Colin most assuredly would not.

\* \* \*

Maude looked around her sitting room and still could not believe her good fortune. Two rooms, just for her. She hoped this wasn’t all a dream, for, other than missing her family, she had everything she could hope to have. She had an excellent position, even if she wasn’t exactly being paid for it. Her quarters were luxurious and the earl himself had brought her a small table and two chairs that very day. She could even ask Ava to join her for tea, if she liked.

Or she could invite Victor.

Maude had never had a sweetheart before. There’d been no time for one when she was working at the inn in her village. Some of the lads at Lord Clayton’s estate had certainly made their interest known. But Maude had never met so many rude men in her life. The things they’d said to her had made her blush to her hairline. She couldn’t imagine being married to any of them, so she certainly stayed clear.

But then there was Victor. He carried himself like a military man, which she knew he was from the night they’d stayed up talking. She’d felt safe with him from the very first. She wouldn’t have trusted any man at Clayton’s the way she did Victor. But she knew he would never hurt her or any woman. And the way he’d kept watch outside Ava’s room that first night had convinced

Maude that he was a very good man. He was also quite handsome. Yes, his scars were significant on the right side of his face. But there was certainly nothing wrong with the left side. And the more you got to know him, the less you noticed the scars.

She'd been embarrassed when she'd awakened on the farmer's cart to find she'd fallen asleep in his arms. Yet, she'd realized there was no place she'd rather be, so she'd shamelessly remained, pretending to sleep. And now, she and Victor were thrown together quite often for he was always helping her in the kitchen when he was not needed elsewhere

There was a knock on her open door. She turned to find the subject of her thoughts.

"Victor," she said, smoothing her gown. "Come in. You're my first guest. Unless...am I needed in the kitchen?"

"No," said Stemple as he entered, smiling. The scars made his grin crooked. Maude found it endearing. "The earl was in earnest. You are not to do any work today."

Maude had been astounded to find Lady Rosemary and Ava putting together a cold collation from the previous night's dinner when they returned from church. Even Lady Leticia had helped. They had been adamant that she wasn't to do any work on her day off, now and in the future.

"Would you like to sit down?" She pointed to one of the chairs the earl had brought her.

"Only if you will, as well. I brought a bottle of wine, a gift for the two of us from Lady Rosemary."

"That was very kind of her."

"I believe the earl's sisters are every bit as kind as he is."

Maude scowled. "Did you hear what some of those villagers were whispering about Lady Leticia? And on Christmas, of all days. I wanted to give them a piece of my mind, but I didn't want to call even more attention to their vile gossip."

"I wanted to do more than berate them, you can be sure of that." Stemple placed two wine glasses on the table. "How did you spend last Christmas?"

"We had half a day off for services, then we had to prepare the Christmas dinner. Some of Lord Clayton's friends were there, so the kitchen staff was up past midnight. It was a decent Boxing Day the next morn. But I would much rather be here without wages than back there for any amount of coin."



“As would I. Last year, I was sleeping in a disreputable tavern near the docks in exchange for keeping the peace. Christmas tends to bring out both the best and worst in people.” He poured them both a glass of wine. “My life has improved tremendously since that night.”

“So has mine,” said Maude, as she shyly met his eyes. “What shall we drink to?”

Stemple considered the question for a moment. “To a Happy Christmas and new beginnings.”

Maude smiled at him, as they touched glasses. “Happy Christmas, Victor.”

“Happy Christmas, Maude.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Colin hadn't really wanted to go to the Babcock's for Christmas dinner, especially since their invitation had excluded Ava. But it would have been rude of him to refuse the invitation and churlish of him to deny Rose and Letty a Christmas feast.

For her part, Ava had said she would happily entertain herself in the dower house library. He liked thinking of her there, curled up in a chair reading whatever it was she read. Probably some type of gothic novel. Or, perhaps a history tome from which she'd prepare Letty's lessons. It was impossible to tell with Ava, which was yet another thing he liked about her. She kept him guessing.

But here he was now, escorting his sisters to the manor they'd called home for most of their lives. He'd hated almost every minute he'd spent growing up there. But it was still odd to have others in residence.

Marvins was his usual arrogant self. Colin wondered how the butler felt working for Americans, for he could not imagine it being at all to his liking. Regardless of how well-mannered the Babcocks were, Colin felt sure that Marvins would still view them as provincial colonials better left on the other side of the Atlantic.

After a brief nod to Marvins, Colin and his sisters walked behind the man as he escorted them to the sitting room, where they were announced. Stemple had already done reconnaissance, so Colin was at least somewhat prepared for the visit.

Mr. Babcock was that uniquely American species, a self-made man, whose fortune was thought to exceed a million dollars – a sum almost impossible to imagine. He was from Boston and had made his fortune in shipping. But he'd come from humble beginnings and even in egalitarian America, Boston had its own version of the *ton*. Apparently, the families of that city had found the Babcock lineage wanting, so the family had come to England in hopes of snagging a title or two for their daughters.

Nora was the eldest of the three, though hardly into her dotage at three and twenty. She was also the reputed beauty of the family and Colin saw right away that her charms had not been overstated. She was quite beautiful, though a bit too perfect for his taste. He preferred his ladies to have twinkling eyes and a barely suppressed smile, not to mention being perpetually on the verge of making some impertinent remark. But this Nora was acceptable if you liked perfect looks.

There was another daughter, Myra – the church winker – who was the youngest at nineteen. While not as beautiful as her sister, she was certainly well-favored, even if the neckline of her gown was a bit too low.

The middle child, Richard, was good looking enough, but was currently staring at Rose in a way no gentleman should. Colin rather thought he'd have to start the evening by punching the bastard in the nose.

His goal was interrupted by the advance of Mrs. Babcock, who scurried across the floor toward him while also in a deep curtsy.

“Thank you so much for accepting our invitation, my lord. You honor us just by attending,” she said as she extended her hand to him, even as she continued to curtsy lower and lower.

He had no choice but to pull her back up. “The pleasure is all mine, I assure you. Thank you for inviting us, Mrs. Babcock.”

“Ridgeway,” said Babcock, as he used one hand to shake Colin's and the other to throw back a drink. Colin idly wondered if it was his brandy. “Glad you could make it. This accursed English weather isn't what we're used to.”

“Is it much different from Boston?”

“Ah ho! You've been looking into my background, have you? I like a man who does his investigating. You always want to stay one step ahead of the competition.”

Colin smiled, though he dearly wished himself home and in the presence of Ava. “Are we in a competition, sir?”

Mrs. Babcock tittered as if this had been a grand jest.

“Everything in life is a competition, Ridgeway,” said Mr. Babcock. “The sooner you learn that, the sooner you'll be out of dun territory.”

Colin could feel Rose bristle – he had not exactly been charmed by the comment, either – but just as his sister was about to say something, the Babcocks' eldest daughter stepped forward.

“You have the most beautiful curl to your hair, Lady Leticia,” said Nora. “I must know your secret. Do you use an iron on it or is it natural?”

Letty grinned. “I just wake up this way. Rose brushes my hair, of course. But it’s always curly, isn’t it, Rose?”

“It is, my love,” said Rose as she gently tugged one of her sister’s curls. She touched fingers with Nora, who’d proven herself to have much better manners than her parents.

“Nora Babcock,” said the girl with a smile.

“How do you do,” said Rose.

And that was how an awkward evening began. They were soon called into dinner, but instead of entering the British way, with Colin – the highest ranking gentleman – escorting Mrs. Babcock, Mr. Babcock simply pushed Colin toward the head of the table to sit beside him.

Colin could sense Mrs. Babcock’s irritation that he would not have the chance to sit next to her eldest daughter. But the woman contented herself with playing matchmaker between Richard and Rose, while Nora conversed with Letty.

Mr. Babcock spoke to Colin about his shipping ventures. Colin was usually interested in business matters, especially since he needed to find a way to provide for his family. But Mr. Babcock’s talk of business tended to be more about people he’d bested and enemies he’d vanquished, rather than talk of how to run a proper enterprise.

Colin kept an eye on his sisters. Letty chatted happily with Nora, who appeared attentive and even charmed by the girl. Rose was being pestered by Richard, who took every opportunity to let their hands touch. He was being much too forward and Colin wanted to intervene, but Rose did not appear flustered. Colin began to fear she was interested in the brazen young man until Rose “accidentally” spilled her wine on him, looking none too contrite as she did so. Colin had to bite back a laugh. That would, hopefully, cool the annoying young man’s ardor.

“Yes, Ridgeway,” said Mr. Babcock, chortling, “I found that anecdote particularly amusing, as well. Who knew it would take that little effort to bankrupt someone? Now, if you liked that one, you’re sure to love the story of how I...”

As Babcock continued talking, Colin’s mind wandered to far more entertaining thoughts, such as just what Ava was doing at that moment. Then he thought of what he would like her to be doing, namely reading a book from his own private library. Specifically an illustrated book about different sexual positions.

He would enter the library, surprising her. She would blush delightfully, then he would investigate just how far her blush extended. He would be very thorough, kissing a trail down her neck to her chest. He would like to rip her gown from her, except he couldn’t afford to buy her a

new one. His lack of funds really was most vexing. He would kiss her from head to toe, then back up again, lingering midway.

He was grateful the table hid his resultant reaction. He reminded himself that Christmas dinner was hardly the place to be fantasizing about Ava. He reluctantly shook off his thoughts, then tried to at least appear interested in what Babcock was saying.

An hour later, Colin was ready to stab the man with any of the sterling utensils embossed with the Earl of Ridgeway's seal. His seal. Babcock had barely drawn breath in his long diatribe, but at least Colin hadn't had to contribute much to the conversation, other than the occasional "most extraordinary." He glanced down the table to see how his sisters were faring.

Letty was happily engaged in conversation with Nora, while tucking into the trifle they'd been served for dessert. Colin reckoned it had been quite some time since she'd eaten anything so decadent. He wondered what miracles Maude could accomplish with their own meager larder.

Further down the table, Rose was still maintaining her distance from Richard, who didn't appear to be as chastened by his earlier soaking as he should be. Mrs. Babcock seemed to be doing most of the talking, though occasionally Myra would add a word or two.

Colin found it interesting that Mrs. Babcock had seated her younger daughter as far away from him as possible. He was also grateful to her for doing so.

Dinner finally drew to a close and Mrs. Babcock suggested that the men take their port in the sitting room so as not to be separated from the ladies. Mr. Babcock did not seem fond of the idea. He'd hinted that he had a few stories unfit for ladies' ears. Colin doubted he would care to hear them, either. So when Mrs. Babcock made her suggestion, Colin was quick to take her up on it.

In the sitting room, Nora was setting up a backgammon game to play with Letty. Richard was still importuning Rose and Mr. Babcock was lighting a cigar the size of a cucumber.

"Lord Ridgeway," said Mrs. Babcock. "Please have a seat on the settee. I do hope you will not join Mr. Babcock in smoking one of his vile cigars. I always make him go out to the terrace when he does so."

"While I smoke the occasional cigar, I believe I will forgo the pleasure tonight, madam."

"As well you should," said Mrs. Babcock. "It can be most vexing for a wife when her husband smells of cigar smoke."

"I daresay it depends on the husband," said Myra, who'd suddenly appeared next to Colin on the settee. "There are some husbands who would be worth any sacrifice."

Colin decided to drive the conversation in a less marriage-minded direction, post-haste. “How do you like the country, Miss Myra?”

“I detest it. There are no shops to speak of. We missed the last assembly and I am told there won’t be another for three months. And if one cannot dance, what is there to do?”

“This house has a well-stocked library.”

“And you are welcome at any time to come and borrow a book from it,” said Mrs. Babcock. “Although, technically, you do own them, so you wouldn’t really be borrowing. I daresay it matters naught since none of us are much for reading.”

“I find it an excessively dull activity myself,” said Myra, who’d somehow inched closer to him. He hadn’t noticed her move and would be impressed by her stealth if he didn’t feel quite so much like a fox to her hound.

Colin smiled at his hostess. “I believe I should check on Lady Leticia. She is a bit of a sharp at backgammon. I would hate to think she is abusing poor Miss Babcock.”

Mrs. Babcock lit up at the very notion, apparently believing it was Colin’s way of being in Nora’s company. Apparently Myra had the same thought because her sudden scowl was frightening in its intensity. Between the girl’s stealth and her intimidating glare, Colin could not help but think she would make an impressive soldier.

Colin made his way to his youngest sister. “Letty, please tell me you’re not cheating at backgammon. It would not be a polite thing to do to Miss Babcock.”

Letty shook her head. “Of course not. Though Miss Babcock is quite good and it might be my only chance of beating her.”

“Your sister is a very skilled player,” said Miss Babcock. “I was pleased to learn at dinner that she enjoys the game. I am the only one in my family who plays.”

“I’ll play any time you’d like,” said Letty.

“Thank you,” said Miss Babcock. “I do not know when I have had a more pleasing offer. But right now I am worried about your sister. I fear my brother has been monopolizing her. Would you please be a dear and check on her?”

Colin could have groaned at how neatly Miss Babcock had separated him from his sister. For Letty was so eager to please there was no doubt she would follow Miss Babcock’s directive. Of course, poor Rose did look like she could use the rescue. But then Miss Babcock did something completely unexpected.

“I must apologize on my brother’s behalf. He seems to be quite taken with your sister, but he is also a rather willful young man caught up in his own importance. I am afraid my parents have not done as much to temper his inflated sense of self worth as perhaps they should. I believe he feels most women should fall in love with him immediately. Since Lady Rosemary possesses sense, I cannot believe she would do any such thing.”

Colin looked over to see that Rose had indeed seized upon Letty’s appearance much as a starving man might latch onto a pigeon pie. “That was quite clever of you, Miss Babcock. But I must ask, are you always so plainspoken?”

“I believe one should speak the truth.”

“In all things?”

She considered the question for a moment. “Unless doing so would unnecessarily hurt another. For instance, when asked if a hideous gown is pleasing to the eye, the choice of whether or not to tell the truth should probably hinge on whether or not the lady has already bought the gown.”

Colin could not prevent his laugh because it sounded exactly like something Ava would say. “So if I were to ask what you think of my waistcoat, what would you say?” He’d purposely chosen a rather ugly one that had been a joke gift while at university.

“I would tell you it is lovely, indeed.” She smiled. “Unless, of course, you were only considering its purchase.”

“I believe you would get along quite well with our new governess, Miss Conway.”

Something flickered across Miss Babcock’s face for a moment, but it was gone so quickly Colin thought he might have imagined it. “I cannot say that I have ever truly conversed with anyone’s governess before, though your Miss Patton is now my sister’s chaperone.”

“Where is Miss Patton? I thought I might like to have a few words with her.” None of which could be repeated in the presence of ladies. Colin looked forward to telling the woman exactly what he thought of her treatment of Letty.

“Mama gave her the night off, so I imagine she is in the servants’ quarters.”

Colin took a perverse bit of pleasure in hearing the woman was in the servants’ quarters and not housed in the spacious nursery, as she had been before.

“I look forward to getting to know both of your sisters better,” said Nora.

“It is fortunate, then, that they live only down the drive.” Colin could not prevent a hint of bitterness from seeping into his voice, though he knew he was being most unfair. It certainly wasn’t Miss Babcock’s fault that his family had been forced to retrench.

But Miss Babcock surprised him once again. For instead of changing the topic to the weather or some other inane subject, she looked in his eyes and spoke.

“This is an awkward situation for all of us. As I understand it, the situation you find yourself in is not of your own making, yet you are the one who must solve it. And the move just before Christmas must have thrown your family into disarray. I am sorry for your misfortune, but hope the arrangement with my father will be of some benefit.”

And just like that, Miss Babcock was more honest in her speech than a ballroom of London misses.

“I see you are forthright in all things,” he said. “Except, perhaps, your opinion of ladies’ gowns.”

“And waistcoats. Now, shall we join your sisters?”

Which was how Miss Babcock surprised him yet again. She was moving to shorten her time with him. If she was, as Stemple had reported, in search of a title, she had just strayed considerably from the path of least resistance. For his title was respectable and she was already living in his house. He would have thought she’d have taken advantage of their time alone to ask his opinion of something, then tell him he was dreadfully clever or brave or whatever she thought he might like to hear. That’s how it would have happened in London. But not here.

He watched Miss Babcock glide across the room, then smile at Letty. He was struck again by just how beautiful she was. The symmetry of her features, her straight white teeth. Miss Conway’s teeth were very white, but there was one tooth that was just a bit crooked. Not enough to affect her smile. But he always noticed it and it made him want to run his tongue across it. While she was naked and in his bed.

“My lord,” said Myra, as she snuck up on him once again. If his senses had been this dull during the war, he surely would have been killed on the second day. Myra continued. “This is quite a beautiful house. But I must confess I still get lost when I roam the halls. Would you care to give me a tour?”

“While I am sure it is difficult to find one’s way at the beginning, I have no doubt you will soon...” Myra was edging ever closer to him and was only inches away from being pressed against him.

Colin stepped back with some haste. “I fear the hour is growing late and I should return home with my sisters. Lady Leticia woke us all quite early this morning.”

“You could always take your sisters home then return here,” said Myra.

“Thank you, but no.”



With just a look, Colin was able to indicate to Rose that he was ready to leave. She looked as anxious to go as he. Only Letty, who was thrilled to have new friends, seemed sad to leave. As Miss Babcock said her farewells to Rose and Letty, Colin found himself all but cornered by Mrs. Babcock.

“We do hope you will return soon,” she said. “An earl is a fairly important title, is it not? I mean, it is not a marquess, duke or prince, but I’m told we don’t have any of those in the neighborhood. At least not any who are eligible.”

“The Marquess of Grayson does make an appearance from time to time.” It was a cruel thing to do to Nathaniel Gage, who’d been a longtime friend to him and his brother. But Nate wasn’t there. Colin could make his apologies to him at a later time.

“But I am told that Lord Grayson is a drunkard and that his father the duke is fairly young and in rigorous health.” From her tone, Mrs. Babcock seemed to think “drunkard” was the least objectionable descriptor in that sentence.

“Ridgeway,” said Rose, and Colin knew she was not enjoying herself for she rarely called him by his title, “I fear the night air will soon be too much for me.”

That was certainly a clanker for Rose loved walking outside in all kinds of weather.

“I can have the carriage take you home if you like,” said Mrs. Babcock. “It wouldn’t do for either of you to get sick and die now that we have become acquainted.” Mrs. Babcock pulled Colin aside. “My lord, I hear tell you are looking for an heiress.”

“Why? Is one missing?”

That set the dreadfully blunt Mrs. Babcock off in gales of laughter. “And to think I was told the British have no sense of humor at all. No. I just wanted you to know that Nora is very well dowered. And, for that matter, Richard will earn a tidy sum working with his father.” Here she nodded at Rose. Colin expected the woman to nudge his sister, surely earning herself a stomped foot if she did so.

Colin stepped in to prevent it. “Thank you, Mrs. Babcock for a lovely dinner. I am sure we will see each other in the new year.”

“Do not wait until then!” Mrs. Babcock looked alarmed by the very notion. “Remember, we have all those untouched books in the library. Come browse at your leisure. You and Lady Rosemary both.”

“And Lady Leticia,” said Miss Nora sweetly.

“I suppose that cannot be helped,” said Mrs. Babcock as she looked at Letty dubiously.

Colin took Rose's arm just as she looked on the verge of striking Mrs. Babcock.

After taking their leave from the family, and Colin receiving yet another wink from Myra, they set off for home. Letty was in fine spirits, chattering on about how nice Miss Babcock had been. Colin had to admit she had been amiable. She'd also been beautiful, well-mannered and as unlike the rest of the Babcock family as it was possible to get. And, as Mrs. Babcock had noted, Nora was an heiress. A solution for his financial problems could be much closer than London. And it could likely be attained if he really put his mind to it.

Yet why did the very thought make him so wretched?

They reached the dower house and a very tired Letty climbed the stairs toward her room. Colin felt Rose's eyes upon him.

"Colin?"

"Yes, love?"

"We will find a way out of our problems without your making any sacrifices."

He embraced his sister. "Thank you, dear girl. But do not worry about me. I will be fine. I always am."

Rose looked like she wanted to say more, but Colin ran up the stairs to tell Letty a bedtime story.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was Christmas night and Ava was snuggled in an overstuffed chair in the library near the fire. She was re-reading Colin's poem one more time. She didn't need to. She'd all but memorized it. But she liked running her fingers across the parchment as she read the words aloud. Quietly. It wouldn't do for anyone to overhear. But some words needed to be said aloud in order to be fully savored.

And she was savoring these.

*"If I could but walk the fields with you when Spring has finally come. To breathe in the flowers covered in dew. To feel the warmth of the earth in which we sow our seeds. To plant the roots that will bind us here forevermore."*

Forevermore. Planting roots and being bound together. Ava realized how very much she would like to be bound to Colin. To his family. For she realized she'd come to love not just Colin, but his family, as well. She knew it was foolish to believe herself in love after such a short amount of time. She was too practical for such notions. But perhaps that was what love did to one. It invaded both the heart and the brain. It sent rationality and reason on holiday, leaving behind emotion and feeling.

Try as she might, she could not disabuse herself of the notion that she had been yearning for this for years. Perhaps her whole life. Colin had said he would always come home when his loved ones were waiting. She felt like she already was home.

If only she could stay.

She ran her fingers across the parchment, then pressed her lips against his words. She skimmed the missive down her cheek, her neck, her bosom, until it came to rest against her heart. She closed her eyes and thought of him in those fields.

Thusly engrossed, she did not hear the door at first when it opened. But when she finally did see Colin standing there, without jacket, waistcoat or cravat, she felt her breathing hitch. She quickly removed the parchment from her person.

He closed the door behind him, then locked it. “This time we won’t have Stemple interrupting us,” he said to her unspoken question.

“How was your dinner?”

“The Babcocks are interesting. Letty seemed to enjoy herself. Rose less so. I learned one hundred and one ways to drive your enemy to financial ruin. And I was invited to read my own books. More importantly, what do you think of your poem?”

He said it in a casual manner, but Ava sensed her answer mattered very much to him.

“I love it.”

There was a sense of relief to him that was almost painful in its intensity. How could he possibly think she wouldn’t adore it?

“Do you like any parts in particular?”

She could hardly keep from laughing, but he seemed for all the world like a schoolboy seeking approval. Though he was certainly no boy.

“I love it as a whole. But, yes, there are parts that I particularly enjoy.” There were parts she would reread for the rest of her life and blush while doing so. Parts she would dream about on restless nights. Not that the poem was improper. Well, it was a bit. But it wasn’t too improper, just the right amount.

The room seemed to shrink as he approached. She was still in her chair, still curled up. Yet everything was different.

“Did you like the part where I compared your eyes to the richest chocolate?”

“That part made me hungry.”

“You make me hungry, Ava.”

*Oh dear.* Ava was growing warmer by the minute.

“Did you like the part where I said I would like to walk these fields with you and lay you down in them?”

She nodded.

“Do you know what I would like to do with you in those fields?”

“You left that part out.”

“Are you criticizing my writing, Ava?” he asked with a grin.

“I am doing no such thing, Colin. I just think it is a pity that your poem was incomplete.”

“How would you complete it, dear Ava?”

He'd finally reached her chair and lowered himself to the floor in front of her. He reached up beneath her dress to find one stockinged foot. He began massaging it. Everything about Ava was centered on Colin's touch. She never knew her foot could feel so good. Nor did she realize the sensation could flood her entire body with feeling.

“I have not yet given you your present,” she said softly.

“I cannot imagine any better present than to have you here with me on a snowy night next to a warm fire.”

“I would like to get close to you, Colin. I want to touch you and have you touch me.”

For a moment, he said nothing. Ava was beginning to worry she'd made a fool of herself.

Finally, he spoke. “Ava. My sweet, darling Ava. I cannot do that. You know my heart is not mine to give, though you would surely have it if I could. And I cannot be so dishonorable as to seduce you, knowing I cannot marry you.”

“Then let me seduce you. Tomorrow will take care of itself. For tonight, it will just be you and I.”

Colin clenched his jaw. “I cannot do that. You deserve better than this. Better than what I can give you.”

“Perhaps I am the better judge of what I want and what I deserve. I will be no man's wife. I will have no children. I am destined to spend the rest of my life looking after other people's nurseries. Or working as a companion. Or as a chaperone. Or whatever work I can find. That is the life ahead of me, Colin. Is it too much to ask that I experience even some of what you alluded to in your beautiful poem? Or must I spend the rest of my life wondering what could have been?”

“How do you know you will not marry?”

“Because I will not marry you. I am afraid that in a few short days you have quite ruined me for other men.”

He said nothing. He simply continued running his hands along her legs and feet.

She put her hand on his shoulder. “Colin, I believe you like me. If your situation were different, we might have a future together.”

“We would, dear Ava. God help me, we would.”

“Then do you not also deserve this night? Wouldn’t you like to have this memory to think of occasionally? Don’t you want to remember me this way? For, Colin, one thing is certain. I cannot stay once you have a wife. It would be unfair to her and too hard for me.”

“But you cannot leave.”

“I cannot stay, Colin. Truly, I cannot. I will begin sending inquiries to employment agencies in the morning. But let us make the most of tonight.”

“I can’t take your innocence. That is a line I will not cross.”

“But are there not other...activities we could do that would allow us to be together without crossing that line?”

He nodded. Ava hoped he would acquiesce for she wanted to have this one night with him. She ached with wanting.

He looked around. “This is not the setting I would like,” he grumbled. “You deserve a featherbed and silk sheets.”

“We could go to your bedchamber.”

“No. For if I had you there, I would go too far. It will be difficult enough to stop as it is. Are you sure you want this? Absolutely sure?”

“Yes. Do you not want it, as well?”

“How can you even ask? How can you think I want anyone but you?”

He reached up and kissed her, then pulled her to the floor on top of him. He rolled her over, grabbing a pillow from the chair to place under her head. He surrounded her with warmth. He filled her with joy.

She’d worn a dress that was easy to unfasten, hoping this might happen. She did not know what she was doing and hoped her inexperience would not put him off. She was so excited she could barely breathe.

He quickly unfastened her gown, lifting her so he could pull it down her shoulders. He kissed her through her plain cotton chemise. Oh, how she wished she had something prettier for him to see.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, as he pressed his mouth to her breasts, “and delicious.”

She tried to pull his shirt off him, but could barely make her limbs function. “Off,” she said. “Take this off.”

“I would much rather undress you, love,” said Colin, as he continued his exploration of her breasts.

“Please,” she said.

“What is this, Miss Conway? You are asking me to do something and even saying please? I thought such civility was beyond you.”

“Hush! Remove your shirt now.”

“That is much more the Ava I know and love,” he said.

Ava’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of the word “love.” But of course he did not mean it. He didn’t love her. Nowhere in his beautiful poem had he said such a thing. He was a practiced rake – at least she assumed he was, for he was extremely skilled and how could a person become so except through practice? He likely used the word “love” with every lady he seduced. She mustn’t read too much meaning into it. And if she repeated that admonition enough perhaps it might take effect.

But probably not.

Colin likely didn’t realize he’d used the word, for he was engaged in removing his shirt and pulling off her gown.

He lowered himself to her again and Ava was able to run her hands over the bare muscles of his back. He groaned in a gratifying manner and she was pleased that she was not the only one so affected by their lovemaking.

They blended together, body and soul, as they lay on the floor kissing and exploring. He’d opened her chemise to her waist but for some reason had not removed it. Perhaps it was a last gesture to her maidenhood, but she would just as soon jettison it if it meant being closer to Colin.

She loved this man. Very much. And she knew there would be no other. It had nothing to do with a lack of opportunities to meet eligible men in the future. She would want no one else. Only Colin.

She would leave this place while she could. She had no wish to dishonor his future bride by continuing on in his employ. But tonight she would have this.

She deserved it. He deserved it.

They deserved to be together if only for one night.

\* \* \*

Colin was in agony. Not just because his body was afire with passion and he wanted nothing more than to make love to Ava, and not just partway. He wanted to join with her as one and remain that way. Forever.

But he had not just himself to consider. He had his sisters. And Ava, as well. If he married her, the future would be grim for all of them. He was not sure he could even keep food on the table. They would lose every bit of the estate that was not entailed and there was still a possibility he would end up in debtors' prison. That wasn't a life for Ava. To toil away, scraping by, when she might have a husband who would provide for her. For he had no doubt that as soon as she left here, she would meet a gentleman who would recognize her for the treasure she was. He would marry her. They would make love morning, noon and night. She would make him laugh and give him children who would be every bit as impertinent as their mother. And they would all live happily ever after. It was what she deserved.

And the very thought of her doing that with another man was making him miserable.

He only had tonight. He would not take her innocence, no matter how he burned to be inside her. He would do nothing that would prevent her from having the life she deserved, the damned husband she deserved.

She was beneath him, heated, kissing and stroking him as if there were no tomorrow. Because for them there couldn't be a future. He took a leisurely stroll down her body, past the beautiful breasts, skimming her stomach. He took a turn and explored her right leg. The firm thigh, down to the rounded calf. He discovered her foot was ticklish. He tried her left foot to find it equally ticklish, almost receiving a kick in the chin as he did so.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I couldn't help it."

"What if I were to kiss your foot for another few moments?"

"I believe I would kick you again and not apologize."

"Then I believe I should continue my journey upward."

He kissed his way up her other leg, enjoying the way she squirmed beneath him. As he reached the top of her leg, he moved over to the heart of her.

"Colin! You shouldn't be there!"

"Hush, sweetheart. I am exactly where I should be. Exactly where I want to be." He nuzzled her gently, then smiled as her hands came down on his shoulders. He could tell she was torn between pushing him away and pulling him toward her. He took the decision away from her as he burrowed in to the heart of her, reveling in her gasps of pleasure.



He wanted to taste her. He needed to taste her. He needed to remember everything about this night. But he had to make sure he did not go too far. For if he truly made love to her, he would have to marry her. He would have no alternative. But he couldn't marry her. Could he?

Could he?

He breathed her in, kissed her into oblivion. And when she cried out with her release, he was with her in his own way. The only way he could be.

She was still breathing hard as he lay down beside her and pulled her head onto his chest. He reached for the nearest clothing – hers, he believed, but was beyond caring – and covered her with it. She lay boneless in his arms and though he was harder than he'd ever been, he gave no thought to going further. Being with her like this was enough. It had to be.

“Colin,” she whispered, as she pulled a shaky hand up to caress his cheek. “Colin, what was that?”

“Something it was my pleasure to give you, love.” *Love*. It felt so right to call her that. “It was something I wish I could do forever.”

“But you did not...I mean, there was no pleasure for you.”

“On the contrary, I shall dream of this night for the rest of my life. It was sublime.”

She must not have believed him, for he saw her hand reaching for him. Her slender fingers were about to press against his cock, when he caught her hand.

“I would love nothing more,” he said, barely able to get the words out, given the way his body was rebelling. “But I am afraid I will not be able to stop if you do. And I will not do that to you. To us. Please let us remain as we are. A moment frozen in time. Before regrets. For it would be more lonely than I could ever imagine to make love to you fully, then never do so again.”

For a moment, she remained as she was. Reaching for him, but held back by him. Then she slowly pulled her hand away and once again placed her head on his chest. They were silent for several minutes. He could not be sure, but he believed he felt one of her tears drop down to his chest.

It was just as well, since he was crying himself.

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

The days following Christmas were busy in the dower house. Ava sent inquiries to employment agencies in London and even one in Scotland. Colin tried not to take it personally that she would try to move that far away from him. Though he also knew he would always be tempted to find her, no matter where she was.

Colin sent a few inquiries of his own to London, to a few men he'd gone to school with. While the vast majority of the students at Eton and Oxford had been from the aristocracy, there had also been a few sons of solicitors and other men of business. Colin had always made a point to make them feel welcome, especially since he knew Clayton and his ilk loved preying on anyone they considered beneath them.

And they'd considered everyone beneath them.

But perhaps one of those men now engaged in commerce could help him by offering employment. Perhaps it was possible to restore his family's finances without having to marry for money. Perhaps a future with Ava was possible.

Dear sweet, passionate Ava. By unspoken agreement, they'd avoided being alone with each other since their night in the library. Ava had begun her lessons with Letty, so they could usually count on his youngest sister being an unwitting chaperone. Rose, however, was another matter. She was intent on matchmaking, for whenever Rose would come upon the three of them, she would find some excuse to draw Letty away. A part of Colin applauded her actions, for the more time he spent with Ava, alone or in company, the less he wanted to be apart from her. And he suspected Rose knew that.

It was ironic, then, that it was Rose herself who inadvertently convinced him he must marry for money.

A week after the interlude in the library, Colin had entered the sitting room to find Ava preparing Letty's lessons. She'd been avoiding the library, just as he had. Neither needed a reminder of what had transpired there.

“Ava,” he said.

She looked up and the moment their eyes met he was seized by the urge to kiss her senseless. To run his hands over every part of her. To make her his.

“Ava,” he said again, for he couldn’t think of anything to say other than asking her – no, begging her – to let him make love to her.

But just then Rose entered the room. “I’m so glad to find you both here. I am done with Letty’s new gown and she would like to show it to you.”

Letty entered, beaming from ear to ear and wearing her new gown made from the fabric James had sent from America. The green was the perfect complement to her hair. Colin noticed this gown was much longer than the ones she’d previously worn, perhaps even too long. No doubt Rose had left plenty of material since this one would have to last a while.

“You look beautiful, Letty,” said Colin.

“Yes, you do,” said Ava. “And Lady Rosemary is an accomplished *modiste*.”

“Perhaps I should have my own shop on Bond Street,” said Rose. “‘Twould be an easy life if all my customers were as beautiful as Letty.”

“I can hardly wait to see the gown you make for yourself,” said Ava. “If you need any help, I’ll be happy to assist.”

Rose straightened the bow on Letty’s dress. “Thank you for the kind offer, Ava. But I am sure I can muddle through.”

“Rose doesn’t have the material anymore,” said Letty. “She sold it to Mrs. Watkins in the village.”

“You what?” asked Colin.

“Oh, dear,” said Rose. “I was hoping you wouldn’t find out. It was terribly generous of James to send it. But the fabric was so fine, I decided we would get much more use out of it in credit from Mrs. Watkins. And when would I ever have an occasion to wear such a grand gown?”

“At your come-out!” said Colin.

Rose sighed. “Letty, why don’t you go show Maude and Stemple your new gown? I am sure they would love to see it.”

When Letty left, Rose turned to Colin, once more the voice of reason and practicality. “A Season is such a waste of money.”

“It is your birthright!”

“Perhaps I should leave,” said Ava.

“Ava, please stay,” said Rose, “and help me talk some sense into my stubborn brother. The cost of a Season goes well beyond one dress. We simply cannot afford it, Colin, regardless of how hard you have worked to get us out of dun territory. Furthermore, I do not want a Season. At least not right now. There’s nothing to say I can’t have one another year, if you still feel it is necessary.”

“But you deserve the chance to have fun like other girls.”

“I have never thought the Season sounded even remotely fun. Have you ever enjoyed it?”

For a moment, all Colin could do was sputter like a fish, though an elegant one. “That is not the point. Ladies are supposed to enjoy the Season. Gentlemen merely tolerate it.”

“So the best I can hope for would be to find a gentleman who would barely tolerate my existence.”

“You would have gentlemen swarming all over you. Which, now that I think of it, isn’t at all to my liking. But how will you meet a husband if not in the social whirl of the *ton*?”

“How will I meet one in an atmosphere where a proper lady is never supposed to speak her mind or act as she normally does? I daresay any husband I would capture under such circumstances could surely sue me for luring him into a contract under false pretenses. And what makes you think I must go to London to find a husband? Perhaps I have already picked one out.”

Colin did not know what to say. It was hard to argue about the artifice of the *ton*. It was one of the things he hated the most about the world they’d been born into. But what the devil had she meant about already picking out a husband? And it wasn’t just Rose’s declaration that had been odd. There had been a speculative look on Ava’s face that made him think she knew his sister better than he did. Colin made a mental note to ask her about it later.

There he was again, trying to find ways to be alone with Ava when Rose was sacrificing her own future. He’d seen her admiring the white silk, yet she’d selflessly sold it to that gossip Mrs. Watkins to help provide for the family. Colin had to do his part, which meant seriously considering Miss Babcock as a bridal candidate.

Mrs. Babcock had already made her plans for his future clear. Not a day went by that she didn’t send a note inviting him and Rose to the house for one event or another. Rose had told Colin she had no desire to return. While she’d liked Miss Babcock during the little time she’d spent with her on Christmas, a visit to Nora would mean time spent with Richard and Myra. Rose felt the unpleasantness of the latter more than cancelled out any pleasure in the former.

Colin understood – and shared – Rose’s views about Richard and Myra. But he had every reason to accept Mrs. Babcock’s invitations. For, as prospective brides went, little fault could be found with Nora Babcock. At least from what little he knew of her.

Yes, she was American, which meant she would receive snubs from some of the haughtier members of the *ton*. But Colin had never cared about bloodlines. Her heritage would not bother him in the slightest.

Her family, however, was slightly more problematic. He didn’t know if there was a polite way of inquiring whether her family planned to return to America on a, hopefully, permanent basis.

But as Ava began sending more and more queries to employment agencies with almost insulting haste and his own to London had so far gone unanswered, Colin began the process of getting to know Miss Nora Babcock. He wanted to see if they could form a friendship that would be the foundation of a marriage. For, while he knew he would never find a love match when his heart would always be Ava’s, he could never enter into a marriage with someone he did not even like. Perhaps he would discover some hidden fault of Miss Babcock’s that would so repulse him that he could put from his mind any type of courtship.

He knew he should not wish for it, but could not help it. For, after all, he was a besotted fool for Ava.

\* \* \*

“Stemple,” said Rose, as she entered the kitchen to find him and Maude laughing about something even as Maude prepared dinner and Stemple polished the silver. Rose was quite fond of them both. She hoped they would stay even after they married, though a betrothal had not yet been announced.

Men could be such slowtops.

“My lady,” said Stemple. “How may I be of assistance?”

“There is a favor I must ask of you. Please stop posting Miss Conway’s letters. At least the ones to employment agencies.”

Stemple looked a bit uncertain. “But, Lord Ridgeway gives me the post to take to the village nearly every day.”

“Yes, and while you may certainly continue to post his correspondence, please refrain from doing so for Miss Conway.”

Stemple grew only more confused. “If I might ask, my lady, has Miss Conway done something to anger you?”

“Not at all. I like her very much, indeed. Which is why you must stop posting those letters.”

“We don’t want Miss Conway to leave,” Maude explained to Victor. “If you keep posting those letters someone will hire her and she’ll be forced to go.”

“But his lordship asked me to do so.”

“I know you are very dedicated to Lord Ridgeway,” said his sister. “But the last thing my brother needs is for Miss Conway to find employment in London or anywhere else. The next time Miss Conway hands you a letter for the post, simply give it to me, instead. They’ll both thank us in the end. I like the way you are doing your hair, Maude. It is very pretty. Don’t you think so, Stemple?”

“Uh, of course, my lady.”

“And you’ll do what I ask?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Excellent!” said Rose as she smiled at both of them and departed.

Stemple could only watch her go. “I don’t feel right disobeying his lordship,” he said.

“But you want Ava and his lordship to end up together, don’t you?”

“Yes, but...”

“There’s no ‘but’ about it, then. Do as Lady Rosemary says.”

Maude turned back to her work as Stemple was left to wonder once again about the complexities of love.

\* \* \*

Colin did not know what was wrong with him. He was alone with Miss Babcock in the sitting room in the manor. Her mother had left them alone with the door cracked only the slightest amount. Nora was a beautiful woman, dressed in a gown that showed off her features admirably. Myra wasn’t the only one in the family with an impressive bosom, though Nora’s was a good deal more covered.

A man intent on marrying the beautiful heiress at his side would have tried to kiss her by now. He might even have tried to compromise her. With her eager mother hovering just outside the door, he had a feeling it could be done easily.

But Colin didn't feel like kissing her. All he wanted to do was go back to the dower house and kiss Ava. However, he had to at least try to get to know Miss Babcock. He would start with simple conversation.

"Do you miss America?"

Nora angled her head as she considered the question. The afternoon sun draped her features in a dazzling light. "I miss some of the people and the country itself can be most beautiful. But I daresay I am quite happy here in England, as well."

"My brother has written of the resilient American spirit that believes no obstacle is too great to overcome. It is an admirable trait."

"But there is also something to be said for British traditions. I imagine there are doors open to you for no other reason than your birthright."

"That is true and I will be the first to admit that being an earl does give one advantages. At the same time, there are activities which are harder to undertake when one is in the peerage, such as having a profession."

Miss Babcock's lovely eyebrows rose in surprise. "You would like to have a profession?"

"Quite frankly, I never thought about it all that much before discovering the extent of my family's financial difficulties. The closest I ever came was when I was a soldier. I joined primarily because I felt it was my duty, though I must admit I gained some satisfaction from knowing just how much it displeased my father. But I found I did not care for war and certainly would not have wished to make a career of it."

"I imagine it would be dreadfully difficult work. But, you were an officer. They had a much better time of it, did they not?"

Colin thought back to his service. Yes, the officers had a much better time of it than the rank and file. There were some officers who were so far back from the front lines they might as well have been in England. But he had not been one of them. He'd preferred being with his men, leading them into battle. The greatest hardship had not come from the sleep deprivation or terrible food or the filth and disease. It had not even come from the risk of dying or being horribly injured. No, the worst part of being an officer had been watching the men in his command mowed down in battle, dying agonizing deaths.

He'd spent time with his men. Perhaps too much, for it was a rare night even now when he did not wake up at least once with thoughts of the heroes who never returned home to their sweethearts, wives and children. He spoke to few people about his memories and, somehow, could not envision doing so with Miss Babcock, no matter how many years they were wed.

But he could talk to Ava about it. He could talk to Ava about anything.

“My lord?”

Colin realized he hadn't said anything for a significant amount of time. But that's what thoughts of Ava did to him. “My apologies, Miss Babcock. My mind wanders from time to time. Are you looking forward to your time in London later this year?”

“Yes I am, though Miss Patton says both Myra and I have a great deal to learn if we wish to do well in Society.”

“Miss Patton certainly has strong opinions, does she not? I am sure you and Miss Myra will do quite well.”

“Will Lady Rosemary have her come-out soon?”

“Unfortunately, I believe she will not do so for at least another year. She seems perfectly content to remain at home with Lady Leticia, though now that Miss Conway is here to look after our youngest sister, perhaps Rose will consider spending more time in London.”

“I can think of nothing better than sharing my London debut with your sister.”

“Perhaps Miss Conway can convince Rose to take her bow, after all.”

“You seem to hold Miss Conway in high regard.”

“Do I?”

“You mentioned her twice in as many sentences. And when I played backgammon with Lady Leticia the other day she told me how you met Miss Conway at a house party, then brought her home.”

Colin inwardly groaned. He would need to have a talk with Letty on better ways to discuss Miss Conway's arrival at the dower house. “I assure you it is not what you are thinking. Miss Conway was the governess for the sisters of an acquaintance. Her employment situation was not what it should be, so I hired her to teach Letty.”

“Yet you already had a governess.”

“Miss Patton had vacated the position.”

“You did not know that at the time.”

“Is there a purpose to your interrogation?” While Miss Babcock had asked all of her questions in the same sweet voice she'd been using the past hour, Colin could not help but be reminded of his time interrogating prisoners of war.



“Pray forgive me, my lord. I certainly did not intend for my questions to be taken as anything other than an interest in your humanitarian efforts. I have heard of your badly disfigured valet. You are obviously a man who feels compelled to help the needy.”

“Actually, it is Stemple who has been of invaluable assistance to me. He is most capable and a valued friend. But thank you, Miss Babcock, for attributing admirable qualities to me. I find I never have enough. Now if you’ll excuse me, I promised Lady Leticia I would read with her. I do not wish to be late.”

“Of course not,” said Miss Babcock, who nonetheless looked irritated that he would leave so soon. “Pray give my best to both your sisters. They are such pleasant companions.”

“Yes, they are. Good day, Miss Babcock.”

“Until we meet again, my lord.”

As Colin made his way back home through the snow, he was not quite certain why he was so out of sorts. Each time he was in Miss Babcock’s presence he was reminded anew of her beauty and exquisite manners. She would fit in well among the matrons of the *ton*, though some would be jealous of her looks and others would find fault with her lineage while envying the blunt that came with it.

And though they had, of course, never discussed it, he had a feeling Miss Babcock could settle happily into a typical *ton* marriage where the husband and wife had separate interests to the point of taking lovers. He would want her to wait until after she delivered the heir and the spare, but then he would have no problem with her taking as many lovers as she wished, provided she was discreet, just as he would be.

Then he thought of being married to Ava. There was no way in hell he would ever allow her to take a lover, nor would he ever want to take one himself. The very idea of the two of them involved with others was ludicrous. It would destroy his very being to even think of her with another man.

No, their marriage would be quite unfashionable for he would keep her on the estate with him except for when he had to go to town for his service in the House of Lords. Even then, he couldn’t see himself subjecting her to the pettiness of London ballrooms. They would likely hole up in their townhouse, make love, read and make love again. Perhaps he would write her another poem. She seemed to like the last one well enough.

But then, he remembered. There was no townhouse. No home at all. When next he was called to Lords there was no place for him to stay because there was no money.

Damn the carelessness which had led him to this position. How he wished it could be different. But that’s all he had now. Empty wishes and dreams. And you couldn’t raise a family on those.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Victor lay awake as he so often did. It was impossible to fall asleep with Maude just down the hall. He had to distract his mind or he would end up taking himself in hand once again, dreaming of making love to her. He was a hopeless, besotted fool.

He took some comfort in the fact that he wasn't the only one in the house. Both Lord Ridgeway and Miss Conway were in love, though at present their situation seemed only slightly less hopeless than his own. When Lord Ridgeway had returned from the manor house that afternoon he'd holed up in the library yet again. When Stemple had taken him tea, the financial ledgers were open, yet pushed aside. No doubt Lord Ridgeway had been trying to make the numbers add up in a way that would allow him to wed Miss Conway.

His lordship was still sending queries to publishers and broadsheets and anxiously awaiting a favorable response. He said he'd have another package ready to be sent with the morning post. That, of course, had made Stemple feel guilty about not posting Miss Conway's employment queries. He knew Lord Ridgeway did not want Miss Conway to leave, but Stemple could understand why she would wish to do so. He himself dreaded the day when Maude fell in love with someone. He could not bear to be there, though he wanted her to be happy.

Maude. Lovely, sweet Maude.

There was a knock on his door. It was probably Lord Ridgeway, with the packet for the post. Stemple donned his dressing gown, then opened the door only to find Maude standing there.

She was wearing a dressing gown over what appeared to be a white cotton nightgown, along with woolen socks. Stemple couldn't see any more of her than he could when she was dressed for work. Yet, she was there in her night clothes and his imagination was running amok.

She cleared her throat. "I've come to inquire about the salve."

At first her words did not register with him. "The salve?"

"Yes, the salve I gave you before we left Clayton's. For your scars."

“Yes,” he said, standing there dumbly. “I still have it.”

“Good,” she said. She remained there for a moment. “May I come in?”

“Oh! Of course.” He ushered her into his sitting room, then looked around to see how she would view it. Everything was neat and in its proper place. It was part of his military training to ensure everything was put away. Not that he had all that many belongings. His room was devoid of any knick-knacks or feminine touches. He kept the pen the earl had given him in a place of honor on his bedside table, along with the journal Lady Rosemary had found for him. They were both next to the pot of salve Maude had made.

The salve.

“I have the salve in the...” He gestured to his bedchamber, unable to saying the word “bed” in her presence.

Maude nodded. “Has it done any good? The salve?”

“I haven’t had the chance to use it yet.” In fact, he’d wanted to keep it intact. It was his most prized possession. A gift so considerate that he could not bear to think it would one day be used up. He wanted it to last forever, just as it would always remain in his heart.

“It won’t do you any good if you don’t use it,” said Maude. “Let me put some on you.”

She walked toward his bedchamber, stopping at the threshold, as if some barrier were there. But after a moment’s hesitation, she entered his bedchamber, looking around her.

“It’s on the table,” said Victor, as he followed her in. *Good Lord*, she was in his bedchamber, the place he’d dreamt of her being. And she wanted to put the salve on him, which would require her touching him. The very thought made him weak at the knees.

“Perhaps, you should sit and let me rub this on your shoulder,” said Maude, her voice quivering just a bit.

He had to get a hold of himself before he fell to his knees and begged her to stay. Not to have relations. Just to continue talking to him in this room, dressed as she was. Then he realized just what she was asking. “Maude, you do not wish to see my shoulder. The right side of my body is disfigured down to my waist.”

She lifted her chin. “The only thing I am concerned about is making you feel better. As I told you, this salve helped my sister’s scars so they didn’t hurt so much. I believe it can do the same thing for you. I assure you that the sight will not affect me other than to feel bad about what you went through.”

“I do not wish for anyone’s pity,” he said softly.

“I won’t give you none. I want to help you, but it appears you’re too proud or stubborn to let me. Now, are you going to sit down and bare your shoulder or do you want to waste this salve?”

He thought about refusing, but then she would leave. So, Victor sat on the bed, turned away from her and slowly bared his shoulder. He was exceedingly nervous for two reasons. One was that he didn’t want her to turn away from him in horror. Or, really, in any manner. He did not want to spoil this moment.

He was also nervous to have the woman he loved touch him in such an intimate way. For though there was certainly nothing sexual in the situation, it was exceedingly intimate. He rarely allowed anyone to see his scars. Even on the few occasions when he’d tried to escape from his loneliness by visiting prostitutes, he’d kept himself fully clothed. He was also glad he’d always taken measures to prevent disease. His scars were bad enough. He hardly wanted to add pox disfigurement to the mix.

He waited to feel her touch. And when it finally came, gently, bathed in the soft salve, he almost wept. He’d watched Maude’s hands cook and clean. He’d brushed against her hands in the course of their work. Now he could feel her fingers on his shoulder rubbing the salve into his skin. She ran them over him in a gradually widening circle.

“You’ll let me know if I hurt you, won’t you?” she asked.

He was already aching, but it was not his shoulder in agony. Her touch was having an effect on a very different part of his anatomy, for he was already hard and growing more so with each stroke of her hands. Thank goodness he was wearing his dressing gown, though he hoped she would not look down at the offending part of him.

She moved her hands down his arm. “The scars here aren’t as thick as the others. The ridges aren’t as hard. If we make a habit of rubbing your arm, you may find it easier to use.”

“You’re planning on making a habit of this?” he asked, his voice much deeper than normal.

“I would like to. Unless you don’t want me to.”

He wanted her to keep touching him, anywhere, anytime. It had been so long since he’d felt a woman’s touch. And certainly never from a woman he cared about this much. For while he and his former fiancée had engaged in some gentle exploration before he’d left for the war, he now realized he hadn’t cared for her the way he cared for Maude. The way he loved Maude.

She ran her hands down the right side of his back, rubbing the salve into his scars, but also venturing onto the smooth healthy skin, made muscular from years of hard work.

“You have a fine back,” said Maude in barely more than a whisper.

And he was barely able to keep from pulling her to him. “You have a gentle touch. Your sister was very fortunate that you were able to help her like this.”

“I’m not thinking of my sister right now.”

“What are you thinking about, Maude?”

“You, Victor.”

Stemple tried to keep his breathing steady. Tried to keep from hoping for something he could not have.

“Victor, do you know what I would like?”

He shook his head, unable to speak. He was glad she was still behind him for he didn’t think he could look at her without baring his soul in his eyes.

She was now tentatively running one hand down his chest from behind. “I would like you to kiss me, Victor.”

His hands began to shake. “You don’t know what you ask, Maude.”

She stilled. “Are you saying you don’t want to kiss me?”

He could sense the embarrassment in her question. He was certainly making a hash of this. “Not at all,” he quickly replied. “But, Maude, what you ask as an innocent girl, curious about men, is not so innocent for me. I would not be able to kiss you and forget about it. There can be no light flirtation between us.”

“Who said I wanted light flirtation?” She sounded...irritated. She rounded the bed to glare at him.

She was definitely irritated.

Stemple quickly placed his hands in his lap to try to hide his rock hard erection.

She continued. And she was not best pleased with him. “Do you think I make a habit of going to men’s bedchambers for ‘light flirtation’ as you call it? Do you think so little of me?”

“Of course not! But, Maude, you could have any man you wanted. Why would you come in here and ask to kiss me?”

“Because I’m in love with you, you daft man!” Her eyes were blazing and her hands were planted firmly on her hips. “How many more hints do I have to give? Now, if you don’t feel the same way toward me, you’d best say it now. I know I can’t read and you’re a butler and I’m

naught but a cook's assistant. But I love you, Victor Stemple. And you'll not make me feel a fool for telling you. I can take your saying no. I'll leave and be on...."

The rest of what she was going to say was lost, as he pulled her onto his lap and kissed her senseless. She loved him? Maude loved him? He had to be dreaming. If so, he had no wish to awaken.

He tried to keep a tight rein on his passion. Tried and failed. He was devouring her. And Maude was keeping up with him. Finally, he drew back to take a breath. "Maude. Dear, sweet Maude. You should leave this room right now because if you do not, I'll make you mine."

Her response was to take his face in her hands. Then she began kissing the right side of him. At first he pulled back, but she would not allow it. She kissed a trail from his forehead down his cheek. Her lips covered each inch of the skin that had caused him so much hurt. And somehow she was erasing his pain. She made him realize the agony of the past would be washed away by the joy in his future.

She spoke against his lips. "I have no wish to leave. But I do need to know....do you feel for me what I feel for you? Even a little?"

He pulled back to look in her eyes. He gently cradled her head in his hands. "No, Maude. I do not imagine I feel the same for you as you do for me." He took a deep breath even as she began to pull away. "I feel so much more. Indeed, I cannot believe anyone has ever loved a woman as much as I love you. I do not want you to leave this room. Now or ever. Though I suppose we will all starve if you do not make the occasional trip to the kitchen. But I would die a happy man with you in my arms in this bed. Have I gone too far? Will you let me make you mine in this bed before we marry? For, if you'll have me, I intend to marry you. As soon as possible."

Her eyes filled with tears and she was grinning. "Do you think the earl will allow us to marry?"

"Hang the earl! Well, no disrespect to Lord Ridgeway, but I would marry you at any cost, Maude. And, I do not think he will object, nor Lady Rosemary. Will you stay with me tonight, Maude? Will you?"

"I want that above all things," she said, as she allowed him to lay her down on the bed. "Victor, my love."

\* \* \*

With bleary eyes, Colin read over what he'd written yet again. He was pleased with it. Of course, that might be because he was finally done with it and at three in the morning everything sounds fine if the reward for finding it so is a nice soft bed.

It had been Ava who'd originally planted this seed in his head. Could he be a writer? Was it possible that someone would pay him for his thoughts? At first he'd found the idea ludicrous.

He'd certainly be ridiculed by the *ton* if it ever did come to pass. For even Lord Byron had had his share of criticism and he was certainly no Byron. Of course, he considered that a good thing.

He'd been busy this past week, writing to old colleagues at school who were now in publishing. He'd sent a book proposal to one and he was about to send this essay to an old friend who had connections at one of London's more respected broadsheets. He had offered them an insider's look at society. He had no idea if they would accept it or, if they did, what it would pay. But if there was a chance he could make his fortune instead of marrying it, he had to try.

He wasn't going to tell anyone, not even Rose and especially not Ava. It would be too embarrassing if he was rejected. Which he probably would be. But he had to try.

He wanted to send this out with the first dispatch in the morning. He hated waking Stemple at this hour, but he would give him the rest of the day to sleep. He made his way through the cold dark house. If he became a writer, perhaps he could afford to light a fire in every room. How lovely it would be to never have to consider the cost when heating his home.

He knocked on his butler's door. There was no answer, which was to be expected at three of the clock. He gently knocked again. He didn't want to awaken Maude, whose rooms were just down the hall.

He was about to knock again, when the door opened and a startled Stemple came out in the hall, pulling the door closed behind him. "My lord, is something the matter?"

"I am so sorry to awaken you, Stemple. But I wanted to ensure this packet makes it to the morning post. I would not have disturbed you if it weren't urgent."

"Of course, my lord. I shall see to it first thing in the morning." He began to enter his rooms again.

"Stemple, as long as you are up, I was wondering if we might talk for a bit." Colin needed to confide in his friend and it would be too hard to do when everyone else was up and about.

"Certainly, sir. Shall we go to the kitchen?"

"I rather thought we would talk in your sitting room." Colin stepped forward, yet Stemple remained in place. He also had a strangled look about him. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course, my lord."

"Then why are we not removing to your sitting room?"

Now the man looked truly panicked. Had Colin offended him? He'd been so caught up in thoughts of Ava, he'd not paid much attention to anyone else. "Victor, I realize you've taken on

the enormous responsibilities of running this house and for that I will be forever grateful. I understand if you are angry or annoyed with me and hope you will tell me if you are.”

Now Stemple looked bewildered.

“My lord, I am certainly not angry or annoyed. You have saved my life by giving me this position and I cannot thank you enough for it. The work I do here is meaningful and I hope you are satisfied with my efforts.”

“I am extremely pleased, as is Rose. In fact, if you let me in there, I can tell you the great compliment she paid you....good Lord, man, why are you so reluctant to let me in? Are you afraid I’ll steal you blind? I can assure you I will only take any cash you might have lying about.”

“I am not alone, my lord,” Stemple whispered.

“But who...” Colin was the veriest of fools. Could he be more of a blunderer? “I am terribly sorry, Victor, for intruding this evening. Do not worry about arising early for the post. I can take it there myself. Tomorrow shall be a holiday for you. For both of you.”

“My lord, that is not necessary and I will gladly deliver your package to the post.”

“No, you deserve the rest. It is good that at least one of us has his romantical affairs in order.”

“My lord, how do you feel about servants marrying?”

“In this case, it is an excellent idea. Other than that, I haven’t given it any thought whatsoever. I hope the two of you do not leave us, though, of course, I will understand if you do. I’ll understand, but make a spectacle of myself begging you to stay.”

Victor grinned. “I cannot imagine a place we’d rather be. Although, I should probably get back to my bedchamber. She is probably panicked by now.”

“Of course. Give her my best. Actually, do not do that as I think it would probably embarrass her. Wait until an appropriate time tomorrow then give her my best wishes for your marriage. Actually, I will do that in person. I am blathering like a drunken lord when in fact I have had a lamentable lack of spirits. Good night. And congratulations, Victor.” He shook his friend’s hand.

“Thank you...Colin.” He smiled. “Now, my lord, may I have that package to take to the post?”

“I shall do it.”

“Do you have any idea where to take it?”

“No.”



“Give it to me, sir.”

In the end, Colin gave him the package, then climbed the stairs to his bedchamber. So Victor and Maude were getting married. He was glad for both of them.

And oh so very envious.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Myra Babcock was bored. Bored with this horrid village with nothing to recommend it. Bored with England if it meant rustivating without any chance of even seeing a British soldier in his splendid uniform. As an American, she knew she shouldn't hold British soldiers in such high esteem, but she simply loved a man in uniform.

It was really too bad that in this God-forsaken county the only single man of any merit was the earl. There was nothing wrong with Ridgeway, of course, and he had once been a soldier. Perhaps he still had the uniform. Myra was sure he looked splendid in it. Perhaps he could be convinced to wear it on a visit to the manor. She would pay him to do so. From what their gossipy chaperone Miss Patton had said, he'd likely do anything for enough blunt.

The only problem was that he seemed determined to court Nora. What's more, their parents were quite set on him making their eldest daughter a countess. Well, not papa, since he usually judged a man by his net worth and the earl was lamentably poor. But their mama definitely had her heart set on the match.

But that didn't mean Myra had to fall in with their plans. And it's not like Nora was some matrimonial prize, despite her great beauty. For even Myra had to grudgingly admit her sister was beautiful. Nora Babcock had two things going for her: beauty and the ability to hide her true self. Of course, it's not as if gentlemen looked all that hard for Nora's faults. But they were there. After all, hadn't Nora laughed harder than anyone at the stories Miss Patton had told of Leticia Emerson's birth?

No wonder Nora was doing so well with Lord Ridgeway. The man had absolutely no idea who she really was.

But then, people tended to underestimate Myra, as well.

She became aware of a disturbance downstairs. A delivery boy from the village had probably gone to the front entrance, earning himself a scold from their insufferable butler.

There was a knock on her door, then Richard entered. “What are you doing up here when there’s a lord downstairs?”

“Mama has probably already shoved Ridgeway and Nora into a closet somewhere hoping for an indiscretion. I’m sure she won’t let me near him.”

“But it’s not Ridgeway. It’s some other pompous lord. You don’t want Nora to take all the men, do you?”

It was a rhetorical question since Richard knew quite well how Myra felt about their sister’s success with men. So, she straightened her gown, pinched her cheeks and went downstairs to meet the new arrival.

He was passably handsome, with blonde hair and a charming smile.

As could be expected, their mother was in alt. She turned to Marvins. “Go find Miss Babcock immediately.”

Myra noted their mother had not sent for her. She made her presence known anyway, but wished she’d worn a gown that showed her bosom to better advantage. “Do we have a guest, Mama?”

“Ah, Myra, there you are. Have you seen your sister?”

“I cannot say that I have.” Nor would she admit it if she had.

Mrs. Babcock curtsied to their guest for what was likely the fifth or sixth time. “Viscount Clayton, might I present my youngest child, Miss Myra?”

Viscount Clayton bowed elegantly. “The pleasure is all mine, Miss Myra.” And the way he darted his eyes across her bosom made Myra realize her gown wasn’t so bad after all.

“Myra, be a good girl and ring for tea,” said Mrs. Babcock. “Come with us to the sitting room, my lord. Now, Viscount Clayton, where is ‘viscount’ on the hierarchy of titles?”

Myra rolled her eyes and was glad to see this Clayton fellow showed his own distaste for the question. “It is an honorary title I will hold until I become the earl.”

“And when will that be?” asked Mrs. Babcock.

“That is difficult to predict,” said Clayton, carefully. “It would mean the death of my own father.”

“Oh, dear! Such a horrible fate to contemplate. Is he in good health, your father?”

“Yes, Mrs. Babcock, dreadfully so. But tell me, I am most interested to know where Ridgeway is. I thought this was his home.”

“It was. Technically, I suppose, it still is. But Mr. Babcock has taken it for our winter stay here in England. Lord Ridgeway and those sisters of his live in the dower house. Our daughter Nora is quite a beauty and we thought to rusticate before going to London.”

“Your daughter Miss Myra is also quite well-favored,” said Clayton with a smile Myra did not trust, but appreciated just the same. “So, Ridgeway’s finances must truly be dire if he’s lost his home.”

“I do not know anything about finances, being a lady and all,” replied Mrs. Babcock. “But I hear tell he doesn’t have two farthings to rub together. Are you of sound financial health, my lord?”

The man smirked and Myra had a feeling he was laughing at her mother, as well he might. “My blunt is the picture of health, if I might speak plainly.”

“Always, my lord. We value plain speaking above all else. We are Americans after all. Now, you simply must stay with us.”

“I couldn’t possibly intrude.”

“But it would not be an intrusion. I will not think of you staying anywhere else.”

“I could always stay with Ridgeway.”

“No!” said Mrs. Babcock so vehemently that the hovering footman jumped. “I will not hear of such a thing. We have plenty of room here. Ridgeway calls on Miss Babcock with a flattering frequency. Anything you have to say to him can be accomplished when he visits, I am certain. Is that not right, Myra?”

Myra studied the man in front of her. It would be just the thing to steal a wealthy viscount from under Nora’s pert nose. And, after all, this man would one day be an earl, too. “Yes, Mama, it is a capital idea for Viscount Clayton to stay here.”

“You must be an especial friend of Lord Ridgeway’s to come all this way to see him,” said Mrs. Babcock.

“Not so great of a friend,” he said. “I have come to deliver wages to two servants who formerly worked for me. Tell me, does Miss Conway reside at the dower house, as well?”

“I am sure I wouldn’t know about other people’s servants,” said Mrs. Babcock. “Though I am sure she has her work cut out for her with that sister of his. Now, I shall ring for Marvins to show you to your room.”

“I can do that, Mama,” said Myra. “We should put him in the blue room.” It was conveniently located on her end of the family wing.

“I do not believe that would suit Lord Clayton,” said her mother. “Put him in the room with the ships.”

That was on Nora’s end. Myra smiled sweetly at her mother. “As you wish, Mama.”

Her mother eyed her suspiciously, before running off. No doubt to alert Nora to Lord Clayton’s arrival. Well, Myra had her own plan. “If you will follow me, my lord.”

Once they’d started climbing the stairs and were out of earshot of the nosy servants, she turned to him. “Now, Lord Clayton, why did you inquire about Miss Conway?”

“As I said, I owe her wages.”

“Could you not have had your man of business take care of the debt?”

“I could have, I suppose. Perhaps I just wanted to see my schoolmate.”

“Lord Clayton, perhaps I should tell you that I can always tell when someone is not being truthful.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you accusing me of lying, Miss Myra?”

“Yes.”

That elicited a laugh from Clayton. “I believe the usual response would be ‘of course not.’”

“You’ll find I am not all usual. Now, what is your real reason for wanting to see Miss Conway?”

She opened the door to his room. The blue room. Not the one with the ships.

“This does not look like the bedchamber your mother wanted you to place me in.”

“You didn’t like that bedchamber and who am I to argue with a viscount? Now, tell me about Miss Conway.”

“With pleasure, my dear,” he said, as he motioned for her to join him in his room.

\* \* \*

“Maude, I’m so excited for you!” said Ava, as she hugged her friend. Stemple had just announced the news of their betrothal at breakfast.

“This is wonderful!” said Rose, who also hugged Maude. “We must make the perfect wedding dress for you. We can alter one of the gowns in the attic.”

“Oh milady, I couldn’t have you do that. Those are your family’s gowns.”

“And you are part of the family now,” said Rose. “I’m sure we can find something that will work. You must come up to the attic with me to look through them.”

“Can I come?” asked Letty.

“Of course. We shall need your help to design it, as well as Miss Conway’s.”

Ava congratulated Stemple. “I wish you very happy. You’re gaining a wonderful wife,” she said as she kissed his cheek.

Colin shook his butler’s hand. “All I know is that the overnight stay at Clayton’s, while unpleasant in the extreme, has certainly benefitted us all. Unless you whisk your bride off to a better place, then I will have something else to blame Clayton for.”

“We are very happy to stay, my lord,” said Stemple.

“Thank heavens.” The earl then kissed Maude, who blushed. “Maude, this is excellent news. He is the best man I know.”

“He is, your lordship. I am very blessed, indeed.”

“This calls for a celebration,” said Colin. “I would suggest a celebratory dinner, but that would rather defeat the purpose. I imagine the two of you would like to go to the church to arrange for the banns to be read.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Stemple. “We were hoping to be wed as soon as possible.”

“I thought you might.”

So, in short order Stemple and Maude left for the church, while Rose and Letty went to the attic in search of a suitable gown. Ava was about to join them when Colin asked for a word.

“Miss Conway, would you care to join me in the library?” But it was clear they both had the same recollection of what had transpired between them in that room. “Or perhaps the sitting room?”

“I believe the sitting room would be better, my lord.”

“Not for all things,” he muttered, as he motioned for her to precede him. Once they arrived, he was disappointed to see her take a seat in a chair and not on the settee, where he could sit beside her.

“I am pleased to report, my lord, that Lady Leticia is an excellent student. And since your library...”

“Ahh, the library again. Perhaps we should go there now.”

“I can give you my report just as easily here. With the excellent books in the well-stocked library, I am certain Lady Leticia will continue to excel at her studies since she has a natural curiosity about everything. I just hope her next governess takes the time to nurture her love of learning.”

“You are doing such a great job with her lessons, I can only hope you will stay on as her teacher.”

“That is impossible, my lord. As soon as I secure other employment I shall be going.”

“But who will take your place, Ava?”

“It is Miss Conway, my lord.”

“If you insist, Miss Conway, and from your look I see that you do. But who in their right mind would come here to teach my sister for free? When you leave, she will have no governess and may never have one again. Must she suffer because you wish to leave?”

For a moment, Ava was struck with horrible guilt. She had not thought about the fact that Colin would not be able to afford to replace her. She’d only thought about how much she would miss Letty and Rose. Drat the man. She certainly didn’t want Letty’s studies to suffer. But then she remembered something.

“My lord, Lady Leticia had no governess when I arrived. What were you going to do to fill the position then?”

“Pray to the Lord above that He would have mercy on us and deliver a governess who was always quick with an impertinent remark. Then you walked in the door. It was truly a miracle.”

Ava narrowed her eyes. “My lord, you’re being blasphemous.”

“Only because I cannot countenance you leaving.” He rubbed his hand through his hair. “Do you really want to leave so much, Ava?”

“I must, Colin. I cannot remain.”

He rose to pace the room, which was odd, for she’d never seen him so restless. He sat back down. He rose again. He truly seemed to be shaken. “What if I do not marry Miss Babcock? Or any heiress? What if I married you, dear sweet Ava?”

Ava was aware of the world stopping. There was nothing there but Colin. Who’d just proposed. Or had he?

“Are you asking me to marry you?”

He paused for a moment too long and the world took off with a jolt again, making her slightly ill. “Not yet. Nor do I know if I will be able to. I was just checking to see if you might be amenable to the possibility.”

Ava took a deep breath, wanting to ensure she would not say anything she could not take back. She was hurt, thoroughly, deeply. Though she knew that had not been his intention. But she could not remain silent. “Am I to understand that you are ascertaining whether or not you have an alternative waiting in the wings before you ask your first choice?”

“No, of course not! You are my first choice. But, as you know, I must have money.”

“Colin, if I were your first choice, you simply would have asked me to marry you. There would be no understudy for the role. “

“I never meant to imply you are any such thing. I am bungling this dreadfully, am I not?”

“Quite. Now I must redouble my efforts to find new employment.”

“You cannot leave until I pay you your wages.”

“But you cannot pay me until you marry.”

“Exactly.”

“I shall borrow the money from Maude.”

“You would deprive Maude of needed funds right as she marries?”

Ava closed the distance between them. “My lord,” she poked his chest with her finger. “I am not an understudy for your bride. I deserve to be the first choice.”

“But you are...” he began, before being poked again.

“Hush! You have an obligation to your family and descendants. I understand that. But I have an obligation to protect my heart. And as hard as it will be for me to leave here, I cannot be heart whole if I remain.”

“Will it really be hard for you to leave?”

“Yes. I shall miss Rose and Letty dreadfully.”

“Only Rose and Letty?”

“Also Maude and Stemple.”

“What about me, Ava? What about me?”



For a moment, she considered not answering him. Because she had no words to say. But in the end, she conveyed her message without them. She went to Colin and pulled him to her for a searing kiss. An amazing kiss. A kiss that changed lives.

But then she released him. And poked him in the chest yet again. “What do you think, you...you....nincompoop!”

She whirled away from him before he could catch her. She was going to leave him. And life would never be the same.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The written invitation from the Babcocks was unusual in two respects. One was that it had a minimum of exclamation points and underlined text. Colin was used to receiving daily invitations from Mrs. Babcock that made clear her excitement. He was often asked to “Partake of a meal!” Or “Walk in the garden with Miss Babcock, who was SO looking forward to seeing him!” On one occasion, he was even promised an “Evening of untold excitement!!!” That evening had consisted of Miss Babcock playing the pianoforte. And not all that expertly.

Colin knew he should not be snide. It certainly wasn’t Miss Babcock’s fault that her mother was pushing the match with such urgency. In truth, the lady herself didn’t seem to share her mama’s enthusiasm for the marriage, though she always said the correct things.

But this invitation had few embellishments and, even more surprisingly, it extended not only to Rose and Letty, but to Ava as well, even if she was only referred to as “the governess.” Ava had been avoiding him even more than usual ever since their understudy conversation and he could tell she wanted to cry off from attending the dinner. So, Colin rather shamelessly enlisted Letty on his behalf.

“But you must come, Miss Conway,” said the girl. “We cannot leave you back here alone.”

“Thank you, Lady Leticia, but Maude and Stemple will be here.”

“But it won’t be the same without you.”

“You shall have a marvelous evening.”

“But none of them like me, except for Miss Babcock,” said the girl quietly.

That alarmed Ava. “What do you mean, poppet? Have they been unkind to you?”

“Not really. But I can tell Mrs. Babcock likes it better when I keep to myself and don’t say anything. And when Miss Babcock is talking to Colin, there’s no one for me to talk to.”

“You can talk to Lady Rose, can’t you?”

“Yes, but Mr. Richard is always pestering her.”

“If you do not wish to attend, why don’t you ask your brother if you can stay home with me? I am certain we will have much more fun, just the two of us. Perhaps we can play a game with Maude and Stemple.”

“I would like that, but, well...I like the desserts at the manor. Not that Maude isn’t a very good cook, of course. But...” The little girl looked wistful.

“But we don’t get much of a chance for dessert, do we?”

“Will you please come with us, Miss Conway? Please?”

Ava was torn. So far she’d avoided Miss Babcock, not wishing to spend time with the woman who would be fortunate enough to marry Colin. But she could not deny Letty.

“All right, Lady Leticia, I will accompany you.”

“Brilliant!” said Letty, as she hugged Ava. “There, Colin, I told you I could get her to come!”

As Letty ran out of the room, Ava scowled at Colin, who’d apparently been waiting in the hall. “You put your sister up to that.”

“There is no doubt she will enjoy herself more with you in attendance. We all will. You can even help Rose keep her distance from that horrid Richard.”

“I will attend, my lord, but only for the sake of your sisters.”

“Thank you. And don’t forget there will be dessert.” He tried to look remorseful, but only succeeded in looking incredibly handsome.

“You are fortunate I like your family so much.”

“What can I say? They are the very best part of me.”

He was amused when she steadfastly did nothing to correct that statement.

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With the exception of Letty, no one from the dower house was best pleased to arrive at the manor. They were greeted by Mrs. Babcock, who still scurried forward in a curtsy, though Colin noticed it was not quite as deep as usual.

“My Lord Ridgeway! Welcome to our, I mean, your home!” she said as she gave him her hand, which he dutifully bowed over. “And welcome Lady Rosemary and Lady Leticia. We have a surprise for you.”

“Mrs. Babcock, you have not had the pleasure of meeting Miss Conway,” said Colin. “Miss Conway, this is our hostess, Mrs. Babcock.”

“How do you do, madam,” said Ava dutifully.

“Yes, well, you are all here, then,” said Mrs. Babcock, ignoring her. “Come to the drawing room for the great surprise. I am told this will be an especial treat for you, Lord Ridgeway.”

Colin was afraid of just what this treat would be. Then he entered the drawing room and saw a grinning Clayton lounging on the settee Colin’s grandfather had brought over from Paris.

“Ridgeway,” said Clayton, slowly getting to his feet. “What a surprise it was when I arrived with Miss Conway’s wages only to find you no longer lived here. For a moment, I was afraid you’d taken to the road in a gypsy caravan. But then I heard you were only down the lane in the cozy cottage.”

“It is one of the most charming houses I have ever had the pleasure of staying in,” said Ava.

Colin wanted to kiss her for coming to his defense, despite how out of sorts she was with him at the moment.

Clayton tsked. “But you have little experience with great houses, my dear. I am sure compared to where you grew up, it must seem a veritable palace.”

“While it is true that I can compare it to only one other great house, I can say it is distinguished by its occupants. Each of whom is happy, intelligent and honorable. In short, it is quite the opposite of my previous experience.”

Clayton laughed. “Oh, Ava, how I have missed you.”

“It is Miss Conway,” snapped Colin. “And you’d do well to remember it.”

“You forget, old boy, that while we may know her equally well now, I knew her first.”

“One more word...” snarled Colin in warning.

“Lord Ridgeway,” said Miss Babcock as she joined them, thereby preventing Clayton’s murder at least for the nonce, “you simply must tell Mama that spring will one day arrive here in Wiltshire. She is simply convinced it will not.”

Colin was still glaring at Clayton, daring him to say a word. But Miss Babcock’s hold on his arm was surprisingly strong. He finally let her pull him away, but he kept an eye on Clayton. Colin had purposely not introduced him to Rose, who was talking to Letty with Richard hovering nearby. If Clayton made a move toward either of his sisters, Colin would intercede. Yet Clayton gave them not a glance. Instead, he looked at Ava.

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Ava tried not to stare at the pretty picture Colin and Miss Babcock made. She'd glimpsed Miss Babcock at church on Christmas, so she'd known she was well favored. But in the drawing room, she was truly exquisite. A perfect match for the sinfully handsome Colin.

She was so engrossed in watching them that she did not notice Clayton's approach until he was but inches away. "They make quite a couple, do they not?" he asked.

"I do not gossip about my employer, my lord."

"Is he only that? Just your employer?"

"Why have you come, Lord Clayton?"

"To deliver your wages. I even brought the wages for that kitchen maid."

"Maude is now a cook and doing an excellent job."

Clayton shrugged. "It does not surprise me that Ridgeway would have to employ an untrained kitchen maid as his cook. He's just this side of debtors' prison."

"You grow tedious, my lord. Kindly give me my wages, as well as Maude's, then you can return home."

"Anxious to be rid of me so quickly? No, don't answer that, my dear. I'm not sure my vanity could take it. I must confess I have an ulterior motive for my trip. I have come to make a proposition to you."

"I am not interested in your proposition, my lord. Or must my knee make my feelings clear again?"

He laughed. "I have so missed your spirit. No, my proposition is of a different sort and concerns Ridgeway. I have learned he has been making inquiries with publishing houses. It seems our impoverished earl fancies himself a writer."

Ava tried not to let her surprise show. Had Colin really taken her advice to heart? Why hadn't he told her?

Clayton continued. "One of the houses he queried, B. Jones, is part of my holdings. Pray do not spread that about because I would hate to be tainted by a whiff of trade, though obviously Ridgeway has no such concerns."

"I believe it is admirable that he is seeking a publisher."

“No offense, my dear, but your kind would think that. Among my lot, it’s rather shameful. However, I am in the unique position to give Ridgeway exactly what he wants. A nice income that would enable him to get out from under the financial mess his father and grandfather left him in.”

Ava was surprised by Clayton’s generosity. “I know he would be most appreciative, my lord. But it would be a sound investment for you, as well. He is an excellent writer.”

“I would have to leave that judgment to you since I would rather be tarred and feathered than read whatever lofty nonsense he chose to write. However, I am willing to give him the money he so desperately needs only if you leave this place and become my mistress.”

Ava felt as if she’d been kicked in the stomach by a particularly angry mule.

“Dear Ava, I see I have taken you by surprise. You are incredibly expressive. Arousingly so. I cannot wait to have you beneath me.”

Ava’s hand itched to slap his face. But she could not afford to antagonize Clayton when he was in a position to hand Colin everything he needed. She could not bear to think of becoming any man’s mistress, but she loved Colin dearly. Could she make this sacrifice for his happiness? To ensure he could marry where he wanted, even though this meant he would never marry her?

“Perhaps you need more persuading. It appears that Ridgeway is doing well with Miss Babcock. But I can assure you it is not going nearly as well as he thinks. I had a talk with Mr. Babcock today and let’s just say he might not be as keen to have Ridgeway as a son-in-law, anymore.”

“You lied about him, didn’t you?”

“I certainly didn’t lie about the exploits of his father and grandfather. No need to, there. The Babcocks want a title in the family, but they also realize that it will take a great deal to erase the taint of trade from them. Fortunately, my title would more than compensate for their deficiencies, whereas Ridgeway’s comes with its own disadvantages.”

“But you’d never even met Miss Babcock until your arrival.”

“Have you never heard that familiarity breeds contempt? I firmly believe that the less one knows about a spouse the smoother the marriage – both before and after the wedding. I’ve seen the lady in question. She would look beautiful on my arm and ‘twould be no hardship to bed her. On this, I’m sure Ridgeway and I both agree.”

Ava could not help gritting her teeth at the very thought of Colin bedding Miss Babcock.

Clayton laughed. “As I said, you are so expressive. I cannot wait to witness more of your reactions.”

“So you want Miss Babcock for a wife and me as a mistress.”

“I need a wife and she’s as well-dowered as she is well-favored. I want you in my bed. But, mostly, I want to beat Ridgeway.”

“If I do take your odious offer, how do I know you won’t rescind his contract as soon as I lie with you?”

“You don’t trust me, pet?”

“Not in the least.”

“I always knew you were smart, yet still attractive despite being so. I shall give Lord Ridgeway such a large advance that even if I were to cancel the contract, he’d still have enough blunt to give both his sisters a Season. Speaking of his sisters, Rosemary is an exquisite creature.”

“Don’t go near her!” Just the thought of this snake near Rose was enough to make Ava want to strike him.

“You are such a delight. And I suppose it speaks well of you that you are so concerned about Ridgeway and his sister. But tell me, are you not worried about your own future? Once our affair becomes known – and affairs always do – you will never again be able to get a job as a governess or chaperone.”

Ava had not thought that far ahead. All she could think about was protecting Rose from whatever villainous plan Clayton might concoct. And she couldn’t repeat this – any of this – to Colin. He would surely call Clayton out.

“What of my future?” asked Ava.

“Well, I must confess that you do not have much of one even now. Some of the guests at my house party may have gotten the impression that you and I were lovers.”

She would kill Clayton herself.

“So, there is no place for you in the great houses of the *ton* now or ever. And if you are delusional enough to think you might one day be Lady Ridgeway, let me disabuse you of that notion. The scandal of your past would kill any chances Rosemary might have to marry. The young red-headed chit wouldn’t even have a hope of marrying years from now. Not that her chances were going to be all that great to begin with. I cannot abide that color hair. If you choose to stay here, not only will you ruin Ridgeway’s chance to become financially independent, but you’ll end his sisters’ dreams of marriage.”

“You’re a bastard,” whispered Ava.

“In all ways but legally, pet. Now run along and consider my offer. I see we’ve attracted Ridgeway’s attention. Another moment and he’ll be slapping a glove in my face.”

Ava turned away from him blindly, running into Myra Babcock as she did so. She did not want Colin to see her so upset because she couldn’t explain the reason. She had to regain her composure and decide her fate.

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“You’re quiet tonight, Ava,” said Rose. “Are you feeling unwell?”

Mr. Babcock had lent them his carriage for the journey back to the dower house. Though the distance was not far, the snow made it slow going.

“I am quite well, thank you. Just tired.” Tired and with much to consider. The rest of the evening after Clayton’s odious proposition had passed as if it had been a dream. Ava had mostly kept to herself while watching over Letty to ensure no one was unkind to the girl.

She’d also kept an eye on Colin and Miss Babcock. They’d been across the room, but she could discern nothing that would indicate they’d developed a *tendre* for each other. If Colin had been in love with Nora, the solution would be simple. Ava would leave when they married and make her own way in the world, though it would not be as a servant in a *ton* household, thanks to Clayton’s vile lies. Perhaps she would go to America. She could make a fresh start there. She’d have to borrow money from Colin, but if he married into the Babcock family he could afford to help her. She would pay him back, of course, no matter how long it took.

However, if Colin did not marry Miss Babcock, then Ava’s life would be much more complicated. Clayton had told her that Colin would receive an offer from B. Jones in one week’s time. If he accepted it – and he would have to – Ava would be expected to leave the next day. If she didn’t arrive in London at the address Clayton had given her, the offer would be rescinded.

So Ava had one week to figure out a way she could help Colin’s family without becoming Lord Clayton’s mistress. Because there was no way she would do that.

Ava felt the soft weight of Letty’s head on her shoulder. The poor girl had fallen asleep. Ava eased her down, so Letty lay across her lap, then she pulled the blanket around her shoulders.

Ava looked up to see Colin staring at her. The heat in his eyes drew her to him. She could not look away. Fortunately, Rose inadvertently broke the moment by speaking of the evening.

“Colin, you must find an excuse to get us out of all future engagements with the Babcocks. Young Richard hasn’t taken the hint that I am not interested in him romantically.”

“Has he made inappropriate advances? I will not hesitate to make my displeasure known by thrashing him.”



“No, he is only boorish in the extreme. I cannot say I like Miss Myra or Miss Babcock all that much, either.”

Colin’s eyes were keen upon his sister. “What fault do you find with Miss Babcock? So far she has not said anything that could be construed as unkind or controversial.”

“And that is part of the problem. Her conversation is utterly inoffensive and it is the very blandness that offends me. I cannot imagine spending a lifetime with a spouse who would never express an original opinion.”

“Really? I daresay most men would have no problem with it,” said Colin with a grin.

He was rewarded with a swat from Rose. “You are not most men. You would not be happy with her, Colin. I am sure of it. I believe you desire a wife who is not afraid to speak her mind. One who is well-read and intelligent. Who is not afraid to make her own way in the world. She should also have a love of family, since she is inheriting one. You want a nurturer, one who would be both sister and mother to Letty, if need be.”

Ava realized both Colin and Rose were looking at her. “You have left one thing off the list, dear Rose,” she said. “Colin’s wife should also have a good fortune.”

“Pah!” said Rose. “We shall be perfectly fine without one.”

“Perhaps James is making the family fortune in America,” said Colin.

“And who knows?” added Rose. “Perhaps I shall marry a man who’s remarkably plump in the purse. Ah, we have finally arrived. Here, Ava, let me take Letty.”

“I shall do it,” said Colin as a Babcock groom opened the carriage door. “Stemple is here to escort you and Ava across the ice.”

Ava watched Colin carry his youngest sister. The sight of it made her heart ache for the children she would never have with him. He would be a magnificent father, regardless of who his very fortunate wife would be. She also thought of the young girl in his arms who’d already suffered the barbs and unkind comments of those who held her parentage against her. What if Colin wasn’t able to restore his family’s fortune? And what if the scandal of having Clayton’s alleged mistress in residence hurt Letty’s future? Could Ava live with that?

The answer was a resounding no.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Clayton had the good grace to depart the Babcocks' home the next morning, sending Ava's and Maude's wages to the dower house by messenger. At least Ava would now have the means to leave the estate, even if she couldn't make it all the way to America. She considered her fate as she tried not to meet Colin's eyes across the table in the kitchen.

"It's all here," said Maude with some surprise after carefully counting her coins.

"Good," said Colin. "I'm sure you more than earned it."

"Milord," said Maude, "you've been so good to Victor and me. Do you need...that is to say, if you want to borrow some coin, you can take what you will."

Ava could tell that Colin was very touched by the offer, even if a bit embarrassed.

He smiled. "Maude, that is perhaps the most generous offer anyone has ever made me. Thank you, but I will not need to borrow from you. In any case, you'll likely need to hold on to your coins since I understand your betrothed's employer is a miserly fellow who is behind on his wages."

"I do not allow anyone to speak ill of my employer," said Stemple. "Even my employer. And you must admit he certainly made a good hire to run his kitchen."

"Truer words have never been spoken," said Colin. "Miss Conway, I wonder if I might have a word with you in the library."

"It is time for Lady Leticia's lessons, my lord."

"I am sure the world will not end if you begin them fifteen minutes late."

"I have been teaching your sister the importance of punctuality."

"And what better lesson is there than by demonstrating what it means to be late? I'm sure she can get along without you for a quarter hour. She can spend the time with her demonic cat."

Ava both dreaded and treasured time spent alone with Colin. And if Clayton followed through with his damnable plans, she would only have one last week with him. She did not intend to waste a minute of it. "Very well, my lord."

As soon as they entered the library, Ava realized she should have asked to move their meeting to the sitting room. For the library filled her with memories of Christmas night. "What did you wish to speak to me about?"

For a moment, he said nothing. And Ava wondered whether Colin was also thinking of that night. "I wanted you to know I have taken your advice."

She acted surprised, since she couldn't very well tell him Clayton had already informed her of Colin's queries. "In what way, my lord?"

"Must you 'my lord' me in private, Ava?" When he received no answer he continued. "I have sent letters to several publishers and broadsheets, inquiring whether anyone might wish to employ me. I haven't heard back from anyone yet, so I cannot get my hopes up. But I must confess I am somewhat invigorated by the process. I have even begun writing on my own. It is one way to channel my frustration, instead of spending every night getting foxed. Although, I must admit sometimes I write and drink. Those are the more interesting pages, by the way."

"I am proud of you, Colin." And she was. She knew he would be a success. She only regretted she would not be there to witness it. "You are very talented and I am certain the world will soon recognize it."

"I don't know if that will happen. But I am glad to be doing something to change my circumstances."

"I would hate to see you forced into a loveless marriage, though I know it is not unusual for your lot."

"I wish you would stop pretending there is a difference between our stations."

"But there is. Even if the differences in our birthright do not matter to us, they would matter to your peers."

"Hang my peers."

"It could affect your sisters' future."

"I do not see why it should. You are a gentleman's daughter."

"I am employed in your household."

"You are helping me with Letty, but if you'll recall, you haven't been paid. Perhaps I won't ever give you money. Mayhap you will have to marry me if you're to support yourself. And, lest I

get myself into trouble again, I cannot at this time ask you to marry me. But I wanted you to know that I am trying to become a paid author. Now will you kiss me?’

“But you are still courting Miss Babcock.”

“I have not officially declared myself.”

“That sounds like a technicality.”

“Perhaps I should apply for a position as a solicitor.”

He kissed her hand, then pulled her to him, putting his arms around her waist. His lips met hers, then gently supped before truly kissing her, allowing their mouths to meld. He pulled her closer so she could feel how hard he was.

She sank into him. She had only these few days to forge a lifetime of memories. And perhaps he was right. Perhaps he could gain employment from someplace other than Clayton’s company. Mayhap, she had naught to worry her.

They continued to kiss and gently explore. Then Colin all but bolted from her, striding across the room toward the windows. Ava was about to ask what was wrong when the door opened and Jasper ran in.

“Jasper has found you, Miss Conway!” said Letty, as she ran in. “I waited for you in the sitting room, but you didn’t come. I hoped you weren’t cross with me because I did so poorly at maths yesterday, so we went in search of you so I could apologize. Did you hear me calling? What are you looking at, Colin? Is something happening in the garden?”

Colin kept his back to his sister as Ava turned to tuck away a few curls that had fallen from their pins. She hoped her lips were not as swollen as they felt.

“Lady Leticia, of course I am not cross with you. We all need a little practice when we learn something new. You must have more patience with yourself. But let us go to the sitting room now and attend to your studies. Perhaps we should bring Jasper with us.”

The cat was staring at Colin and hissing.

“That is an excellent idea,” said Colin. “I believe you were going to teach the importance of punctuality.”

“Indeed, which means I owe Lady Leticia an apology.”

Letty grinned at her. “I’m just glad you’re not cross with me.”

Letty hugged her and it was everything Ava could do not to cry. Letty was a dear, sweet girl. And if Ava had been fortunate enough to marry Colin, she would have loved Letty like a

daughter. Ava would miss her terribly when she left. But she would hurt her grievously if she stayed.

Even if Colin got his contract from someone other than Clayton, Ava still had to leave.

\* \* \*

Myra was confused and quite disappointed. Lord Clayton had returned to his estate. He'd left that very morning. She would have liked the chance to get to know the viscount better. Much better. And she was surprised that he hadn't stayed to court Nora. Because that's what gentlemen did. Upon meeting Nora, they never saw beyond her sister's exquisite looks. They all believed the outer casing reflected the inner soul. She was beautiful to look at, so it was assumed that she possessed kindness, honor and a generosity of spirit to make her a paragon of womanhood.

That was their initial impression.

The fact that Nora was still unmarried after being courted by every eligible gentleman in Boston showed that while New Englanders were initially fooled by her looks, they did not remain so for long. That was why the Babcocks had come to England, in hopes that the family fortune could buy Nora a husband.

Yet Clayton had departed after breaking his fast, without even taking his leave of Nora, who was still asleep. Myra wanted to congratulate the man on being able to detect Nora's true nature faster than anyone ever had, though she didn't think they'd spent enough time together for that to happen. God knew Ridgeway was still fooled by her. Of course, their mama had told Nora not to show her true self to Ridgeway unless she could find a better husband. But Ridgeway seemed impoverished enough that he would have to take anyone, even Nora at her worst. Myra almost felt sorry for him.

Myra had overheard Clayton's scandalous proposition to Miss Conway, of course. That was the advantage to moving with some stealth. She often heard things she wasn't supposed to. And she always used them to her advantage.

Who cared if he was going to employ the governess as his mistress? That was really none of her concern, since she was only intent on marrying him. She wasn't that interested in Clayton himself, but she was anxious to be married as a means of escaping her parents' constant criticism. And she very much wanted to steal him out from under Nora's nose. Myra didn't often have the chance to best Nora, so she always put considerable effort into it when an opportunity presented itself.

She found Nora in the ballroom, where she was practicing her curtsy in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors.

“I thought I’d find you here,” said Myra, startling her sister. “You always did like a big mirror.”

“I was just practicing my curtsy. I would so hate to embarrass his lordship.”

“Which lordship? I’m sure you don’t mean the poor one. And the other is gone. Tell me what you did to frighten Clayton away.”

“I’m sure if anyone frightened him away, it was you. You might take care with your meals, Myra, you’re beginning to resemble a cow.”

“That’s the Nora I’m used to. I daresay Lord Ridgeway will get to know this side of you soon enough. After the wedding of course.”

“Who says I’ll marry Ridgeway? Perhaps I’ll choose Clayton. I’m sure he’ll be back. I’d be a countess once Clayton comes into his title. In the meantime, I’d be a viscountess.”

“Assuming he’ll marry you, of course. Shall I ask him if he will? Oh, that’s right, I cannot because he isn’t here. Why did he leave, do you suppose?”

“It’s probably that Conway creature’s fault. They had quite a long *tete a tete* last night and she looked positively ill the rest of the evening. I’m surprised you didn’t learn anything about it, skulking about the way you always do. Do you think she’s his mistress? I wouldn’t tolerate Clayton having such a mistress once we are wed.”

“Most men have them.”

Nora made a beautiful moue of distaste. “That may be true, but I object to her in particular.”

“Do you think she’s Ridgeway’s mistress?” Myra had been wondering, but there was no one else to ask. However, there was something in the way the earl spoke of Miss Conway that had always raised her suspicions.

“It doesn’t matter if she is, for the first thing I shall do upon becoming Lady Ridgeway – if I choose to do so – will be to get rid of Miss Conway.”

“I would think the first thing you’d do would be to ship the bastard sister off to some sort of boarding school.”

“That would be the second thing. I’m glad she’s not his real sister, as I could not abide having a child with that garish red hair.”

“What about the other sister? I cannot imagine you would like to be compared to a beauty like Lady Rosemary.”

Nora wrinkled her nose. “I do not think she is all that attractive. She is not bad looking, I suppose. I would not be ashamed to be seen with her, as I have been with you. But I would ask

papa to dower her so she could get a husband who would take her far away. I wouldn't want anyone else in residence with us."

"When do you plan to inform Ridgeway of your plans?"

"If I marry him, I would tell him soon after we are wed. But, as I said, I might marry Clayton."

"Even though he has run away from the estate?"

"No one runs from me, Myra. And make no mistake. If I want him back, he'll come."

"Like the gentlemen in Boston?"

Nora's eyes flashed so angrily that Myra almost took a step back. "You would do well to never bring up Boston again. Unless you want to find yourself married to some old man and sent far away."

*That*, thought Myra, didn't sound so very bad. At least she would be gone.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

It was the perfect day for a walk. The sun was shining brightly, making the snow sparkle, and the crisp, clean air was refreshing. Colin had asked Ava to walk to the village with him. Ava had accepted, then brought along Rose and Letty as chaperones. Colin had smiled wryly at her, but it was obvious he liked spending time with his sisters. At the moment, he and Letty were engaged in a snowball fight. His aim was quite deplorable and he somehow had the misfortune to be hit by almost all of Letty's snowballs, which required a great deal of work to be in the right place at the right time.

Ava and Rose looked on and laughed.

"This is beautiful country," said Ava.

"I have always liked it," said Rose. "There is a grandeur to the land that appeals to me very much. I am glad you like it since you will be staying here."

Ava didn't have the heart to tell her she would not be staying long at all. She was lost in her thoughts and did not see the rut in the road until she'd stepped in it. Fortunately, Colin was able to catch her before she fell.

For a moment, time was reduced to the feeling of being in his arms. Ava was so close to him, she could feel the warmth of his breath. His steely arms had her locked to his chest. She had the irrational thought he might kiss her, though of course he couldn't with both of his sisters there.

He finally released her. As she stepped away, she saw Rose and Letty grinning.

"Colin," said Letty. "You should marry Miss Conway."

Ava's face flooded with color.

Colin cleared his throat. Twice. "Why do you say that, poppet?"

"I like her very much. So does Rose. And I think you do, too. And besides, if you marry her, I won't have to do maths."



Colin picked up his sister and held her over a snowbank. She squealed with laughter when he fainted like he would drop her. “Leticia, if I married Miss Conway, you would have to do even more maths.”

“Why?” Letty was giggling so much, even Ava and Rose had to join in.

“Because I said so!”

He finally put her down and they resumed their snowball fight.

“You really must marry him,” Rose said to Ava. “And before you tell me you’re the governess and he’s the earl, I have studied the two of you together. It is obvious that you care for each other very much. I daresay you love each other. And if there’s one thing this family needs it’s a marriage that is also a love match.”

Ava could not deny her feelings for Colin. Not to Rose. “I care for your brother very much. But, sweet, practical Rose, you know he must marry an heiress.”

“He must do no such thing. He must marry for love. He deserves it. You both do. We will find a way to make do. We will...”

Rose stopped talking and her expression was so arrested, Ava was worried she’d suddenly been taken ill. Rose was staring at something in the distance. It was a rider coming their way.

“Who is that?” asked Ava.

A black stallion and his magnificent rider walked through the lane. The horse was enormous and the man was dressed all in black, which was a contrast to his fair hair and blue eyes. But a closer look revealed that the man wasn’t quite steady in the saddle. He seemed to sway just a bit, though he still seemed just as dignified. Perhaps it was the cut of his greatcoat, which was obviously expensive. Or the horse itself which, even to Ava’s untrained eye, was unmistakably valuable.

The man was staring at the horizon with a grim look, as if on his way to a date with the executioner. Ava could not be sure, but it looked like he was not much older than she, perhaps in his late twenties.

She was just about to ask Colin about the man, when Rose called out.

“Grayson!” she called. She had her hands on her hips and for all the world looked like she was a teacher scolding a pupil.

The man in the saddle turned to look at her. It took a moment for his eyes to focus, but when they did, he showed a quick succession of expressions from confusion, recognition, surprise and

something else. It was difficult to identify that last one since no sooner had Ava begun to study him, than the man fell from his horse, face down into a snowbank.

\* \* \*

Rose was terrified. She ran to Nathaniel Gage, Marquess of Grayson, afraid he'd broken his neck in the fall. And it would be her fault for startling him. Well, he might have had something to do with it since it was obvious he was foxed and in no condition to be riding. It wasn't the first time, of course. Nor would it be the last. Fortunately his horse was so well trained that it was used to his master's drinking habits. When Nate fell, the animal bent his great head to snuffle him. Then, satisfied his master was not in mortal danger, he slowly backed away from the crazed woman who was running toward them.

Rose carefully rolled Nate over, though it was quite a task considering he was a good six inches taller than she and hewn of solid muscle. Only Grayson could spend so much time debauched and not have a spare ounce of fat upon him.

She held her breath as he lay motionless, then finally he opened his eyes. "Thorn? That you?"

Thank God the man was alive, though his breath reeked of spirits. She knew she shouldn't have startled him, but she'd been shocked to see him in the lane. He hadn't come home for Christmas so she'd assumed the earliest he would make an appearance would be at Easter. The last person she'd expected to see today was, unfortunately, the one who made her heart beat faster and heated her dreams at night. For she'd been in love with Nate since she was a little girl. And he called her "Thorn." As in a Rose's thorn.

"Grayson, is that you?" Colin was standing beside them and looking down at his old friend.

"Ridgeway?" asked Nate, as he struggled to sit up. "Heard you were in London looking for a bride."

Colin pulled him to a standing position, then did the same for Rose. "Seems like I might be losing my touch. None of the ladies in London seemed to recognize my appeal."

"You wouldn't want to get leg-shackled anyway," said Nate, looking aggravatingly handsome. "Not a state I ever want to be in."

"Does his grace know that?" asked Colin with a grin.

"Fraid so. One of the reasons I'm here. Though dreading the visit."

"Well, leave it to Rose here to divert you from your purpose," said Colin, who tugged one of her curls fondly.

Just like she was ten years old again. It was mortifying.

“Thorn didn’t mean me any harm.” Nate turned the full force of his grin on her. He was having trouble focusing again and this time his eyes seemed to drift over her form, then back up again, like he couldn’t quite comprehend what he’d seen.

Rose’s eyes locked with his. She could barely breathe. She could not look away.

Colin was oblivious to it. “Remember that day when Rose wouldn’t stop pestering us and fell into that bog? James and I could not stop laughing and she was sputtering mad about it. Then you waded in and pulled her out. The sight of you two makes me laugh even now.”

Rose could not believe her brother had chosen that moment to do his best imitation of a braying ass.

“Lord Ridgeway,” said Ava, before Colin could dredge up another embarrassing story. “Perhaps you should ascertain if your friend needs medical attention.”

“Where are my manners?” said Colin. “Miss Conway, may I present Nathaniel Gage, Marquess of Grayson? His ancestral home is that castle on the hill. Grayson, this is Miss Ava Conway.”

Grayson made an elegant bow, despite his lack of balance. “My apologies, Miss Conway for my condition. I had not thought I would meet anyone today.”

“I believe you did not think,” said Rose, hating how very much like a fishwife she sounded. But, really, when was he going to grow up?

“Guilty as charged,” he said. “And Lady Leticia, please promise me you will pelt your brother with snowballs. I am sure he deserves it.”

Letty laughed.

“If you come over to the house, perhaps you and I can have an all out snowball war,” said Colin. “I’m sure you’ll hear, but we’re at the dower house now.”

“You are?” Grayson looked at Rose. “Is everything all right?”

“Quite,” she said.

“Come for dinner,” said Colin. “As long as you don’t mind eating in the kitchen.”

“Trust me, I’d rather eat in your kitchen than the ducal dining room, but I’m leaving tomorrow.”

*Leaving tomorrow.* Rose wanted to groan aloud. She hadn’t seen Nate in months and then when she did, she was dressed in an old cloak and made him fall off his horse.

She certainly had a way with men.

“I should be off,” said Nate, with another look at Rose.

“I don’t think you should be riding,” said Rose.

Colin laughed. “Rose, when are you going to stop treating Grayson as a brother you can boss around?”

“I don’t think of him as a brother,” she said quietly.

She wasn’t sure, but there seemed to be a different quality to the look Nate gave her. Maybe he was beginning to see her as someone other than his friends’ sister. Or, given his state of inebriation, maybe he was about to be sick.

Whatever had been there was gone, as he swung back in the saddle effortlessly.

“Miss Conway, it was a pleasure to meet you. Lady Leticia, please remember to pummel your brother. Ridgeway, I shall see you on my return. And Thorn?”

Rose looked up.

“Take care of yourself.” Then he smiled at her before continuing his journey home.

Rose wanted to cry with the absurdity of it. Nate would be in the county for only one day and she’d made him fall off his horse. She looked up to see Ava looking at her curiously.

She hoped the too perceptive Ava did not figure out why Rose was so disconcerted. It would not do for Colin to discover that the only man Rose had ever loved was also his drunk, scapegrace friend.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Maude, you have such a lovely figure,” said Rose, as she pinned the gown she was altering. “Are you certain you do not wish the bodice to be a bit lower?”

“But we’ll be in church, Lady Rosemary. I cannot possibly show too much when God is watching.” Maude was standing very still in Rose’s bedchamber as Rose and Ava worked on the gown and Letty looked on.

“Yet, I do not think it would hurt to show a bit more of what the good Lord gave you,” said Ava, from where she was pinning the hem.

Maude laughed. “Perhaps we can lower it a little. Victor might like it.”

“He will love it, I’m sure,” said Rose, as she pinned the bodice.

It had been two days since their walk into the village. Ava had been trying to keep her distance from Colin, while at the same time trying to get Rose to speak to her of Lord Grayson. The marquess was an incredibly handsome man, but he’d been so inebriated that day it was shocking he’d been able to remain seated on his horse as long as he had. If he was a man prone to drinking, Ava could not wish for Rose to become his wife.

Some problems were not so easily solved as others.

Rose had deftly evaded her questions by claiming she was only concerned about Grayson as a friend. Yet, Ava could not help but believe there was rather more to it than that.

There was a knock on the door.

“Ladies,” called Stemple from the hall. “I have taken the liberty of bringing you tea.”

“You can’t come in!” said Letty. “It’s bad luck to see your bride in her gown.”

“Yes, dear,” said Rose. “But tea would be nice.”

“I didn’t know he could make tea,” said Maude.

Ava went to the door and opened it just a crack. “Thank you, Stemple. But I am afraid you cannot enter and see your bride-to-be in her wedding gown.”

“But the wedding is still two weeks away,” he said, trying to peer into the room.

Ava moved into the hall, shutting the door behind her. “You may see your betrothed later – after she has removed the gown. Which looks beautiful on her, by the way.”

“I am sure it does. How shall I serve the tea if I cannot enter?”

“I can take the tray.”

Stemple looked disappointed. “If you’re sure you don’t need my assistance.”

“I am quite positive.”

“You might wish to know that Lord Ridgeway received several letters from London today, Miss Conway. He seemed quite pleased to get them.”

Several letters from London? Perhaps he had good news from a company other than Clayton’s. “Thank you for informing me. I shall place the tea inside then find his lordship.”

He opened the door for her.

“That will be all, Stemple,” said Ava laughing.

“If you insist.”

“We all do!” said Rose from inside the bedchamber.

Ava placed the tray on a table. “If you will excuse me, I must attend to something.”

She left quickly, then all but ran to the library in search of Colin. She found him at his desk, but not with the smile she hoped he would have.

“Ava,” he said, rising from his chair. “What a lovely surprise. I thought all of you were helping Maude with her gown.”

“We were, but Stemple said the post had arrived.”

“It has. Unfortunately, nothing has come for you.”

“Was there anything else of note?”

“Even more unfortunately, there was. I received three responses to my queries. All were polite, but each said the same. They are not interested in my writing at this time.”

Ava's heart sank. How could anyone reject this man? "Perhaps not at this time. But that could very well change. How many more queries did you send?"

"Another dozen or so, but I am not optimistic that their responses will be any different."

"I am. Surely not every publisher in London is so mutton-headed as to say no to you. I am certain there must be someone with the good sense to sign you to a contract."

"Or perhaps this is just a pipe dream."

"I will not let you give up on yourself." She closed the distance between them and placed her hand on his cheek.

He turned his head to kiss her palm. "No one has ever believed in me the way you do."

"It is easy to do, Colin. And I will never lose faith in you."

\* \* \*

Mrs. Babcock paced the length of the sitting room once again, eyeing the threadbare rug with disgust. "Really, I cannot think how an earl's family could live in such a place. When you become the countess Nora, you must purchase all new furnishings. You can start by taking this rug out and burning it."

"I shall start with a wedding trip around the world," said Nora, from where she sat on the settee.

"Your father might have a thing or two to say about that. A trip around the world is too expensive by half."

"But Papa has loads of blunt."

"Of course he does. But that doesn't mean he'll spend it all on you. He says the marriage portion will be significant given all the debt Ridgeway has. Your papa will be ruthless in the negotiations, of course, and he'll not be the soft touch you think him to be once you're married. After all, we still have Myra to marry off and she won't go cheaply."

"Mama," said Myra from the window seat, "you do realize I am sitting right here, do you not?"

"I'm not saying anything you do not know. These Brits are too haughty by half when most of them have not a pot to piss in."

"Yes, I cannot imagine why they would not want Americans for in-laws," said Myra dryly.

The criticism sailed over Mrs. Babcock's head. "Nora, your father hates this place and would like to decamp for London. He believes you must bring Ridgeway up to snuff sooner rather than later."

“Trust me, Mama, I have it all in hand.”

“Do you? You already let a viscount slip away.”

Nora narrowed her eyes. “I am sure I had nothing to do with that. I’m certain Myra said something to scare him away. Besides, he was only a viscount who will one day in the future be an earl. Ridgeway is an earl right now.”

“And poor as a church mouse. If you married Lord Clayton, your father wouldn’t have to spend nearly as much money.”

“Yet you’re willing to waste money on Myra.”

“I am still here,” said Myra.

Their mother continued. “Nora, do all of us a favor and bring this courtship to its conclusion quickly. You always wanted to be a spring bride, did you not?”

“That is true. I’ll get him to propose now, then Papa can take the family to London. If I meet anyone better there like a marquess or duke, I can cry off with Ridgeway.”

“That’s my girl,” said Mrs. Babcock. “Now I must have a conversation with Cook to see if we can put an end to all these English dishes. They’re making your father terribly dyspeptic.”

As Mrs. Babcock sailed out of the room, Myra studied her sister.

“I take it your heart is not engaged with Ridgeway?”

Nora laughed. “Of course not. I’m sure I would never be so gauche as to fall in love with someone that poor. But he is handsome and I imagine he could be fun in the bedchamber, though I hope he will not want too many children. And I am looking forward to being a countess.”

“Unless you can be a marchioness or duchess.”

“I would dearly love to be a princess above all else. But I understand all those positions are taken in England and you know Papa would hate to travel to a place they don’t speak English. This will be good for you, too. When I am a countess, you will be thrown together with a better class of gentlemen. One of them just might offer for you. Although you should give serious thought to changing the way you wear your hair.”

Myra wondered how her sister the countess-to-be would look with a blackened eye. But it was not worth the trouble. Yet still wonderful to imagine.



## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

Colin was growing used to the clean country air, so unlike London. And he appreciated how quiet the mornings were without noise from the streets below. But on this morning, he awoke with a sense of dread. With his rejected inquiries fresh in his mind, he'd spent the evening going through the estate's financial ledgers. Unfortunately, they were much as they had been the last time he'd perused them. Grim.

He was supposed to take Miss Babcock for a walk that morning and was dreading it. He was glad he no longer had Stemple helping him dress. He didn't want to see the look of disappointment on the man's face as Colin prepared to escort Miss Babcock. He was disappointed in himself, as well. But he could see no other way out of his predicament, barring a miracle.

He broke his fast and was regaled by Letty's recitation of what she'd been learning from Ava's expert instruction.

"Miss Conway has been to Italy, Colin. Can you imagine? Her papa was a great professor and he took her there once and she learned ever so much and she's even seen paintings in person that I've only seen in books. Have you been to Italy, Colin? I know you were in France and Belgium in the war, but did you go to Italy?"

"No, pet, I have never been to Italy."

"I think it would be brilliant if we all could go, Maude and Stemple, too. Maybe we'll go when you and Miss Conway get married."

Ava knocked over her water glass. Colin almost dropped his fork. "Unfortunately, we won't be going to Italy in the near future, though I would love to look at those art books with you so you can show me what you learned."

"Where will you and Miss Conway go when you do get married?" asked Letty.

Colin looked at Rose, hoping she would intercede. However, she was completely engrossed in her breakfast, as were Maude and Stemple. A quick glance at Ava showed that she, too, was inordinately interested in her meal, though her blush had turned her face a delightful shade of red.

“Letty, why do you think Miss Conway and I should get married? This is the second time you have brought it up. And don’t say it’s about maths.”

“Well, if you get married, she could live here forever and Stemple wouldn’t have to keep hiding those letters Miss Conway has been writing.”

“Lady Leticia, what are you talking about?” asked Ava.

“This is my fault,” said Rose quickly. “Completely and utterly my fault. I told Stemple I would dismiss him if he did not refrain from posting Miss Conway’s letters.”

“Lady Rosemary did no such thing,” said Stemple. “She asked if I would do it. I could have refused. The fault is mine. I am sorry, my lord and Miss Conway.”

“The fault is mine!” said Rose. “Stemple never would have done such a thing on his own. It was my idea. I told him to do it. I am the one who owes an apology. I am terribly sorry, Stemple, for placing you in such a difficult position.”

Colin was trying to take everything in. Had his household conspired to keep Ava from leaving?  
“Do you not also owe Miss Conway an apology?”

“Yes, I do,” said Rose. “Ava, I am sorry I deceived you. I want you to stay and this was the only way I could think to do that.”

“But I must go,” said Ava.

“Please stay, Miss Conway,” said Letty. “We have so much fun together and you’ve taught me so much and who will help us decorate for Christmas next year if you leave?”

Ava looked at a loss for words. Colin thought it was likely the first time in history such a thing had happened. “Well, Miss Conway? What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I certainly do not wish to leave...” she began.

“So you’re staying?” said Letty.

“I would like to...”

“You’re going to stay!”

“Poppet, I do not know if I can.”

“Please say you’ll consider staying,” said Rose.

“I will consider it,” said Ava softly, though not with as much conviction as Colin would have liked.

But the day was looking brighter because of it. Until Colin remembered the task ahead of him. “I must be off.”

“Can’t you stay here instead?” asked Letty. “We’re holding lessons outside and Rose is coming even though she doesn’t need to learn anything anymore.”

Colin kissed his youngest sister as he prepared to leave. “I think perhaps Rose needs to learn to mind her own business a bit more, even if her heart is in the right place.” Then he kissed Rose to take the sting out of his words.

But as Colin walked to the manor house, he was heartened by how much his family loved Ava.

\* \* \*

“I thought it was time for you and me to have a talk,” said Mr. Babcock from behind the desk in the study. It was the same desk that Colin’s father had occupied whenever he’d called his children into account. And that desk was the same one Colin and James would have to grip as they bent over for their canings. Looking at it now, Colin wondered why he hadn’t burned the damned thing the moment he became the earl.

“Are you listening to me, Ridgeway?”

“Of course, sir. It is time for a talk.”

“As I’m sure you know, Nora’s marriage portion is significant. In your case it would have to be in order to cover your significant debts, even if most of them were incurred by your father.”

“If I might ask, how do you know how the debts were incurred?”

“I had you investigated, of course. You don’t really think I’d come to England without knowing about the peers who were in want of a wife? I had my man of business look into the lot of you. You’re a good deal more impoverished than most of them. But you don’t have a gaming problem, a love of drink or opium, and you’re even discreet enough with your mistresses that my man couldn’t figure out who you have set up in town. Of course, your finances are so bad you might not be able to afford any of those things, up to and including the girl. But plenty of your peers are poor, yet are still able to be miscreants and deviants.”

“I am flattered to be found guilty of poverty but cleared of the miscreant and deviant charges.” If Colin didn’t punch this man before the end of the interview, he would surely have apoplexy from the thwarted desire.

“I am willing to give you £75,000 when you marry Nora, then I can gift you £25,000 more *per annum*. Assuming you keep my little girl happy, of course, as well as help me in my business endeavors.”

It was all Colin could do not to let his jaw drop inelegantly to the floor. £75,000? That was more than enough to settle all the debts, restore the estate and give his sisters the future they deserved.

“Are those terms agreeable, Ridgeway?”

If all that had been at stake was money, they would have been more than agreeable. But there was more, even if Colin did not wish to think of it. “I have not yet spoken to your daughter, sir. And, in truth, I have not decided to propose.”

“I’ll raise it to £30,000 *per annum*, but I’ll expect you to introduce me to all your rich friends.” Colin realized that in marrying Nora, he would also be subjecting himself to a lifetime of doing her father’s bidding.

But £75,000. Then £30,000 *per annum*.

“That is a most generous offer, sir. But as I said, I have not yet made up my mind.”

Mr. Babcock had a rather thunderous look on his face, reminding Colin even more of his father. But, fortunately, the beautiful Miss Babcock chose that moment to enter the study.

“Papa, you cannot mean to keep Lord Ridgeway to yourself. He has come to take me for a walk on his beautiful estate.”

“I suppose you can go,” said her father. “But Ridgeway, I don’t intend to wait forever.”

“Of course, sir,” said Colin, as he escorted Nora from the room, grateful for the escape.

She looked remarkably beautiful with a pink woolen cloak and a matching fur hat, muff and collar.

“You’re certain you will not mind the cold?” he asked her.

“Not when I am on your arm, I am sure,” she said smiling.

And, indeed, Miss Babcock’s perfect looks were only enhanced by the brisk weather that brought a pretty pink glow to her skin.

“Your estate is magical in winter,” she said. “I can only imagine how beautiful it is in spring.”

“It is lovely.” He should add a compliment like “but not as lovely as you.” But he didn’t.

“I have not yet been to London, because Papa felt we should celebrate Christmas at a true English estate. But I confess I look forward to visiting the capital. I understand you spend a good portion of the year there.”

“Until recently I spent a great deal of time there, though now I believe I will only be going back when Lords is in session.”

“So you would wish to spend more time here?”

Colin couldn't tell for certain, but Miss Babcock sounded a bit disappointed.

“My sisters are here and while Rose will have her come-out, I wouldn't want Letty to spend all her time in town.”

“Your sisters are both such dear girls. I so look forward to getting to know them better, especially dear Letty.”

“Speaking of my sisters, there they are now, along with Miss Conway.”

“Yes, the interesting Miss Conway. But what are they doing?”

“Making snow angels.”

Colin hadn't consciously walked in the direction of the dower house, the direction of Ava. But he was there now. And Miss Conway's lesson seemed to be about the making of snow angels.

“Hello, Miss Babcock!” said Letty from the ground. “You and Colin must join us!”

“Join you how, Lady Leticia?”

“Make angels with us!”

“Yes, Miss Babcock,” called Rose from beside Letty, “do join us. We're having ever so much fun.”

Colin had to cough to cover his laugh. While he knew Letty's invitation had been innocent, he had a feeling Rose knew damned well the last thing Miss Babcock would do was lie down in the snow.

But she did smile prettily at the two sisters. “Thank you so much for the invitation, but I am afraid my cloak would be ruined.”

“You could go change,” said Letty. “We'll wait.”

Colin looked at the beautiful Miss Babcock, dressed in the first stare of fashion. Even if she were to ruin her cloak and hat, he had no doubt she had a wardrobe filled with replacements. Then he looked at Miss Conway lying in the snow, flailing her limbs, wearing her old cloak and

the mismatched scarves and mittens that Rose had found in the attic that had probably last been worn some twenty years earlier. One of these ladies would make him an excellent wife and be an incredible mother to his children.

It was not the woman on his arm.

“I think,” said Colin, “that perhaps angel making is not something Miss Babcock wishes to do today.

“Thank you for understanding,” said Nora, as she tugged on his arm.

“However,” continued Colin, “I believe I must partake of this exercise. They are in desperate need of a male angel.”

“We are!” said Letty.

So Colin fell back into the snow next to Ava and began to make his angel. He looked to his right to see that Ava was enjoying herself just as much as Letty and Rose. He knew what he should do. But even more so, he knew what he wanted to do. And he didn’t want to fight his heart any longer. He found himself laughing, even as he knew he would never receive a £75,000 dowry nor £30,000 *per annum*.

\* \* \*

“What do you mean, my lord?” asked Nora.

After returning to the house Colin had requested a moment alone with Nora, which Mrs. Babcock had been only too happy to grant. He believed she would have escorted them to a bedchamber if asked, but instead, had deposited them in the sitting room, then closed the door. Colin had just told Nora that he regretfully would be ending his courtship of her.

“While it has been a delight spending time with you and your family, I believe we would not suit. I am afraid that my years in London have made me quite unfit for polite company such as your family’s.”

Nora frowned. “I do not understand.”

“I have been alone for too long and have a great deal of work ahead of me as head of the family. I am afraid I could not give you the attention you deserve.” But he looked forward to showering Ava with it, even as he would have to redouble his efforts to earn money.

“Am I to understand that you are rejecting me?”

“Not at all. I am recognizing my particular weaknesses that would not make this a good match. The fault is wholly mine.”

“Well, of course it is. But you cannot be serious. You cannot reject me.”

“I am not rejecting you, Miss Babcock. It is only my own...”

“Stubble it! Is it that Miss Conway baggage?”

Colin stiffened. “Miss Conway is my friend. I will not allow you to speak disparagingly of her.”

“I’ll bet she’s more than your friend. Did you get her with child and this is some misguided effort to ‘do the right thing?’ The right thing would be to send her on her way. You’re poor. Embarrassingly so. How would you even provide for her? For anyone? You don’t even have a proper carriage! You were lucky that I even considered you for a husband. I had many options. Papa gave me a list, then we came to this dreadful county hoping to make your acquaintance. I can see now I was wasting my time. But I won’t make that mistake again. I’m sure Lord Clayton will be an excellent husband.”

Colin was struck with a profound sense of relief that he hadn’t married this harridan. But no one should have to be bound to Clayton. “Miss Babcock, while you may be upset by this turn of events, I advise you to avoid Clayton. He would not make you a good husband.”

“Yes, it would be terrible to be married to someone with all that blunt, wouldn’t it? I can only imagine the horrors I would encounter being showered in jewels and fine clothes, while everyone bowed and scraped. God save me from wealth. You are a horrid man and I hope you and that scandalous family are confined to that cottage until you’re dragged away to the poor house.”

“Upon further reflection, perhaps you and Clayton would do well together. I shall take my leave of you now. Pray give my regards to your family.” He gave a creditable bow, for he was someone who always had good manners. He was also in a terribly good mood, since he could now marry Ava. They’d still be, in the words of Miss Babcock, embarrassingly poor, but he would find a way around that.

As he opened the doors, he almost ran into Myra, who must have been listening at the keyhole.

“Miss Myra,” he bowed to her. “I believe I may be *persona non grata* here after today. But I wanted to wish you well during your stay in England. I have a feeling your family may be moving to London before long.”

“You rejected Nora,” said Myra, who was stating it as a fact, rather than asking a question.

“I believe I am not the man for your sister.”

“That was obvious to me from the very beginning.”

Colin flinched as he heard the sound of a vase crashing against the wall from inside the sitting room. Apparently, Mrs. Babcock heard it, too, for she scurried across the foyer to check on her eldest daughter.

Myra continued. "I have to admire you for being such a gentleman in the face of my sister's deplorable tirade."

"I would not cast aspersions upon her, but thank you."

"Do you plan to marry that governess of yours?"

Colin wasn't sure how to reply. It was certainly none of this chit's business, but she was being quite reasonable and had the terrible misfortune to have Nora as a sister. "My future plans are yet unclear."

"They shouldn't be," said Myra, as they heard more crashes from inside the sitting room. "Perhaps we should take a walk."

Colin wasn't sure how to tell Myra he wasn't interested in her. "I really should be going."

"Do not worry. I have no designs on you. Quite frankly you're too poor for even me to consider. But I do know something that might interest you. And it will simply infuriate my sister."

"Very well," said Colin as he took her arm and walked toward the front door.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Other than when her father died, Ava could not remember being this miserable. She'd had a delightful day with Rose and Letty, though she felt guilty since their excursion had been rather light on lessons. But once they'd seen the pristine snow it had been all but impossible not to play in it. She'd tried to talk about how snow was formed, but one snowball hit from Rose had been all it had taken to wipe away any thoughts of teaching. And it was true that Letty deserved all the fun she could have.

Even seeing Colin with the beautiful Nora Babcock hadn't spoiled her mood, though it hadn't exactly added to her joy, either. They looked perfect together. Absolutely perfect. She'd had to stop Rose from hitting Miss Babcock on the arse with a snowball as she and Colin left, even if Ava had secretly wanted it to happen.

But then Ava had returned to the house and seen the post. There was a letter from B. Jones, Clayton's publisher. She did not doubt what it said. And that meant she had to leave this house tomorrow.

Forever.

The very thought was enough to make her ill. If she didn't arrive in London, Colin would not receive the advance. She would go there and meet Clayton. But she would not become his mistress. She would only stay long enough to meet the terms of the agreement, then depart as soon as possible for America. Well, she would depart for Portsmouth where she would hopefully find a way to earn enough for her passage to the United States.

She was curled up in the window seat of her pretty room, looking out at the fields covered in snow. She would never see them in spring. She would never see them any other way than they were right now.

She had to do something to get out of these doldrums. She had to face her new circumstances and make the most of them. She had to persevere, no matter how much she wished to return to bed and sleep for a decade or so.

There was a knock at her door, then Colin entered.

“Colin,” she said as she jumped up. “What are you doing here? Is something wrong with Letty?”

“Nothing is wrong with Letty. But I have two bits of news and I believe you’ll like both of them. At least I very much hope you will.”

She knew what one of them was. “You should not be in here. It is most inappropriate.”

“Are you not curious about what I’m going to say?”

“Of course I am. Pray deliver your news.”

“The first announcement is that I have broken things off with Nora Babcock. Not that there was anything to break off. But I told her I am no longer going to court her.”

“What?” That was surprising, especially since he couldn’t have done that before seeing the letter from B. Jones. He’d broken things off with Miss Babcock knowing that he dearly needed the money. What did that mean?

He continued. “I am a selfish creature. I know I have a responsibility to my family. But I could not marry a woman I do not love, especially when I have already given my heart to you.”

Ava wanted to cry from the beauty of it. And the tragedy of knowing she would soon be forced to leave. “But the money...”

“Is nothing compared to you. I have been leaning this way for quite some time. ‘Struth I was never enamored of the idea of marrying anyone for money. And in my subsequent conversation with Miss Babcock I learned without any doubt that marrying her would have been an utter nightmare.”

“But how will you live? The debts? Rose’s Season.”

“It doesn’t matter. Once I saw you making snow angels with my sisters, it became imperative that I follow my heart. And I followed it to you.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her. Ava reveled in the warmth and was disappointed when he drew back.

“Now, for my second piece of news. It turns out I shan’t be poor after all. I have a publishing contract from a company called B. Jones. It is glorious news, is it not?”

“Glorious,” she said quietly.

“It’s a £1000 advance, with another £25,000 once I finish my book.” Colin was grinning from ear to ear.

Ava could only gape. Clayton had truly laid it on thick. And how disappointed Colin would be when he learned he’d never get the £25,000. When she saw Clayton in London she would be sure to plant him a facer.

“Aren’t you excited, sweetheart? This means we can be married. If you’ll have me, of course. Will you marry me, Ava? Will you?”

She wanted that more than anything. But how could she compound the pain she would cause him by agreeing to marry him when she knew she would leave tomorrow? “Colin, this is wonderful news. Why not leave a discussion of marriage to another day?”

“If it helps you to decide, you should know that since I’ll be getting £25,000, we’ll be able to have a decadent *ton* wedding.”

“What?”

“Not only that, but I just told Rose she can have her Season and I promised Letty that we’ll take her to Italy. Both of them are so excited. We have our lives back, sweetheart.”

This was terrible. The girls would be so disappointed when the contract fell through. And Colin would be humiliated. “But Colin, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s, well, you must practice economy.”

“Not with £25,000. We’ll have more than enough blunt.”

“But, but…”

“But what, sweetheart?”

There was something in Colin’s tone. Something hard that she’d never heard before. She looked up to find his penetrating gaze upon her. And he wasn’t happy.

“You know,” she said. What had given it away?

He was more angry than she’d ever seen him.

“Tell me you weren’t going to be Clayton’s mistress.”

“Of course not! I was going to go to London so you’d at least get to keep the advance, then I would find a way to leave for America.”

Thankfully he seemed to believe her, but it didn't improve his mood. "You were going to leave without telling me."

"I couldn't tell you. I knew you would call him out or do something to bring even more scandal down on the situation, which would hurt your sisters. How did you find out?"

"Myra Babcock overheard Clayton's despicable proposition. Why didn't you come to me with this?"

Now he seemed hurt and Ava couldn't stand it. "Because it would have placed you in a terrible situation – choosing between your sisters and me. Clayton is telling people I was his mistress. If you marry me, it will ruin your sisters' future. I am never going to be his mistress, but I have to leave."

"No, you do not."

"But your sisters...."

"Will understand. Come with me."

"Where?"

"To talk to them."

"I can't. It is too embarrassing. What are you..."

Colin picked her up as if she weighed nothing and carried her out of the room, down the hall, down the stairs and into the kitchen, where Rose, Letty, Maude and Stemple were taking tea.

"Are you giving rides?" asked Letty.

"Perhaps later, poppet. Ava hurt her foot and had to be carried downstairs. Can you do me a favor? I believe Jasper is in the attic. Can you please find him and bring him down here?"

"What's he doing in the attic?"

"Probably shredding the curtains. But I would very much appreciate it if you did it."

That was all it took for the eager-to-please Letty to leave the room.

"Now," said Colin, "we have perhaps ten minutes before Letty realizes Jasper is actually in the sitting room, scratching one of my least favorite chairs. There is something all of you should know since it concerns each of you."

Colin told them about the end of his courtship with Miss Babcock which pleased them all. Then he recounted Clayton's proposition.

“I cannot believe that bastard would try to hurt you and Ava by using Letty and me,” said Rose. “And before you scold me for my language, Colin, that is the most polite name I can think to call him.”

“I would like to catch Clayton in a dark alley,” said Stemple. “Give me the word, my lord, and I will make it happen.”

“Thank God for Miss Myra,” said Maude. “I cannot think what would have happened to Ava if she’d left.”

“I still must leave,” said Ava, with tears in her eyes. “I cannot bear to hurt Rose and Letty.”

“You will only hurt us if you leave,” said Rose, as she hugged her. “I want my brother to be happy more than anything in the world. I want you to be happy. It’s obvious to everyone that the two of you are in love. You belong together.”

“But the scandal. Clayton will tell everyone I’m his mistress.”

“Anyone who listens to him is a fool,” said Colin. “And, quite frankly, it won’t be the first scandal this family has endured. As for the money, well, that is something that affects everyone.”

“I am confident we can find a solution,” said Rose.

“I am content working without wages,” said Stemple.

“As am I,” said Maude. “It’ll be worth it to see the two of you as happy as Victor and me.”

“What about you, Ava?” asked Colin. “Can you marry a poor man?”

“It is not that. I do not wish to create a scandal...”

“Yes or no, Ava? Will you take me as your husband, knowing the hardships ahead? For I love you and cannot bear to think of life without you.”

This time Ava didn’t try to prevent the tears from falling. And for once in her life, she chose the selfish course of action. “Yes, Colin. I love you, too.”

Later, Ava wasn’t sure if she’d kissed him or if he’d kissed her. She also could not believe they’d done so in front of everyone. But at the time, all she knew was she had a future with the man she loved.

“Jasper wasn’t in the attics...you’re kissing!” said Letty as she entered the kitchen, holding her surly cat.

“Poppet,” said Rose. “Ava is going to be your new sister. She is marrying Colin.”

Letty hugged her. “No more maths,” she said.

“More maths,” said Ava, as she hugged her back. “I am afraid that I will continue on as your governess for the foreseeable future.”

Despite that, Letty looked almost as happy as Ava and Colin.

Even though no one was as happy as Ava and Colin.

\* \* \*

The rest of the afternoon passed in a festive mood. Colin’s sisters couldn’t be more thrilled that he would be marrying Ava. And, though the ledgers hadn’t changed and there were still debts to be paid, Colin had not felt peace in his heart like this for many years.

Somehow Ava had done that for him.

That night Colin carried Letty to bed, since the girl had stayed up later than usual with the excitement of planning another wedding. He and Ava read her a story as Colin thought of putting their own child to bed. He realized it would be yet another mouth to feed – he seemed to excel at increasing his expenses – but he was not worried. They would find a way to get by. Together. He and Ava, with Rose and Letty and Maude and Stemple.

Once Letty fell asleep, Colin and Ava tiptoed out of her room. Ava went to her door and turned back to him. “Good night, Colin.”

“No, sweetheart. The night is just beginning.” He swept her off her feet then rushed down the hall to his own bedchamber since it wouldn’t do for either of his sisters to take an ill-timed trip to the hall.

He opened the door, then locked it behind him. Only then did he put Ava back on her feet.

“Colin, I shouldn’t be in here.”

“Of course you should. You’re my countess now.”

“Not legally.”

“A mere technicality. Did you really think I could wait three weeks to have you in our bed? For it is our bed.”

“The Countess of Ridgeway does not have her own bedchamber?” Ava asked before kissing him.

“For all intents and purposes, no. You will spend your nights with me. In this bed. We’ll have to nestle into each other for warmth. I have no money, after all.”

“Does that mean on warm nights you’ll cast me out?” She kissed him again.

“On warm nights we shall have to nestle into each other because I won’t be able to sleep any other way. And you, Miss Conway, are wearing too many clothes.”

Colin remedied that in short order. As soon as she was naked, he took a long admiring look, then quickly deposited her in the bed under the down quilt. Because the room was incredibly cold and he really couldn’t afford to keep the fire going.

But he had no doubt he could keep her warm.

He quickly divested himself of clothing, aware that her eyes were devouring him. He began to run for the bed.

“Wait!” she said. “I want to admire you.”

“That can wait ‘til spring. Now let me in under those covers with you,” he said as he dove under the quilt and took her in his arms.

For long moments in the moonlight they simply kissed. He did not want to rush things, though his body did not want to wait all that long.

“Colin,” said Ava from beneath him. “Are you sure about this?”

He placed her hand on his hard cock. “Do you feel any uncertainty?”

For a moment she could not speak. She ran her hand slowly up and down his shaft, then closed her fingers around it.

Colin’s breath seized.

“I was not talking about this, Colin. I believe a part of you wants to be with me.”

“A big part of me,” he smiled against her lips before sucking in his breath yet again when she squeezed him as she stroked. “Sweetheart, if you want to have a serious conversation you cannot touch me at the same time.”

“Very well,” she said as she reluctantly took her hand from him.

“Actually, I was hoping we could make love now and talk later.”

“That does not surprise me, my lord,” she said in the prim governess tone of voice he loved so much. Then she became uncertain and his heart lurched. “But I do not wish to be a burden to your family.”

“Do not...”

“Hush,” she said, as she stopped his speech with a kiss.

“Ordering me around again, Miss Conway?”

“Always, my lord. Colin, I do not have the breeding to be your wife and half the *ton* will think I was Clayton’s mistress. How can you marry me?”

“The question, love, is how can I not? Before I met you, I looked at my life and only saw where I was falling short. Now I look at it and think about how we can rise together.”

“That is beautiful.”

“Yes, it is. If only you could give me a book contract.” He kissed her then and there were no more thoughts of the future. Only what they had in that bed at that time.

The feel of his skin against hers. The heat between them. The way it would always be.

He kissed her neck as he moved his hand down her body, caressing her breasts, then moving lower. He kissed his way down her body, then suckled at her breast as he moved his hand to the damp curls between her legs. She was moaning softly beneath him but he had to make sure she was as ready as she could be.

He continued his journey downward until he found the heart of her. He began lapping at her, laving the pink bud. She was trying to be quiet, but it was fortuitous that the master suite was as large as it was.

She pulled a pillow over to muffle her moans. He reached up and took it away. He sucked once, twice, thrice more and she quickly covered her mouth again before moaning in ecstasy.

And it was a good thing it happened when it did because he could barely control himself any longer. He lay on top of her, watching as the dazed look in her eyes slowly returned to normal. She reached up and kissed him, then he parted her legs and began to slowly press into her.

She tensed and he slowed even further, praying for strength. When he reached her maidenhead he gently rocked back and forth before piercing it. She flinched, then reached up to kiss him.

“It gets better, doesn’t it?” she whispered in his ear.

He panicked, then looked down to see the laughter in her eyes.

The minx.

“Fill me, Colin. Fill me with your love.”

And he did. As he always would.

They moved together in passion and love. In relief of finding each other. Of knowing that two good souls would be better together.



This was unlike any experience Colin had ever had. Even in his poorest days he'd never had to search too hard for a bed partner. He was a physical, passionate man, but nothing had ever been like this. Nothing had ever come close.

He moved over her faster and faster. She clung to him, meeting his pace, matching his heart. He looked into her beautiful eyes, then she tensed as she climbed the peak and flew away. He followed directly afterward.

He lay on her, careful not to crush her as they both caught their breath. He tried to pull out of her, but she clung to him. So he carefully rolled onto his back taking her with him.

“I love you, Ava.”

“And I love you.”

“I hope I can be the man you deserve.”

“You already are, love. You already are.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Colin and Ava arose much later than the rest of the household the next day in part because they'd made love again that morning, then had been reluctant to leave their bed. Ava had wanted to return to her room the previous night, but Colin had said they should begin as they meant to go on. Rose would not care and Letty would not notice.

Ava rather thought Letty noticed everything, but she'd been all too happy to remain spooned together with him.

Rose and Letty were in the sitting room when Colin and Ava joined them.

"Ava, I've been sketching ideas for your wedding dress. As with Maude's we'll have to start with a gown in the attic, but I believe we can alter it to make it look like it's in the first stare of fashion."

"How lovely," said Ava, as she looked at the design. "But I am happy enough to be married in an existing gown so we can save the fabric."

"We can afford it, love," said Colin. "And Rose is an excellent seamstress."

"I know she is, but perhaps she would like a new gown."

"Who's coming up the drive?" asked Letty from the window. "It's a man and a little girl."

\* \* \*

James Emerson was tired. It had been a long journey from America to Portsmouth and then from Portsmouth to Wilton on the mail coach. But it seemed like the longest portion of the entire journey had been the one mile walk from the village to the manor.

Correction. The dower house. He'd learned his family had relocated to the dower house, which meant the finances were just as bad as ever, which made him feel even more guilty than he already did. He'd wanted to help his family, not add to their problems.

No one had recognized him in the village, but he couldn't really blame them. He'd been gone almost eight years, having left home at the age of twenty. He'd changed quite a bit in that time. He was no longer the slim son of the Earl of Ridgeway. He was built like a man who made his living from the land – which is exactly what he had been doing. He was wearing buckskin trousers and leather boots from a craftsman in Kentucky. By *ton* standards he needed a haircut. By his standards he did not, despite the fact his straight black hair was well past his shoulders. He was wearing the rough woolen overcoat of a man used to living in the wilderness. He had the tanned features of someone who spent a great deal of time outside.

But the biggest change was that he was not alone.

His steadfast companion, all of six years of age, was holding his hand, looking about quietly, with wide eyes. She'd never been to England before. She'd never crossed the ocean. She was curious about everything, but too shy to speak in front of others. That would come later. When the two of them were safe at home.

Which brought up what he'd just heard. The village gossips had been discussing the latest news. It had been assumed that the impoverished Earl of Ridgeway would become engaged to the eldest daughter of the rich Americans who now inhabited the manor. But the rich Americans were moving to London very much without the poor earl in tow.

James had not known that his family was now in the dower house. Perhaps Colin had sent word, but mail service in America was sporadic at best. He also had not known Colin was considering marrying for money, though it appeared that had come to naught.

Good. Colin deserved better than that.

James had passed the shopkeeper he remembered as being a nosy gossip, but had not said a word to her. She'd eyed him with suspicion and her eyes had widened at the sight of Anna's skin, which was the color of tea. Mrs. Watkins hadn't recognized him and James had no doubt her next topic of conversation would be the two strangers who'd just come to town on the mail coach. But James would waste no more time thinking of her. Not on a day like this. Not when he was coming home.

The walk to the house was silent and all but overwhelming. He could tell Anna was tired, though she never complained. He would carry her, except he was already carrying their luggage. He hoped she would like her new home, though he had no intention of making it permanent. If he was successful in his mission, they could be on their way back to America within a month. If he was unsuccessful...

It didn't bear thinking about.

James wondered what he would find at the house. He wasn't sure if he'd recognize Rose. She'd been but a girl of eleven when he'd last seen her. From the letters she'd written, it was clear she

was now a young lady of intelligence, good sense and humor. He hoped she'd be able to use the white silk he'd sent for her come-out ball. At least one of his siblings should have a love match. It might be too late for Colin and it was definitely too late for Win, who was married to a cold man who kept her away from her family. And James had little faith that he would ever fall in love. Not again. He would not allow that to happen. He had too much to lose.

He squeezed Anna's hand and she looked up at him and smiled. He was a father. He was still getting used to it, since he'd only learned of her existence but a few months earlier. She was about the same age as Letty, the sister he'd never met. He hoped they could be playmates for each other. Anna had had a difficult, lonely, life. Half Indian, she'd been ostracized by her tribe and it was only when her mother had been dying that she'd tracked down James to tell him he was a father.

His biggest regret in life was that he hadn't known earlier.

He was anxious to meet Letty. They'd corresponded whenever possible, but he'd left England just as she was born. He'd been told how cruelly she'd been treated over the years and he resolved that he would help make it up to her. His daughter and youngest sister had too much sadness in common. He hoped they could find some joy in each other.

The house finally came into view as they began the final quarter mile of their long journey. They must have been spotted while still far up the drive because they were yet one hundred feet away when the door was thrown open and a young woman stepped out. It was Rose. A grown up Rose.

He began running down the drive, making sure Anna could keep pace. He finally dropped his luggage and swung Rose into his arms. He'd thought of his homecoming countless times over the years and now it was finally happening.

Rose was laughing and crying all at once. "James! What a lovely surprise! Are you really here? I cannot believe it!"

James held her close, in part because he didn't want anyone else to see the tears in his eyes. Then he looked up to see that a small crowd had gathered, with what must be Letty smiling shyly at him.

"My dear girl, come let me hug you," he said, finally letting go of Rose.

That was all the encouragement Letty needed, for she ran into his arms. Colin was beaming ear to ear. Then James realized he was being dreadfully unfair to Anna.

"Anna," he said. "Here are my sisters and brother to come greet us. Colin, Rose, Letty, this is my daughter Anna."

There was a moment of stunned silence from Colin and Rose, but Letty wasted no time at all in making her feelings known. She hugged Anna, who was startled at first, then tentatively returned the hug.

“Oh, Anna, it is so very grand to meet you,” said Rose, as she, too, hugged Anna, being careful not to overwhelm her. “I am your Aunt Rose and this is your Aunt Letty and we could not be happier to have you here.”

“I’m an aunt?” said Letty, laughing.

James watched his daughter anxiously, for she was not given to showing emotion, especially to strangers. But Letty’s enthusiasm must have been contagious, for Anna gently returned Rose’s embrace and even smiled at Letty, who was now talking non-stop about all the things they would do now that James and Anna had come home.

“Ava! I can call you Ava now that you’re to marry Colin, can I not?” Letty called to the attractive woman James had not recognized.

“Of course you can, sweetheart,” said Ava.

James looked at his brother in surprise. He was betrothed to a woman who, while quite attractive, did not seem to be an heiress. Now he understood why the American family was currently decamping from the manor.

Letty continued. “Ava, I have a niece!”

“That is very exciting,” said Colin’s betrothed, “but perhaps we can all move inside since it’s dreadfully cold out and I’m sure our niece and your uncle have had a long journey.”

“An excellent idea,” said Colin, as he ushered the ladies into the house, but remained behind to face James.

As two brothers who’d grown up with a tyrannical father, they’d been through a great deal together. Neither of them had been all that comfortable showing emotion earlier in life. Colin had often retreated into playing the court jester, making everyone laugh. James had simply been quiet, tending to mull things over again and again until he could make sense of them. Even when there was no sense to be made.

And now they were face to face once more.

For a moment, neither moved. Then one or the other moved – it was impossible to tell who’d started first – and they hugged each other, culminating in pats on the back that could have felled oxen. James observed that while Colin hadn’t spent the past eight years working the land as he had, he certainly hadn’t gone to fat, either.

“Welcome home, brother mine,” said Colin grinning. “And you have brought a wonderful niece to us. I know you have not been the most avid correspondent...”

“The mail service is rather erratic.”

“I am sure that it is. But do you think that in, perhaps, one of your letters you might have mentioned I am now an uncle? She’s quite beautiful, by the way. I can only assume she gets all of her good looks from her mother. Will she also be joining us?”

James shook his head, sadder about Alawa’s death than he’d ever been. He hadn’t known Anna’s mother well, which made him feel ashamed. But she had been a good woman and had done her best to raise Anna despite the resistance of her tribe. He would be forever grateful that she had reached out to him before her death. “She died four months ago. I was unaware of Anna’s existence until a short time before that.”

“I am sorry,” said Colin. “But not to make too fine a point of it, you couldn’t have told us in your Christmas letter?”

James had to laugh. “Is it not enough that the two of us are here now in the flesh?”

“A perfectly valid point. Surprising, coming from you. Now I would like to meet my niece.”

“And I shall meet your bride-to-be. Which begs the question: could you not have mentioned the delectable lady in one of your letters?”

“That will be the last time you refer to my wife-to-be as delectable, unless you would like to sleep in the stables.”

“You wouldn’t do that to your niece.”

“To her? Never. To you, in a heartbeat.”

“I would think you’d be much more welcoming. I have, after all, been gone for several years.”

“Yes, well, perhaps Maude can make a pudding for your return. But Ava is not your present. Now get your sorry arse in the house before I kick it all the way back to America.”

“I would like to see you try.”

But they were, unfortunately, interrupted before it could be attempted by Rose, who’d stepped outside. “Colin, James, come in the house. It’s freezing out there.”

“She’s grown into a bossy chit, hasn’t she?” said James, grinning.

“Intolerably so. Who do you think took the initiative to get us moved to this place? If left to my own devices, I’m sure I could have solved our financial problems in only another two or three decades.” He kissed his sister as he reached her. James put his arm around her waist.

“This is turning into the very best of years,” said Rose, as she entered the house with both her brothers. “And I think it was most clever of James to bring me such a lovely niece.”

When they reached the foyer, Letty was still happily chatting away. Apparently, her plans had evolved into swims in the lake during summer and hikes through the hills.

Ava was removing Anna’s wet things. She took off her own shawl, placing it around Anna’s shoulders to warm her up, all the while smiling and making her feel at home.

A man James did not recognize bowed, then helped divest him of his things. He was badly scarred on one side of his face, probably as a result of the war.

“James,” said Colin, “this is Stemple, my poorly paid valet in London, who has been promoted to unpaid butler at the dower house.”

“Lord James,” said Stemple as he bowed. “Welcome home, sir.”

“Thank you, Stemple. It is a pleasure to meet you. If you suffered through as my brother’s valet, I can only assume you are a hearty soul impervious to boredom. Well done, sir.”

“Ignore him, Stemple,” said Colin.

Stemple ignored Colin. “Lord James, I shall take your luggage upstairs. Do you have any thoughts as to where Miss Emerson shall sleep?”

James considered the question. “It has been quite some time since I was in the dower house and I remember it only vaguely. I care little for where I will sleep, but would like my daughter close to me, not in any type of nursery.”

“Currently four of the bedchambers are occupied. But the two at the end of the hall are vacant, if you and Miss Emerson would like to stay there. If I might suggest it, your daughter may also wish to share a bedchamber with Lady Leticia.”

James and Colin looked over to where Letty was in alt chattering. This time she’d made it all the way to next Christmas, where she was talking about making snow angels. Anna had not said much, but at least she did not look frightened, a sight James had seen all too often in the past. He turned back to the butler. “Thank you, Stemple. I believe my daughter would like that, as long as it pleases Letty, as well.”

“Very good, my lord, I shall see to the arrangements straight away.”

Colin approached Anna carefully, bending to greet her. “I cannot imagine a better day than the one in which I get to meet my niece. I’m your uncle Colin and I am so happy you’ve come home.”

Anna smiled shyly at him as she clutched Ava’s shawl about her. She wore her black hair in two long braids. James’s heart warmed at the way his entire family – as well as Colin’s betrothed – had taken to Anna right away. But he’d expected nothing less. For, despite the bad example of their parents, his brothers and sisters were good people and tolerant of those who were different.

He didn’t have the heart to tell his brother that they had not truly come home. Home was an ocean away where he still had the dream of being his own man. But he would not spoil the day with such a comment. Especially because he feared he would still cry – actually cry – with the joy of seeing his family again.

He cleared his throat, instead.

“Ava,” said Colin, “please allow me to introduce you to my brother the prodigal.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord James. I have heard so much about you.”

“Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to learn about you from Colin, so I look forward to doing it firsthand.” James could see Colin watching him warily. “But please allow me to give you a brotherly kiss.” He kissed Ava’s cheek. Approximately one second into it, Colin inserted his arm between them.

“That’s enough of that,” he said.

James almost laughed with relief. Colin had found himself a love match after all.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The wedding of Colin Emerson, Earl of Ridgeway to Miss Ava Conway was unusual in many respects. Some said he was marrying beneath him in wedding the daughter of a university professor. Lord Ridgeway refused to dignify that remark with a comment, though in private he said he liked having the new Countess of Ridgeway beneath him, atop him and any other way he found her.

Another unusual aspect of the wedding was that the ceremony itself was shared with their two servants – the only two servants employed at the dower house. It was simply unheard of for an earl to do such a thing. But since Ridgeway hardly had enough funds for a special license, he and his bride had had no choice but to wait for the banns to be called. It was rumored that he'd suggested the double wedding to his servants, who'd then postponed their own vows for another week to accommodate them.

Miss Conway had no relations at the wedding, though she had both Lady Leticia and Miss Anna Emerson as her attendants. That alone had scandalized the village, to have not one but two children who were all but bastards, even if the family did treat them as if they were, well, family.

Very few members of the *ton* were in attendance. That was to be expected, it was noted by some of the more vicious gossips, since it was hardly like the Emersons would be able to accommodate guests in the dower house.

Lord James was there, of course, with his little girl from America, whose skin was a most embarrassing tan color. Of course Lady Rosemary and the new Lady Ridgeway had been treating the little girl like a princess, even going so far as to tell everyone they encountered just how beautiful she was.

The oldest Emerson sister, Mrs. Pierce, had sent her regrets. But that was to be expected since it had been an age since she'd traveled to the estate. She hadn't even come for the old earl's funeral.

As for the *ton*, it was rumored that the former Lady Evelyn Williams, who'd rather scandalously married a Bow Street Inspector and even more peculiarly preferred to be called Mrs. Stapleton, had sent their congratulations, along with a present. None other than the Duke of Lynwood and his family, the Kellingtons, had also sent their congratulations. Apparently, Ridgeway had done some sort of service for that Bow Street chap, who happened to be friends with Lynwood. And it was well known that the Kellingtons were loyal to a fault.

The one attendee from London did create a scandal. Nicholas Chilcott, the Earl of Layton, was there. While it had never been formally acknowledged, everyone knew he was the family's half brother. The old Earl of Ridgeway had made one too many visits to the Layton family estate one county over. The handsome earl, with the Ridgeway dark looks, was even the same age as Colin Emerson.

Given the family's scandals which were all on display in the church and the fact that there would be no wedding breakfast since Ridgeway's cook and butler were also getting married, it was speculated no one from the village would even attend the wedding.

Of course, everyone did.

Everyone except for the Babcock family.

But it was said those Americans always did have ideas above their station.

\* \* \*

The two happy couples, along with the rest of the Emersons, arrived back at the house immediately following the ceremony. Maude had baked a cake the day before. And Colin raided the wine cellar for champagne.

"If there's one thing we can thank the old earl for, it was his love of wine," said Colin, as he poured everyone a drink.

Nicholas, the Earl of Layton, kissed Maude on the cheek and congratulated Stemple. Then he moved on to Ava. "Welcome to the family, my dear," he said as he kissed her cheek.

"And that's enough of that," said Colin as he inserted himself between them.

"If I'm playing host to Anna, Letty and Rose for the next month to give you and the other happy couple time alone here the least you can do is let me kiss the bride," said Nicholas.

"Where will I be?" asked James.

"The stables," said Colin and Nicholas at the same time.

"My love," said Ava, as she kissed her husband, "why don't you enjoy some time alone with your brothers while I help Anna, Letty and Rose pack?"

The three men took her suggestion, grabbing a decanter of brandy and retiring to the library where they opened the French doors to mask the cigar smoke they were about to indulge in. The three of them sat in chairs with their feet up, looking for all the world like the brothers they were.

“You chose well, Colin,” said Nicholas. “I like her.”

“She’s a very good woman,” said James. “I’ve come to like her very much in the past three weeks.”

“James, I’m warning you…”

“In a brotherly fashion, of course,” said James.

“Colin,” said Nicholas. “If there’s anything you need, do not hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you, but I cannot take money from you.”

“I don’t see why not. You’re my brother. You have the care of two of my sisters and now my niece. I would do anything for you and James. I’m already frustrated enough that I can’t do anything for Win.”

“How often do you see her?” asked Colin. “I was turned away at the door each time I tried. I was on the verge of breaking in when I learned she and that bastard she’s married to were on the continent. Damn father to hell for making her marry that man.”

“I’ve tried time and time again. I’m not giving up, but I do have to spend some time at the estate. Simon is doing everything he can to make it seem like I’m neglecting my duties.”

Simon Chilcott was Nicholas’s cousin and heir.

“Simon Chilcott is a horse’s arse,” said James. “Unless he has changed a great deal since I last saw him.”

“He has not,” said Nicholas as he blew a smoke ring.

They sat in companionable silence for a moment.

“Nick,” said James. “I may need help with something.”

Both of his brothers looked at him in surprise. James was a fiercely independent man. It was what had driven him to America in the first place.

“I have a deed to some land. It’s not a large parcel, but it is important. It’s being contested in London since the other man claiming ownership is a peer. I need a good solicitor and was hoping you could help me find one.”

“Of course.”

“But if you have land in America,” said Colin slowly, “does that mean you’ll be returning?”

“Yes,” James said quietly. “As long as I settle this deed there is every reason for me to return.”

“But you’ve just come home,” said Colin.

“But I must do what is best for Anna.”

Colin wanted to object. He wanted to chain his brother to a post to keep him from leaving. But in the end, the three of them simply sat in silence. And he prayed that the future would take care of itself.

## **EPILOGUE**

Colin and Ava had been married almost one month. They'd spent that time alone in the dower house, other than for Stemple and Maude, who spent most of their time in Stemple's rooms.

Colin had just finished drawing up a plan for the spring planting, when Ava entered the library. She was wearing her brown dress, a gown he'd seen countless times before. She had an apron over it and there was a bit of dirt on her cheek from whatever she'd been cleaning.

No other countess would spend part of her day cleaning. No other countess would ever look this beautiful doing so.

"Something arrived for you in the post," she said, as she gave him the missive.

"Perhaps it is an inquiry about leasing the manor house." They'd told their solicitor to look for another tenant.

"I do not believe it is," said Ava.

Colin looked at the return address. "It's another publisher, no doubt to reject me. If I did not have you, dear Ava, to tell me what a splendid husband I am, I do believe these rejections would make a humble man of me."

"I have my doubts about that," said Ava as she kissed him.

"Minx," said Colin, as he opened the letter and began to read. Then re-read. Then he sat up and read it again.

"What does it say?"

"It's from an old friend from Eton days. Clayton and his gang used to beat him regularly until I put an end to it. And he says he wants to publish my book." He shook his head in disbelief.

"He wants to publish my book. He wants to publish my book!"

He hugged Ava and spun her around, then kissed her.

“That is wonderful! And wholly unsurprising. I knew someone would have the good sense to do it.”

Colin continued reading. “It says I shall get an advance of £100 and upon its publication I will receive...” Here he looked decidedly dejected. “...£1000. More if the book does well.”

“But of course it will do well.”

“£1000 for an entire book! That’s not much.”

“It is much more than we have now.”

“But how will I ever be able to shower you with the presents I want to give you with only £1000? Rose needs a Season. And I’d like to take Letty and Anna to London and...”

“Lord Ridgeway!” said the stern governess.

“Yes, Miss Conway?”

“Do not make me complain of you to your ancestors’ portraits. That is enough money to live on and we can even pay Maude and Stemple their back wages.”

“Do you not want your back wages?”

“My love, all I want is you.”

They kissed.

And all was well.

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I hope you liked the first installment of the Emerson series. James is up next as we find out just what he'll do for the love of family. (Answer: a lot.)

Thank you to all of you for being so supportive. Please take the time to pursue your own dreams. They are within reach. You just have to keep moving forward.

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