

As many times as she replayed what happened next, she could never decide the sequence of things. But which of them made the first move was irrelevant. Their lips met, hesitantly for an instant and then, as though he intended to devour her, Montfort clutched her in his powerful arms and pulled her off the stool. Had she been less tall, he would have lifted her from the ground entirely, no more mindful of her weight than if she were a feather.

His mouth covered hers with firm insistent pressure, urging her to respond. Her hands were trapped against his chest, so she grasped his lapels and clung to him to keep from toppling backward. That pulled him closer and, as her lips involuntarily parted, he slipped his tongue into her mouth and explored its tenderest parts. The sensation was altogether alarming and thrilling, heightened by his musky scent and the bristled contact of his moustache against her petal-soft skin. Like a newborn kitten, she blindly moved her lips against his.

Heat shot directly down through her midsection and her knees melted. She felt herself open in places she never knew existed.

Then, as abruptly as it started, it was over.

“Finish it? Odd you should use those words,” Montfort said, thrusting her back and pacing away as though nothing had happened. Her head swam, the buzzing grew louder in her ears and she panted for breath, but he looked as though he had done nothing more than help her up from the stool.

Gracelessly, she groped behind her and half fell to the stool.

“Family history has it those were the words Jacinta spoke before her husband finally ran her through with his rapier,” he said. “He forced her to watch as he killed and mutilated her lover, and then dragged Jacinta back to her chamber by that magnificent hair, dispatched her and propped her body in the turret window with her hair cascading down the wall.”

Claire gasped.

“Yes, that part was true,” he continued. “She flaunted that famous hair at her window to signal her lovers. This time it was the Roundheads’ undoing, because the earl had informed his own troops that a view of his lady’s mane from the parapet was the signal to attack.

“Fools who venture into the ruins today swear they know which stones fell from beneath the window when the Roundheads destroyed the tower during the siege, because they’re stained with Jacinta’s blood.

“That’s horrible,” Claire exclaimed. “I’ll never be able to look at the window in the library again. You’ve ruined a beautiful story forever!”

“No wonder you loved Joss Carter. Do you also prefer whitewash to the truth?”

“No, no,” Claire responded. “But surely you must admit some artistic license? Josiah wasn’t actually writing history...”

“Artistic license,” he sneered. “I’m doing you a favor, Miss Burton. When you look at that lovely window in ‘your’ library now, you can consider it a warning to traitors and adulterers. Lady Jacinta was not sacrificing herself to warn her husband of an impending attack – that was Joss’s nonsense. The real story is about two angry people who hated and deceived each other.”

“Is the world so ugly, then? Is there no room for beauty, romance, hope?”

“Not if it is purchased by sacrificing the truth.”

“But surely art is meant to uplift us, to show us what we can be, and not force us to grovel in our baser natures?”

“Is it base to be human, Miss Burton?”

Claire huffed out a mirthless chuckle and gestured to Rhys’s large signet ring, deeply incised with the figure of a dragon. “You are fierce on every subject, aren’t you? So much that I think I

begin to understand the Montfort family motto – if that’s not one of Josiah’s fictions, too. She grasped his hand and reads the words in Latin inscribed around the sigil.

“*Trifle not with the dragon,*” Claire parsed slowly. “Do I translate that correctly?”

“Very good. You are a scholar, then?”

“You give me too much credit,” Claire said stiffly as she dropped his hand. “I often sewed in the room my brother and his tutor used before Cam went to university. I liked to listen to the stories of antiquity they studied together.”

“And what does your learned brother think of this madness of yours, Miss Burton?”

“Madness!” she retorted. “Yes, I suppose it is. But I hope you will not judge me too harshly for it.”

“I don’t quite know how to judge you, Miss Burton, nor frankly, should you care. My opinion is not worth the bother, I assure you. But let us return to the purpose at hand. I’ll send my steward over tomorrow with a lease, if you wish.” He shoved open the cottage door and left her to follow or not as she wished.

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Montfort squinted in the bright sun, his thoughts addled. That kiss! He had kissed more women than he cared to count, and in more productive ways. But Claire’s kiss—the only word he could apply to it was “sweet.”

It warmed the center of his being like the cider that had so obviously thrown her off kilter.

But *she* had kissed *him*. It was like the mouse turning on the cat. He said he didn’t know what to think of her. That she baffled him would be closer to the mark. She was clever, he’d give her that. If she had fallen to Joss’s wiles, he’d wager it had been once only and she hadn’t enjoyed it.

Her Sunday-school guilt would have seen to that. No wonder she wanted to bury herself in the wilds of Herefordshire. She probably did daily penance or, worse, told herself it never happened.

But an affair with Claire Burton began to offer charms beyond the tangible. Yes, he'd get his land back, but how satisfying it would be to see her blossom as a woman under his hands, to find joy in their coupling. She seemed imminently teachable and more willing to learn than she realized.

But that kiss—he'd been kissed like that once before. Honestly. Fervently. With no thought beyond the moment. No calculation. Before Lucy spurned him, she had kissed him like that. But Montfort sensed a generosity in Claire that Lucy lacked. If Lucy was a cool draught of water for a thirsty man, Claire was a bountiful spring waiting to be tapped.

Minutes passed. He ran his tongue over his lips, recalling the taste of Claire's lips. Her perfume—lily of the valley?—lingered in his nostrils. He straightened his lapels, stared at the ground, adjusted his trousers. If she had noticed the quickening activity there during their embrace she had given no sign. Finally, he planted himself akimbo by the gate and stared up into the sky, braced for her reproach.

A lark soared amid trailing veils of cirrus, the liquid notes of its song falling to the earth below like crystal shards. Then she stood by his elbow and spoke.

"Lord Montfort," she said, her light voice mingling with the clear trills of the bird. "Where is my horse?"

He started and looked toward the road. His bay hunter, still tied to the dilapidated fence, pawed the dirt restively. Claire's horse was gone.