

THE COURTSHIP

A NOVELLA



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

GRACE BURROWES

contents

[The Courtship Windham - 0.5 by Grace Burrowes](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

The Courtship

Windham [1]

Grace Burrowes

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Windham - 0.5

The first novella to be published by New York Times bestselling author Grace Burrowes features the foundation story for her bestselling series. This is the tender story of love tested and won, and how Percy Windham, the dashing and brilliant man who was never supposed to become the Duke of Moreland, wooed the amazing lady who became his beloved Duchess.

Percival Windham is a second son, and a cavalry officer acclaimed and respected by his men. He is immensely attractive and distracts himself with the women who seem to throw themselves at him at every turn, until at a country house party, he meets beautiful, retiring Esther Himmelfarb. Esther's wealthier relations are taking shameless advantage of her dependence on them, and only Percy seems to see the striking intelligence beneath her modest demeanor. Percy sees her as the perfect companion and she finds in him the man of her dreams.

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- [The Courtship](#)
 - [One](#)
 - [Two](#)
 - [Three](#)
 - [Four](#)
 - [Acknowledgments](#)
 - [About the Author](#)
-

The Courtship
Windham - 0.5
by
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*This story is for every woman who thinks she doesn't fit in and isn't worthy of notice.
You may not fit in, but that's precisely because you are indeed worthy of notice.*

“One hears he takes snuff only from his mistresses’ naked breasts.”

Esther Himmelfarb rearranged her cards and stifled a snort at one of Charlotte Pankhurst’s more ridiculous observations.

Herodia Bellamy tossed the queen of diamonds onto the table. “One hears that he bathes frequently, but seldom alone.”

“A crowded undertaking,” Esther murmured, “given the man’s size in relation to the average bathing tub. Your turn, Lady Zephora.”

“I know for a *fact*,” Lady Zephora said softly, “that both Lord Anthony *and* Lord Percival have been ordered by Her Grace, their mama, to take brides this year.”

So much for whist. Esther continued to study her cards while the ladies catalogued Colonel Lord Percival Windham’s many positive attributes.

Their raptures matched Esther’s list of the man’s shortcomings almost exactly.

“He’s soooo handsome,” Charlotte cooed. “And it’s all genuine—the golden hair, the muscles, the height.”

“The dreamy blue eyes,” Herodia added. “When he looks at you, it’s as if he’s trying to convey that he loves you simply in the way he regards you.”

Not to be outdone, Zephora stated what Charlotte and Herodia had no doubt heard repeatedly from their mamas. “His wife would always have a courtesy title, and someday she might become the next *Duchess of Moreland*.”

Which was the outside of too much, since it contemplated the death of the present duke—a gentleman as vigorous as he was dignified—as well as the death of the current ducal heir, Lord Pembroke, an upright soul whose greatest sin was that he’d fathered only two girl children in ten years of marriage.

“Consider,” Esther said, gathering up the cards, “the present duchess would be your mama-in-law when you married Lord Percival. If she has the authority to recall commissioned officers from their billets in service to His Majesty, imagine the power she’d wield over a mere daughter-in-law.”

“Lord Percy wouldn’t allow her to intrude,” Charlotte sniffed. “You are just jealous, Esther, because a girl without a title or a dowry can’t look so high.”

The jab was unexpected, since these conclusions were seldom spoken aloud. They were accepted as common knowledge, which usually allowed Esther the backhanded gift of a nonentity’s privacy.

“Esther is pretty, well spoken, well educated in the domestic arts, *and* wellborn,” Herodia pointed out. “Cease carping, Charlotte, lest the gentlemen overhear you.”

This rebuke did not feel to Esther like a defense, because it wasn’t. Herodia was seizing an opportunity to appear superior to Charlotte, nothing more.

“I can *look* as high as I please,” Esther said, shuffling the deck into a neat stack. “Though looking alone holds little gratification. Shall I deal again?”

As long as lords Percival and Anthony Windham were in the room chatting up the hostess by the punch bowl, Esther would have to remain as the fourth in the game. Play—or what passed for it—resumed, while Esther sent up a silent prayer that the next three weeks went by as quickly—and as painlessly—as possible.

“I know that look, Percy.” Tony kept his voice down, thank God, because Lady Morrisette was only several yards away, latched on to the arm of His Grace, the Duke of Quimbey.

Percival Windham did not pause in his perusal of the blond young lady seated at a card table across the parlor. She had a stillness to her, a serenity that drew the eye more than all the flirtatious glances and powdered bosoms in the room. “What look?”

“You’re falling in love again. I’ve seen it a dozen times at least. Her Grace will rejoice to hear of it.”

“I do not fall in love, Anthony. I fall into bed, or occasionally into linen closets, private boudoirs, secluded bowers, that sort of thing.” Percival took a sip of decent punch and turned a direct stare on his younger brother. “And Her Grace will not be hearing a peep out of you, not unless you want me to apprise her of a certain tryst you had with Miss Gladys Holsopple before leaving Town.”

Tony’s smile was hopelessly unguarded. “Gladys Holsopple is toothsome and not too much concerned for propriety when nobody’s looking. An estimable female. And you don’t have to worry about my peaching on you—we’ve Mannering for that.”

Mannering, the valet they’d be sharing for the duration of the house party. Percival turned his thoughts in a more sanguine direction and gestured slightly with his glass. “Who’s the pretty card player?”

While appearing to arrange the lace at his cuff, Tony glanced across the room. “Herodia Bellamy. Well dowered, her papa is said to have Bute’s ear. Dances nicely and doesn’t titter.”

Tony was one of the best reconnaissance officers ever dispatched to Canada—where his talents had clearly been wasted. “Not her. She damned near tried to dance her way into my bedroom at Heckenbaum’s last week. The *pretty* one.” The one who made even arranging her cards an exercise in grace.

“Lady Zephora Needham. Her papa’s Earl Needham, and they say it takes two hours to arrange all them bows in the chit’s hair.”

Tony in a teasing mood was a burden, indeed.

“Not her, and not that gossiping Pankhurst twit, either. The one with the unpowdered hair. I haven’t seen her before.”

“Her.” Tony’s smile was replaced by a frown. “Not your type at all, Perce. Esther Himmelfarb. Well-bred, well read. The poor relation invited to make up the numbers when somebody cancels—at the very last minute. Grandpapa’s an earl, but she didn’t take, according to Gladys. She’s the sort to play chaperone when the proper chaperones are off in the butler’s pantry with the likes of you and me.”

Himmelfarb, a prosaic Teutonic name, suggesting connections to the heavily Germanized royal court.

Or suggesting... Percival studied the young lady. Blond hair was severely braided into a coronet that would accentuate her height when she stood. A single spray of rosebuds had been woven into the back of her coiffure, the barest ornamentation, when fashion allowed women to adorn their hair with bird’s nests and battleships.

Northern lights came to mind. Cool, beautiful, unexpected, and ethereal. Miss Esther

Himmelfarb had a complexion other women sought to achieve with cosmetics and generally failed. Perfect pale skin with more rosebud pink tingeing her high cheekbones, and not a beauty patch to be seen. Her dress was a sky-blue gown de chemise, no panniers, and not much bustle, but of soft velvet and expertly tailored.

All in all, a lovely woman, one upon whom primness sat more temptingly than all the wiles of a beckoning siren.

Percival watched as she shuffled the deck in tidy, economical moves. “Dallying with her would be a great deal of effort.” A *challenge*.

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “And yet you’re considering it. Ruin that girl’s reputation, and she has nothing left. I’ll call you out myself, tattle to Her Grace—”

“You are feeling the effects of the punch, Anthony. I do not dally with ladies barely out of the schoolroom.”

“Unless they’re widowed, fast, or fairly determined.”

Percy’s lips quirked up. “And very, very discreet.”

A moment of fraternal silence fell, during which the Duke of Quimbey, a handsome single man yet in his prime, laughed merrily at something Lady Morrisette said. The ladies at the card table all turned to regard Quimbey, the greatest prize on the marriage market for the past several Seasons.

“Thank God for Quimbey,” Percival said.

He’d spoken a trifle too loudly. Esther Himmelfarb swiveled her gaze to regard him, while the other ladies continued to ogle Quimbey with longing glances.

God in heaven, Anthony, I do believe you’re right this time.

Green eyes regarded the Moreland spare with a blend of humor, condescension, and... *pity*? There were depths in Esther Himmelfarb’s gaze, depths of reserve and self-possession that made a red-blooded male want to take down all that golden, shot-silk hair. To provoke her to blushes and sighs and... *passion*.

“Right about what, Perce?”

Had he spoken aloud?

“We’d best find a housemaid who can provide a distraction for Mannering. Can’t have any tales getting back to Her Grace when she’s decreed we’re both to be wed by year’s end.”

* * *

House parties entailed dancing. This was Holy Writ.

What better opportunity to look over the possible flirts and affairs, and to show oneself off to same, than the endless rotation of partners encountered on the dance floor?

Esther loathed the dance floor as her personal purgatory, until the final set concluded, and she found herself on the arm of—Everlasting Powers forefend!—Percival Windham. For her, the Almighty was now fashioning circles even of purgatory.

“Miss Himmelfarb, I believe?” His lordship winged an arm and smiled graciously. “Shall I have us introduced, or in the informality of the occasion, will you allow me to join you at supper?”

A more calculating man would have offered to escort her to whoever had the honor of dining with her, but then, Lord Percival likely did not have to be calculating.

“I will happily accept your escort to the buffet, my lord.” Where Michael might rescue her or Lady Morrisette would find some dowager needing company. Esther laced her gloved hand around Lord Percival’s arm, only to encounter a small surprise.

Or not so small.

Gossip had not lied. The man was muscular in the extreme, and this close, he was also of sufficient height to uphold the fiction that he’d protect Esther from any brigands or wolves wandering about Lady Morrisette’s parlor.

“Does your family hail from Kent, Miss Himmelfarb? I know most of the local families and cannot recall Himmelfarbs among them.”

The question was perfectly pleasant, and so too was his lordship’s scent. Not the scent of exertion or the standard rose-scented rice powder—he wasn’t wearing a wig—but something elusive...

“You’re twitching your nose like a thoughtful bunny, Miss Himmelfarb. Are you in anticipation of something particularly succulent among the supper offerings?”

He smiled down at her as he spoke, and for moment, Esther could not fashion a reply. Of all the times for Charlotte Pankhurst to be right about a man’s blue, blue eyes... “I’m trying to fathom the fragrance you’re wearing, my lord. It’s pleasant.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think from your expression that you do not approve of men wearing pleasant scents.” His tone, amused, teasing, suggested that sometimes, *all* he wore was a pleasant scent—and that just-for-you smile.

They came to a halt in the buffet line, which meant... Esther was doomed to sharing a meal with the man.

Lord Percival leaned nearer, as if confiding something amid the noise and bustle of the first night of a lively, extended social gathering. “Bay rum lacks imagination, don’t you think? I shall wear it when I’m a settled fellow with children in my nursery. There’s cedar in the scent I wear, reminds me of Canada. You’re partial to spicy scents yourself.”

He was inviting a reciprocal confidence from her with that observation. The notion of trading secrets with Percival Windham made something beneath Esther’s heart twang—disagreeably, of course. “Lavender with a touch of a few other things.”

While Esther stood beside Lord Percival, he leaned even closer and subtly inhaled through his patrician nose. Horses did that, gathered each other’s scent upon acquaintance. And like a filly, Esther held still for his lordship’s olfactory inspection and resisted the urge—the unladylike, disconcerting, thoroughly inappropriate urge—to treat him to a similar examination.

“My dear”—his lordship had straightened only a bit—“why is My Lady Hair Bows staring daggers in this direction?”

My lady...? Then... my dear?!

He was a very presuming fellow, even for a duke’s spare, and yet Esther felt the urge to smile back at him. “I’m not sure what you mean, my lord.”

“You know exactly what I mean, Miss Himmelfarb.” He picked up a plate, though they were still some distance from any sustenance. “Now the Needy girl is at her elbow, pouring brandy on the flames of gossip. You and I will be engaged by this time tomorrow, I don’t doubt.”

Did one correct a duke’s spare when he made light of marriage to a woman within staring distance of professional spinsterhood?

Yes, one did.

“Her name is Needham, my lord. And I should think an engagement unlikely when you have yet to ask for my hand and I have given no indication I would accept your suit.”

The light in his eyes changed, going from friendly—yes, that was the word—to something more intent. “You are an impertinent woman.” This did not, unfortunately, sound as if it put him off.

“As compared to you, my lord, who are somehow a *pertinent* man? Or perhaps pertinacious might apply?”

That was rude, intended to put the perishing idiot in his place, but it only added approval to the warmth in his gaze. His eyes crinkled at the corners, his lips curved up to reveal perfect, straight white teeth in a dazzling, alarmingly intimate smile.

“We’re going to get on famously, Miss Himmelfarb. I adore impertinent women.”

Esther knew not what to say to that. The line shuffled forward while Charlotte, Herodia, and Zephora glared a firing squad of daggers, and Esther tried to ignore the scent of cedar and spices.

* * *

“You most assuredly do not look like you’re enjoying yourself.”

Esther glanced around the ballroom, where guests were milling before the dancing resumed, then cast a brief, exasperated look at her cousin, the Honorable Michael Adelman.

“Could you enjoy yourself while the tops of your breasts were engaged in conversation by one man after another, and half those men married to wives busily ogling some other fellow’s falls?”

Michael’s lids drooped in a manner he likely did not intend to be seductive, though it made his good looks even more alluring. “I think the Needham girl might accept my suit. She’s said to be well dowered. The party lasts only three weeks, Esther.”

Remorse had Esther patting Michael’s sleeve. “Three weeks is nothing. We shall contrive. Compliment her coiffure lavishly.” That was the purpose of the outing, in fact—to secure an advantageous match for Michael, and as expeditiously as possible. Michael shuddered beside Esther on a gilded green-velvet sofa set into an alcove off the ballroom’s dance floor.

“How does one consummate a union with a wife who must sleep with a wooden pillow, lest she disturb the architecture of her hairstyle? I lie awake at night and fret over this, you know.”

He was her cousin, and Esther loved him, but he was only a man and therefore not much afflicted with insight.

“You capture her heart so completely that for you she’ll give up hours of torment having her hair dressed and content herself with elaborate wigs, while leaving her crowning glory in the state intended by the Almighty. We’d best mingle. Lady Morrisette has twice smiled this way.”

Michael rose and assisted Esther to her feet. “God help me,” he murmured. “Our hostess is reported to hold these gatherings mostly as a means of seeing to her own entertainment.” He bowed over Esther’s hand. “Say nice things about me to the Needmore girl.”

“Needham.”

And of course Esther would, for despite his dark good looks, height, and charm, without a decent match, Michael’s future held little worth looking forward to.

“Miss Himmelfarb.”

With effort, Esther did not grimace, for it appeared the tops of her breasts were again to engage in conversation. “Sir Jasper.” She gave him her hand, and because he was standing so close, when he bowed over it, his nose nearly touched her décolletage.

“The sets are forming, Miss Himmelfarb, and I would happily partner you.”

Something in his tone implied that his partnering was available in locations other than the dance floor, and on short notice. Sir Jasper Layton was not yet thirty, had all his teeth, and was as handsome as a bad bout with smallpox could leave a man. Three beauty patches and a heavy hand with the face powder did more to call attention to his scars than hide them, though.

Esther manufactured a smile. “Thank you, sir, and tell me how your sisters go on.”

He appeared surprised to recall he had sisters, though both attended the same court functions as Esther and many of the ladies present at the house party. Soon enough the steps of the dance saw him partnering other women, and Esther could breathe a sigh of relief.

“Are you concentrating on the steps, or have you taken me into dislike?” Percival Windham bowed to her jauntily, took both of her hands, and as the dance called for, moved closer. “Or is Sir Jasper overstepping?”

Esther dropped his hands, turned her back, smiled over her shoulder—*who* had chosen this particular dance?—and turned back to take Lord Percival’s hands. “I’m concentrating on the steps.”

They promenaded down the line, hands joined before them. “You’d rather be in the library, curled up with a book by the fire, reading French poems, or possibly German. Tell me, Miss Himmelfarb, do Germans write poetry?”

He was teasing, but also studying her as he smiled that particular, personal smile.

Esther dropped his hands and turned a full circle. “I’d be reading Shakespeare sonnets up in my room. Anybody can come upon a lady in the library.”

Though her room would be stuffy and dank because Esther lacked sufficient strength to pry open its single window.

“There’s a full moon tonight, Miss Himmelfarb. Why not walk with me in the garden instead?”

He turned to his corner and whisked her down the line, leaving Esther to wonder if twenty more days—and *nights*—of this nonsense was worth the effort of seeing her cousin suitably matched.

As she slipped up to her room an hour later on aching feet, she also spared a thought to wonder whom Percival Windham would have enticed into the garden, and if he’d truly limit his activities there to walking.

* * *

“The trouble is, we ain’t got a proper dam.”

Dear Tony was sliding past pleasantly foxed and barreling on to true inebriation, so Percival waved away the footman plying the card room’s decanter.

“You’re insulting the Duchess of Moreland, Tony, if you’re saying our mother is anything less than proper. One does this at considerable peril to his well-being.”

Tony continued to stare morosely at his brandy. “That’s what I’m saying. She’s all duchess and no mama. Not mama, not dame, not mother. We’d be back in Canada if His Grace had a notion how to foil her queer starts.”

“Do you honestly expect me to believe you’re missing Canada?”

“Not missing it, exactly, but there ain’t any debutantes in Canada, no levees, no duchesses.”

In vino, veritas. “There are bears and wolves, or had you forgotten?”

Tony offered his brother a rueful grin. “Wolves don’t sing any worse than those sopranos at the opera.”

“The sopranos are a good deal better smelling and friendlier.”

“That they are.” Tony blinked at his drink, perhaps wondering how the thing had gotten so quickly empty. “There’s one little Italian gal from the chorus, and I swear that mouth of hers could devour—”

“Anthony, we’re in proper company.” To the extent a card room of reprobates and dowagers could be considered proper at the end of a long evening.

At the peremptory note in Percy’s voice, Tony blinked. “Is it time to go home?”

Not for another twenty days. “We’re certainly not going back to Canada tonight.”

“Bloody cold in Canada,” Tony observed, apropos of nothing.

“True.” Percy set his drink aside and debated whether to leave Tony to his own devices at such a late hour. “At least in Canada the savages announce themselves as such, observe certain rules of engagement, and don’t use the minuet to scout out the opposition.”

“That’s exactly what I mean!” Tony gestured with his glass a trifle wildly. Then paused as if he’d heard an arresting sound. “I’ll be stepping to the gent’s retiring room for a moment.”

“Of course.” And Percy would not allow his younger brother to stumble through the corridors, half-disguised, in charity with the world, only to be pulled into a convenient broom closet by some enterprising debutante.

They negotiated the dimly lit passages without incident—unless a giggle from a secluded alcove on the second floor could be considered an incident. As Tony unbuttoned his falls and took a lean against a handy wall in the men’s retiring room, he aimed an oddly sober look at his brother.

“I’ve had this notion, lately, Perce.”

The man could piss and philosophize at the same time—a true exponent of the aristocracy. “Any particular notion?”

“It’s a queer notion, as queer as considering a vocation in the church.”

“Which you did for about fifteen minutes, until you recalled that bit about poverty, chastity, and obedience.” For Percy, five minutes’ contemplation of a life in the church had seen him buying his colors. “For God’s sake, button up if you’re done.”

“What? Oh, indeed.”

This late in the evening, Tony’s fingers were clumsy, though his brain apparently continued to lumber around and his mouth danced attendance on it. “I’ve had the notion Her Grace might be right. Petey ain’t getting any younger, and his lady ain’t dropped a bull calf in ten years of marriage.”

Tony was the only person in the whole of the realm who could refer to the Marquess of Pembroke, heir to the Moreland ducal title, as “Petey.”

“Lady Pembroke could yet conceive a son.”

“Canada is cold, Perce. It’s full of wolves and savages and colonials with very big, loud guns and little allegiance to dear King George.”

When Tony had fumbled a few buttons closed in relevant locations, Percy linked his arm through his brother’s. “Are you thinking of selling out and joining the ranks of retired bachelors?”

That would solve a significant problem for Percy, true, but the idea of boarding a ship for the colonies at the end of the Season and not having Tony there to provide his inane commentary was disquieting.

“I’m thinking of taking a bride,” Tony said, much of the bonhomie leaving his voice. “You like all that military whatnot, the pomp and nonsense, for King and Country. I like to be warm and well fed, to tup pretty girls, and spend my quarterly in two weeks flat.”

And so had Percy, until a few years in charge of several hundred younger sons and rascals like Tony had somehow soured the allure of returning to an idle existence. Then Her Grace had taken this notion to recall her sons from the provinces and lecture them about Duty to the Succession, Familial Loyalty, and Social Responsibility.

The woman put the average gunnery sergeant to shame with her harangues.

“You are not ideal husband material, Tony.” Percy spoke as gently as he could. “The ladies like some constancy for the first few years of marriage. They like to show off their trophy and drag a new husband about on calls. You’ve got the place in Hampshire, and you’d be expected to tend your acres for much of the year.”

Tony was silent until they reached the head of the stairs. “You’re saying I’d have to leave my bed before noon. Save the drinking until after supper, show up for parade inspection, the same as in Canada. Scout the terrain, deal with the locals.”

Put like that, civilian life didn’t sound like much of an adjustment.

“A wife would take umbrage at the opera singers. She’d expect pin money and babies.”

“Babies aren’t so bad.”

Tony sounded wistful, though he was right: babies were dear and about as easy to love as a human being could be. A man with two adorable nieces could admit such a thing easily—to himself. On the one hand, if Tony married and produced babies—male babies in particular—then Percy could sail back to the regiment despite Her Grace’s harangues and blustering.

And yet, on the other hand, to leave Tony behind in the clutches of a duchess-in-training, no older brother to seek consolation and counsel with, Her Grace looming over the marriage with a calendar in one hand and a receiving blanket in the other...

The Marquess of Pembroke was a decent fellow, but he hadn’t been able to hide from his younger brothers what the duchess’s interference had done to an otherwise civil and sanguine union.

“You’ll not be marrying anybody just yet, Tony Windham. As a duke’s son, you’re a prime catch. At least look over the possibilities at some length and think of your chorus girl.”

“Right-o, dear, sweet, little... the Italian—whatever her name is.”

“The one with the devouring mouth.”

* * *

A room to oneself was a mixed blessing at a gathering like Lady Morrisette’s. On the one hand, Esther had a little privacy in those rare moments when she wasn’t stepping and fetching for her betters, and particularly for Lady Morrisette.

On the other hand, a lady with a room to herself had to guard doubly against the gentlemen who “accidentally” stumbled into her chambers late at night. She also had no one with whom to discuss the

day's small revelations, such as how hard it had been not to watch Lord Percival Windham as he showed one lady after another how to hold her bow and let fly her arrows.

While Esther had lost the archery contest only by deliberately aiming her last shots wide of the bull's-eye, Charlotte's accuracy with a barbed comment was not to be underestimated, regardless of how desperately she'd needed Lord Percy's assistance with her bow.

Esther flipped back the covers and eased from the bed—the cot. She'd had a choice of sleeping with Lady Pott's maid in a stuffy little dressing room, or taking this glorified closet under the eaves. The closet had appealed, though on a warm night, it was nigh stifling, and on a cool night it would be frigid.

“I need a posset.”

Closets did not sport bellpulls, so Esther slid her feet into slippers, belted a plain dressing gown over her nightgown, and headed down the maid's stairs to the kitchen.

A tired scullery maid frowned only slightly at Esther's request before preparing a cup of hot, spiced, spiked milk.

“There ye be, mum. Will there be anything else?”

Esther took a sip of her posset. “My thanks, it's very good. Does that door lead to the kitchen garden?”

“It do, and from thence to the scent garden and the cutting garden. The formal garden lies beyond that, and then the knot gardens and the folly.” The maid shot a longing glance at the stool by the hearth, as if even giving these directions made a girl's feet ache.

Ache worse. After eighteen hours on her feet, the maid was no doubt even more tired than Esther.

“I'll take my posset to the garden.”

“The guests don't generally use the kitchen garden, mum.”

“All the better.”

This earned Esther a small, understanding smile. The girl sought her stool, and Esther sought the cooler air of the garden by moonlight—the garden where she'd be safe from wandering guests of either gender.

Kitchen gardens bore a particular scent, a fresh, green, culinary fragrance that tickled Esther's nose as she found a bench along the far wall. Percival Windham's comment the day before about the moon being full came to mind, because the garden was limned in silvery light, the moon beaming down in all its beneficent glory.

“So you couldn't sleep either?”

Esther's first clue regarding the garden's other occupant was moonlight gleaming on his unpowdered hair.

“My lord.” She started to rise, only to see Percival Windham's teeth flash in the shadows.

“Oh, must you?” He approached her bench, gaze trained on the cup in her hand. “Might I join you? I fear the farther reaches of the garden are full of predators stalking large game.”

He sounded tired and not the least flirtatious. Esther pulled her skirts aside when what she ought to be doing was returning to the stuffy, mildewed confines of her garret.

She took a sip of her posset and waited.

“How do you do it, Miss Himmelfarb?”

“My lord?”

He sighed and stretched long legs out before him, crossing his feet at the ankles and leaning back against the wall behind them. Moonlight caught the silver of his shoe buckles and the gold of the ring on his left little finger.

“How do you endure these infernal gatherings? They are exhausting of a man’s fortitude if not his energy. If one more young lady presses a feminine part of her anatomy against my person, I am going to start howling like a wolf and wearing my wig backward.”

His lordship sounded so put upon, Esther found it difficult not to smile. “May I ask you a question, your lordship?”

“Lord Percy, if you must stand on ceremony—or sit upon it, as the case may be.”

“Do you take snuff?”

He peered over at her in the moonlight. “I do not. It’s a deucedly filthy habit. Nor do I use smoking tobacco. I’m convinced my father’s frequent agues of the lungs are related to his fondness for the pipe. If you were to ask to borrow my snuffbox, you’d find it holds lemon drops.”

He reached over and plucked Esther’s cup from her grasp, raising it up. “May I?”

What was she to say to that? “You may.”

He helped himself to a sip of her posset, and the idea of it, of this handsome lordling drinking so casually from her cup, was peculiar indeed.

“Are you flirting with me, my lord?”

He set the cup down between them, his lips quirking. “If you have to ask, Miss Himmelfarb, then I’m making a poor job of it, aren’t I?”

He hadn’t said no. “May I ask you another question?”

His lordship closed his eyes and leaned his head back. “I’d rather it be a flirtatious sort of question now that you raise the subject. You’re very pretty, you know, and I’ve lately concluded the entire purpose of this gathering is to develop one’s stamina as a flirt. Like field maneuvers, I suppose.” He cracked open one eye. “I apologize if I’m being rude. That’s a truth potion you’ve slipped me.”

He settled back against the wall, shifting broad shoulders as if to get more comfortable. With his eyes closed, Percival Windham by moonlight was...

Handsome. Still, yet, more... deucedly handsome, to use his word. Lord Percival was the spare, but he had “duke” stamped all over him. The height, the self-possession, the charm...

“So you’re not averse to another question, my lord?”

“If we’re to be drinking companions, Miss Himmelfarb, then the ‘my lording’ has to cease. Mind you, I am not flirting with you.”

He was humoring her, though. Or something. “Do you frequently bathe in company?”

A beat of silence went by, while Esther wondered if perhaps that posset wasn’t truth potion after all.

“Miss Himmelfarb, this version of not-flirting holds a man’s interest. Whyever would you ask?”

He sounded amused and genuinely intrigued.

“I am appeasing my curiosity. Young ladies gossip almost as much as young men do.”

“They couldn’t possibly. To answer your question, it might have escaped your notice, but my dimensions are such that I rather take up the available space in most tubs. I am not in the habit of entertaining callers when I’m at my bath, despite what our hostess appears to have told half the women in the realm. You never did answer my question.”

Esther cast back over their short, odd conversation. “How do I endure house parties?”

“Without committing hanging felonies on your fellow guests, all of whom seem intent on mischief. It’s worse than an entire regiment of Scottish recruits on leave.”

He wasn’t simply tired, he was exasperated and not a little bewildered. Esther picked up the posset and handed it to him.

“Do you miss Canada?” This was what she should have asked him, not those other questions—the ones that Herodia, Charlotte, and Zephora would not believe the answers to.

He drank deeply from her cup and kept it in his hands. “I *wish* I missed Canada. The land is so beautiful it makes your soul ache, but pitiless, too. In any season, Canada has ways to kill a man—snakes, locals, diseases, itching vines, and lunatic commanding officers.”

Perhaps he was a little drunk, or a little homesick for somewhere neither Canada nor Kent.

“You could transfer elsewhere.”

“And it would be the same, Miss Himmelfarb, because it would still be His Majesty’s military, and I would still be the Moreland spare.” He fell silent, Esther’s cup held in his two hands on his flat belly.

“You were treated differently because your father is a duke?”

“I was. By some I was treated worse, by others better. At my last post, I was bitterly resented by my superior officer.”

This was far, far worse than flirting, or even that whispering-in-her-ear thing Percival Windham could do in a room full of people. Still, she asked the next question.

“What happened?”

He grew still, the darkness seemed to gather closer, and Esther caught a whiff of his cedary scent on soft night air.

“I will tell you, Esther Himmelfarb, because I am a just a wee bit in my cups, or perhaps it’s the moonshine loosening my tongue. In any case, we will both wish—and in the morning pretend—that I had kept my own counsel.” Another pause, another sip of her posset. “My unit was between posts—there are no roads worth the name—and we came upon an encampment of natives. There are all stripes of Indians in the Canadian woods, some friendly, some murderous, and some both, depending on the day of the week. We encountered not even a gesture in the direction of hostility from this group, which upon inspection turned out to be a function of their menfolk being off on a trapping expedition.”

Rape. He would not use the word in her presence, but Esther felt it lurking on the edges of the conversation.

“General Starkweather ordered the women and children rounded up, declared them prisoners, and started marching them through the woods. He did this to goad me, I’m fairly certain. We were not to provoke the locals without cause, and shivering in the woods while praying for spring did not constitute cause in the opinion of any man in that company.”

He set the cup aside, apparently having finished Esther’s posset.

“We got about two hours’ march from the encampment, and were not likely to make our billet by dark. The general ordered the prisoners lined up in a ditch and declared himself unwilling to be slowed down by such a lot of filthy, murdering savages when the weather might turn foul at any point.”

Murder now joined rape in the part of the conversation Lord Percival was not speaking aloud. Murder, rape, and offense to the honor of any officer, any honest man, present on the scene. Esther

wanted to touch him, to stop him from speaking more words that would hurt him and forever haunt her.

“General Starkweather assembled a firing squad. He made sure I was directly on hand when the lads were given the command to shoulder arms. If I interfered, I was of course, guilty of insubordination of a magnitude that would earn me a conclusion to my troubles in the same manner our captives were facing.”

Rape, murder, dishonor, *execution*.

While all around him, gossip wanted to accuse Percival Windham of frivolousness and debauchery.

“You did not give the order to fire. Not on helpless women and children.”

He sat up, set the cup on the ground, and peered over at her for a long moment before he resumed speaking, his words addressed to a patch of rosemary growing across the walk.

“There was an old woman, a stout little thing with a brown face as wrinkled as a prune. She’d been carrying an infant the entire distance, and the child had begun to fuss, likely from hunger. I sat there on my horse, wrapped from head to toe in thick layers of wool, while that old woman shivered, her own blanket given up to keep the child warm. I have never seen such fortitude before or since.

“The men figured out what Starkweather was up to, and the quality of their silence was as chilling as the wind in those woods. Picture this: snow all around us, two hundred of His Majesty’s finest poised to witness murder, and the only sound the wind in the pine boughs and that crying baby.”

Rape, murder, dishonor, hanging, dread, and no options.

“The old woman tickled the baby’s chin.”

Lord Percival reached over and brushed a knuckle twice over the point of Esther’s chin. “She tickled the baby’s chin, jostled him and jollied him, until he was laughing as babies will. Despite the cold, despite his hungry belly, despite the firing squad several yards away, the baby laughed. Starkweather gave the command to take aim then told me to take over.”

“You did not do murder. I know you did not.”

How did she know it, though? From the kindness in his eyes when he flirted? From the weariness he’d let her see by moonlight? From the fact that he’d even noticed an old woman with the courage to tickle a baby while death loomed?

“I did not give the order to fire, Esther Himmelfarb. I will admit to you I was insubordinate, and Tony was there to witness it. As I opened my mouth and gave the command to order arms, the air was filled with a shrieking such as I hope never to hear again. The trapping party had tracked us, circled around front and taken their position in the trees above the trail. I regret to report that though casualties on both sides were minimal, General Starkweather did not survive the affray.”

Had he killed his superior officer? Esther did not think so, but neither did she care if he had. “Good. The man was not fit to command.”

Lord Percival regarded her again for a long, long moment, until his lips curved up in a grave, sweet smile. “A court martial would not have rendered that decision, my dear.”

“Then a higher court intervened in a timely fashion, my lord. Surely you cannot argue my conclusion?”

“I cannot—I will not, given your insistence, but neither will I be romanticizing the appeal of the military. If I retain my commission, I’ll likely ask for and get an administrative position. I excel at recall and application of rules and regulations—I should probably have become a barrister, except

the inactivity would have bored me silly.”

In the past five minutes, they’d gone from an uneasy discussion on a hard bench, to a conversation between two refugees from... life. “You’ll hate working at a desk, my lord.”

“I’d hate even more the vapid existence of a younger son dancing about on the end of Her Grace’s leash. My sister-in-law begged us to come home, and Tony and I could refuse Bella nothing.”

“You are fond of Lady Pembroke?”

“I was eight years old when I met her, and yes, she is the first woman I fell in love with, if you discount Mrs. Wood.”

He was perfectly, astoundingly serious. “Mrs. Wood was your governess?” This was safer ground, no awful words lurking unsaid, but in some ways the honesty he offered was equally dangerous.

“The very one. A dear old soul who made Latin and French into games and declared sums fit only for naughty boys on rainy days. Tony and I adored her. My father intervened when the tutors took over and said Mrs. Wood must stay on as our French instructor because her accent was superior.”

“Can you speak any French at all?”

“*Je vous adore*, Miss Himmelfarb, will that do? I enjoy languages, but find sums a bloody lot of work, particularly in a commercial context. You know, you never did tell me how you endure these infernal house parties. Tony thinks we’ve been sent here to convince us to take brides out of sheer self-preservation. A bachelor’s pillorying earned by our failure to become engaged this past winter.”

A little dart of pain lanced through the sense of commiseration Esther had been fancying she shared with Lord Percival. A man who complained of being marital prey did not regard present company as a threat.

Which she wasn’t. He was a duke’s son, after all.

“I do as little as possible to burden the help, for one thing. These parties are very trying for them, and they can be unexpected allies.”

“Sound advice. Mannering has to do double duty, serving both myself and Tony. But how do you... *endure*?”

His tone held genuine consternation, a sentiment Esther could share all too easily.

“Nap in the middle of the day, my lord. Don’t drink to excess *ever*, and keep a chair wedged under your door latch if you’re alone in your room. If your drink tastes the least strange, set it aside, the same with your food. Retire to your room on the pretext of seeing to correspondence, and you should be given some privacy. I also ride out on the fine days but take a groom with me, even when I’d prefer a solitary outing.”

His examination of her this time was not accompanied by a smile. “I see you are a veteran of these gatherings, Miss Himmelfarb. Why aren’t you married, if you find them so tedious?”

“Maybe for the same reasons you aren’t married.” Even that was probably saying too much. Esther retrieved her empty cup from where it sat on the ground between them. “I ought to be going in, my lord.”

“Percival, or Percy to my friends. We can be friends, can we not?”

He was offering something—friendship, of some offhand, passing variety—even as he removed from consideration the curious, budding, silly notion that he might have noticed her as a man notices a young woman.

“I must be going.” Esther scooted to the edge of the bench only to find her companion on his feet,

his hand under her elbow.

“I’d see you in, Esther Himmelfarb, and even up to your room, but we both know what gossip that might cause. My thanks for your company and for sharing your posset.”

She turned to go, but his hand was still on her arm and his fingers closed around her wrist. A few beats of silence went by while Esther cataloged impressions.

He was wonderfully tall and substantial, a man upon whom even an Amazon like herself could lean, confident of his support.

At the end of a long day, his scent was still beguilingly pleasant. Not overwhelming, not cloying, just a teasing hint of cedar and spices that made her want to close her eyes and breathe through her nose.

And he was near enough that Esther could feel the heat of his body in the moonlit shadows.

“Good night, Esther.”

“Good night, my—Percival.”

Would he kiss her? She hoped he would, a token kiss to her cheek, a small memory of pleasure in the midst of purgatory, a touch to make all that had been shared before a little more real.

His lips brushed her forehead before he dropped her wrist. “Sweet dreams, my lady.”

She was being dismissed. Esther stepped back—did not curtsy—and left him standing in the garden, bathed in cool, silvery moonlight and solitude.

“Moreland! You will attend me! Hippolyta Morrisette has sent news!”

Her Grace’s trajectory into the breakfast parlor was checked by the need to turn sideways to fit her panniers through the doorway, though this did nothing to stop her prattling. “Not four days into the house party, and both boys are already much admired by several young ladies.”

George, His Grace, the Duke of Moreland, rose from his place at the table. “Good morning, Your Grace. I trust you slept well?” He tossed a meaningful glance at old Thomas standing at attention by the sideboard.

Her Grace’s lips thinned as she allowed her husband to seat her. “I slept abominably, though I find this morning there is cause for cautious optimism.”

She would not be silenced, not by the presence of a servant, not by the open door, not by anything less than the hand of Almighty God slapped over her mouth, and even then she’d give the Deity a struggle for form’s sake. Her Grace was a determined woman and always had been.

His Grace flicked a glance at one of his oldest retainers. “Thomas, if you’ll excuse us?”

The barest hint of commiseration showed in the old man’s eyes before he bowed once to the duke, again to the duchess, and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

“His knees creak, Moreland. You should pension him before he keels over in his livery.”

And lose one of few allies under the ducal roof? “Thomas serves loyally, Your Grace, and has some good years left in him. May I fix you a plate?”

Her Grace fluffed her skirts just so. “Please. I’ll have eggs, toast, ham, a portion of apple tart, and half a scone with butter and strawberry jam.”

Determination apparently built up an appetite, and yet the woman still had a fine figure—from what His Grace could gather. They’d had separate apartments for more than twenty years, and what happened in the early hours of the day behind the closed door of Her Grace’s dressing room remained a mystery.

As well it should.

His Grace needed two plates to hold the food his wife had requested. He set the plates down before her and took his place at the opposite end of the table. “What news have you had from Lady Morrisette?”

The duchess tucked into her breakfast, gesturing with her fork for the teapot. “I don’t know as I can trust Hippolyta Morrisette’s veracity, but she claims both Tony and Percy are quite as sought after as Quimbey himself.”

Then the boys were to be pitied. “Is that so?”

“You will not take that tone with me, Moreland. We need grandsons, and it’s my duty to ensure we get them. Criticize me for many things, but I am dutiful.” She glowered at him for a moment for emphasis—unnecessary emphasis—before returning to her meal.

They hadn’t started out sniping at each other. They’d started out two young, lusty people who’d hoped and prayed their parents had found them a suitable mate. And for a time...

And then little Eustace had fallen from his pony, and it had become clear that they’d buried marital happiness along with their firstborn son. Thank a merciful God the accoucheur had told the duchess that Tony was the last child she could safely carry. Ten years of Her Grace’s grim focus on marital duty had about given His Grace’s interest in procreation a permanent tendency to wilt.

Shrugging that thought aside, the duke tried for a tone that was conciliatory without being condescending. “You have become determined on grandchildren only since Twombly took a child bride, Your Grace. He should be shot for mistreating your sensibilities, but you’ll soon be surrounded by other gallants. Did Lady Morrisette mention any young ladies in particular?”

Her Grace stirred sugar into her tea with vengeance. “Twombly deserves his fate, marrying a mere girl. She’ll be the death of him, mark me on this, Moreland. And of course I will have other gallants, but Twombly was a fine dancer.”

Twombly was an aging hanger-on, not worthy of Agatha Venetia Drysdale Windham’s notice, though it was none of His Grace’s affair where or with whom his wife spent her time. Still, a husband was entitled to the occasional protective gesture.

“Shall I call him out for you when he’s back from his wedding journey?”

The duchess shifted on her seat. “Wouldn’t that be a fine thing if he prevailed, leaving me a dowager duchess with no grandsons? No, thank you, Moreland. And yes, Hippolyta says Lady Zephora Needham is spending as much time as possible with Percy and Tony, and Charlotte Pankhurst is pitching for whichever son is not escorting the Needham girl. Needham is an earl, but Pankhurst is in line for a marquessate, and those are not to be sneezed at. Pass the cream.”

His Grace obliged, and then—knowing it was folly—gave his wife the benefit of his thinking regarding the entire campaign to see the younger sons wed.

“You know, Pembroke may yet have more children. We needn’t be hasty with Percival and Tony, and might regret forcing their hands.”

Her Grace paused in mid-chew and raised her head, like a grazing animal scenting an intruder in its grassy paddock. “That useless twit Pembroke married will produce nothing but girls, Moreland. What use are girls, tell me?”

You were a girl once. I had rather more use for you then, and you for me.

“Girls provide the Crown an opportunity to modify the letters patent, to entertain the notion of special remainders, the viscounty—”

“The Morefield viscounty can be preserved through the female line, but why, why on earth, should this family revert to a lesser title when, for nearly two hundred years, a dukedom has been ours to command?”

Oh, woe to the duke who provoked Her Grace on the subject of “our” dukedom. While her eggs grew cold and His Grace’s digestion became tentative, Her Grace prosed on for a good five minutes about duty, chits, twits, and sons who ought to accept the guidance of a mother devoted—*dee-voted, I tell you!*—to nothing but their lifelong happiness.

“So,” she concluded with a stab of the butter knife toward her husband, “I’d prefer the Pankhurst girl, though the Needham heiress as a contingency plan will do nicely.”

A concerned father had to ask, regardless of the risks involved. “And what about Tony? Is he to have the contingency plan for his bride if Percy can win the Pankhurst girl?”

“Of course not.” Her Grace tore off a bite of scone and eyed it like a hawk might eye a lame mouse. “Gladys Holsopple has had two seasons, she has eight strapping brothers, and her mama assures me the girl is a very high stickler and well dowered too. She’ll do for Tony, though convincing him to take on a young lady so enamored of propriety will involve effort. I expect your support in this, Moreland.”

She popped the bite of scone into her maw and started chewing like a squirrel.

His Grace did not by word or deed give away certain information brought to his ears privately by loyal staff. “Somehow, my dear, I will convince Tony that a woman of unimpeachable character holds his best hope for marital happiness.”

“See that you do, and pass the butter, if you please.”

His Grace sent up yet one more prayer for the happiness of his younger sons and passed his duchess the butter.

* * *

A week in purgatory was a very long time, particularly when Michael was more enamored of the card room than any of the young ladies present. Esther told herself he was biding his time, waiting for the allure of Quimbey, Lord Tony, and Lord Percival to fade.

Which ought to occur in no less than three decades at the latest, provided each man developed a tendency to flatulence.

“Lady Zephora believes her bellpull is not working correctly.” Esther put as much apology into her tone as she could when she addressed the Morrisette butler. “I’m on my way to the kitchen to bring up another tea tray, for the young ladies have assembled in her drawing room this morning.”

Hayes did not roll his eyes. He smiled beneficently, maybe even consolingly. “These things do happen, Miss Himmelfarb. I’ll see to it and have a tea tray sent along posthaste.”

The bellpull was not broken, and they both knew it.

“I wouldn’t want to trouble the kitchen staff unnecessarily, Mr. Hayes. I’m on my way there, as it happens, and will cheerfully retrieve a tray for Lady Zephora.”

The smile lurking in his eyes disappeared, because now they both knew the object of Zephora’s complaint had been not only to criticize the house staff for a slow response to incessant demands, but also to force Esther to fetch and carry like a servant.

“If you say so, miss.” He gave her a deliberate formal bow and let her hustle along the corridor. Was it lying if the other party knew the falsehood for what it was? Esther hoped not, because another day—another hour—in purgatory would have her...

What had Lord Percival said? Howling like a wolf and wearing his wig backward.

She brushed aside the memory while she waited for the scullery maid—Patricia—to put together the tea tray. Percival Windham hadn’t so much as smiled at her in the past three days. He’d smiled at everyone else—servants, horses, dogs, debutantes, they all merited his smiles—while Esther had earned only a few brooding glances.

And she hadn’t set one slippered toe in the kitchen garden after dark. As the full moon waned, so had the glow of that encounter with Lord Percival.

Esther picked up the tray—the blasted thing was heavy—and headed for the maid’s stairs.

“Miss.” Patricia’s voice had Esther pausing. “Not them stairs.”

The front stairs, the ones used by family on their rare sorties to the lower regions of the house, would be longer, though Esther understood Patricia’s point: the maid’s stairs were for the help.

The damned tray was heavy. Esther shook her head and started for the maid’s stairs, only to understand halfway up that Patricia’s warning hadn’t been about appearances and self-respect, or not only about those things.

“Miss Himmelfarb.” Jasper Layton lounged on the first landing, elbows propped on the banister as he gazed down at her. “What on earth could cause a proper young lady to lurk on the back stairs so early in the day?”

Noon approached, but it was early by Sir Jasper’s standards. Without paint and powder, his appearance improved somewhat, though late nights in the card room had left dark circles beneath his eyes. Regardless of his toilet, he was still inclined to have his conversations with the tops of Esther’s breasts.

“Sir Jasper. If you’ll excuse me, Lady Zephora will not want her tea cooling. I’ll wish you good day.”

He shifted, lazily, just enough to trap Esther two steps beneath the landing. The superior position clearly appealed to him, too, so Esther let him enjoy it for a moment while she dropped her gaze to the tea tray.

He stepped aside, allowing her to pass, and then she realized why. With the tray in her hands, she faced a closed door on the far side of the landing. Her choices were to wait for Sir Jasper to open the door, to try to balance the tray on her hip and open the door herself, or to set the tray on the floor, open the door, and then pick the tray up.

While Sir Jasper ogled her backside, of course.

“A small dilemma,” Sir Jasper observed from much too close behind her. “You study the dilemma, while I study the opportunities it presents.”

A male hand slid around Esther’s waist. She closed her eyes and discarded options: she could scream, which would result in her being compromised if anybody heard her; she could stomp on the blighted man’s foot, which would anger him and not solve the problem; she could dump hot tea on his falls, which was social suicide though a nice thought to contemplate; or she could endure this small detour into hell.

A second hand joined the first, easing up over Esther’s ribs. “Instead of playing chambermaid to those ninnies in hair bows, you might consider more pleasant diversions with me, you know. I can be very considerate and quite discreet.”

He could also manage a fair impression of ants crawling over Esther’s skin. While he brushed his thumbs over the tops of her breasts and pushed his hips against her backside—thank God for her bustle—Esther sighed breathily.

“Lady Zephora has no patience, sir. To delay for even a moment will guarantee her enmity.”

“I can placate Lady Zephora.” His breath, reeking of the previous night’s overindulgence, came hot against Esther’s neck.

It was time to end this.

“Lady Morrisette has asked me to join her as soon as I’ve seen to the young ladies. If you’d get the door, sir. Please.”

Esther suffused the last word with pleading, but knew a moment’s real trepidation when Sir Jasper did not immediately do as she asked. He gave her breasts as much of a squeeze as her stomacher allowed, reached around her to lift the door latch, and stepped back.

“A man’s protection would offer you a great deal more than this servile existence, Miss Himmelfarb.” He stroked his crotch twice, his gaze on Esther’s breasts. “A great deal more.”

Gracious God. Esther did her best rendition of the flustered schoolgirl and ducked out of the stairway, kicking the door shut behind her with a shade too much force. Sir Jasper offered not

marriage but ruin, and the cursed man no doubt honestly believed a few months of his favors were preferable to a respectable life with children.

Esther set the tray down on a sideboard and paused to consider her appearance in the mirror above it. Flushed, pale, *angry*.

Sir Jasper's offer, not the first of its kind, was not preferable to decades of respectable marriage and motherhood—but was it preferable to decades of impoverished spinsterhood? To being shuffled around her siblings' households as the poor relation? To growing old with her parents?

"I behold a vision, though not, I think, a happy one."

Behind her in the mirror, an unpowdered Percival Windham, golden hair loose about his shoulders, was smiling perplexedly at her reflection.

Now, he chanced upon her? *Now*, when she wanted to cock back her arm and slap any man she saw on general principles?

She curtsied. "My lord. Good day."

"It is no such thing when you're consigned to carrying trays for the harpies populating this house party." He stepped a little closer and lowered his voice. "We've shared a moonlit posset, Miss Himmelfarb, though you seem determined to ignore the memory."

He was implying some question or other, while Esther wanted to... howl like a wolf, in part because they *had* shared a moonlit posset.

"Forgive me, my lord. I do not relish Lady Zephora's tongue lashing when I appear belatedly with her tea tray."

He came around to stand between Esther and her reflection, his lips pursed in study. "Hang Lady Zephora and the whole chorus. Something has you overset."

At that precise, benighted moment, Sir Jasper emerged from the stairway and sauntered along the corridor.

He nodded at Lord Percival. "My lord."

"Sir Jasper."

Jasper paused and ran an insolent gaze over Esther while she stood silently by the sideboard. Bad enough to be ogled, but it *hurt* to endure such treatment where Lord Percival could see it. Esther did not know whom to hate for that hurting—Jasper, Lord Percival, or herself.

Sir Jasper took himself off after a pointed look at the tea tray. Had she been alone, Esther might have ducked back into the maid's stairway and had a good cry.

Percival Windham turned an inscrutable gaze on her in the ensuing silence. "Esther Himmelfarb, was that weasel bothering you?"

The question held such quiet ferocity, Esther wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. She nodded, because whatever else was true about Percival Windham, he hadn't blamed her for Sir Jasper's weaseling. "I should have known better than to use the maid's stairs. He is a predictable nuisance."

"You will not blame yourself for his bad behavior. Come along." Lord Percival picked up the tea tray like it weighed nothing and winged an elbow at Esther. "You look tired, my dear, but I know you aren't lurking in gardens of a late hour."

Esther took his arm, recalling the muscles there only when she wrapped her fingers around them. "How could you know that?"

"I've made the kitchen garden my private retreat, but I've also repaired there in hopes of

continuing our previous conversation. One needs allies. Witness your encounter with Sir Weasel.”

And because Percival Windham had dubbed himself Esther’s ally, she had his escort right to the door of Lady Zephora’s chambers. He even went so far as to take the tray into the sitting room, causing a flurry of billing and cooing among the ladies gathered there in morning attire.

Esther took a window seat, watching while Lord Percival dodged invitations to walk, to ride out, to share a *private archery lesson* with this young lady, or a meal alfresco with that one. As she contemplated a duke’s son having to duck and leap his way through a series of morning greetings, it occurred to her that for him, there was risk lurking not just at the top of the maid’s stairs but on every hand.

Which made the notion of him retreating to the kitchen garden, alone but for the moonlight, a very intriguing thought indeed.

* * *

“These things grow more tedious each year.” Lord Morrisette fastened his falls, missing a button on the left side. “The difficulty is the ladies make up the guest lists, and we gentlemen are left like orphaned pups, seeking any available titty, as it were.”

Percival did not respond to his host’s observation. The ladies had withdrawn, leaving the gentleman to make use of the chamber pots and the decanters, in no particular order.

“Any titty is better than no titty,” somebody observed from the opposite corner.

A philosophical discussion ensued as to the ideal shape for the female breast: large, small, soft, firm—all had their enthusiasts.

“The real quesh-tion.” Lord Morrisette blinked at his glass. “The more pertinent in-quire-ree is what shape ought the ideal female orifice follow? The assembled company will be pleased to know I’ve made a study on this.”

Spoons were rapped against glasses amid a round of cheers and jeers.

Percival hooked Tony by one elbow. “Let’s get some air, shall we?”

They left the room—ostensibly to smoke, to pass gas out of doors, or to chase housemaids—as a vote was proposed regarding the advantages of the inverted wine glass shape over the champagne flute.

“I thought nothing could be as stupid as drunken soldiers far from home and in need of a sound swiving, but I must revise my opinions.” As they headed away from the sound of male laughter, Tony sounded impatient, an odd circumstance for him.

“This is Kent,” Percival reminded him, steering him toward the stairs. “There is no greater concentration of the wealthy and aimless on the entire planet than in this county at this time of year.”

“So you’re not enjoying all the married women, chaperones, ladies’ maids, and other offerings? I could swear Hector Bellamy was trying to entice me into bed the other night with a chambermaid thrown in as sop to convention.”

Tony clearly did not find this amusing—neither did Percival. “You’re handsome, blond, and almost as tall as I am,” Percival replied, then directed Tony toward the kitchens. “I know a place where we won’t be disturbed, accosted, or propositioned.”

“As long as it’s not Canada.”

They emerged into the moonlit kitchen garden, only to spy Esther Himmelfarb seated on the bench against the wall.

She rose immediately and bobbed a curtsy. "My lords, I'll bid you good night."

Before Percival could signal Tony to take himself off, before he could detain the lady with anything approaching a witticism, she hared away amid a cloud of fragrance and maidenly shyness.

"Pretty girl," Tony remarked, settling onto the bench. "She grows on one. Gladys said we ought to keep a lookout for her."

Percy took the place beside him, though he couldn't help cursing himself for bringing Tony along to this destination at this hour. "When did the fair Gladys pass along that sentiment?"

"We correspond, discreetly of course."

One tended to underestimate Anthony Windham. Tony offended no one, he invited confidences, and—perhaps his greatest attribute—he was also capable of keeping them.

"What would you think of acquiring Esther Himmelfarb as a sister-in-law?"

Tony was silent a long time, which was better than had he burst out laughing.

"Her Grace would make her life hell," he said eventually. "His Grace would accept her."

An accurate assessment, as far as it went. "And you?"

Another protracted silence broken by the serenades of crickets, who knew nothing of titles and sang for their true loves every night.

"She'd do, Perce. You aren't the frivolous younger son you were five years ago. Canada sorted you out, or something did. Miss Esther would follow the drum, did you ask it, and Her Grace would have to choose her battles with that one."

"No, she would not."

Tony's observation and Percival's own reply brought some order to the chaos of a man contemplating—seriously contemplating—holy matrimony for the first time. Percival sat forward on the bench, his elbows braced on his knees.

"At first, I merely thought myself smitten with Miss Himmelfarb's good looks and self-possession. She's so irreproachably Teutonic about the chin, you know. Stirs a man's instincts, that chin."

Tony maintained a politic silence, so Percy continued to work out his logic with words. "Esther Himmelfarb is lovely, but she's also canny, and she's resourceful. These are qualities to admire, qualities a lady with a title needs if she's to manage well."

And now it was time for an officer to gather his courage and confide in his little brother. "She said Starkweather had been judged by a court higher than the military, and I must not argue with its decision."

"You told her about him?"

Percy nodded. The crickets sang, the scent of rosemary wafted on the breeze, and what had been a hunch in Percy's mind, an instinct, solidified into an objective. "I came upon her after Layton had been pestering her on the stairs, and Tony, I had all I could do not to flatten the man right then and there."

"Why didn't you?"

Insightful question. "Because until my ring is on her finger, such behavior would redound to Esther's discredit... I'm also not sure she'd accept me."

"And that," Tony said slowly, "is why she would make an excellent Duchess of Moreland,

should the day ever come.”

“Precisely. I must woo Esther, and I’m not entirely sure how to go about it.” The admission lay between them, a puzzling anomaly in their long history of late-night conversations wherein Percival typically parsed Tony’s confusions and blind turns.

“Bit of a puzzle,” Tony said, “when a gal don’t flirt, carry on, or cast any lures. You could try kissing her.”

“I expect Jasper Layton has made the same attempt, and likely others have as well.” She slept with a chair wedged under her door latch, considered all food and drink suspect, and trusted none of the ladies to guard her back, for God’s sake. A frontal assault was not going to win the lady’s heart.

“Sometimes answers come if we’re patient,” Tony said. “I’m waiting for Gladys to turn twenty-one.”

“How much longer?”

“Another bloody year, and her mama is making noises about an excellent match in the offing. Makes it difficult to twiddle one’s thumbs here in Kent when one’s love is twiddling hers back in Town.”

“So you write letters and twiddle and swill Morrisette’s brandy.”

“You’ll expect me to keep an eye out for Miss Himmelfarb, too.”

The image of Jasper Layton eyeing the lady with undisguised lust rose in Percival’s mind. “I’ll keep an eye out for her as well, and as for the wooing part, maybe something inspired will come to me.”

* * *

Percival Windham was the most aggravating specimen of an aggravating gender ever to attend an aggravating house party.

Why would he have brought Lord Tony to the kitchen garden, when he’d all but invited Esther to tryst with him there? Perhaps tryst was stretching it a bit—stretching it a lot—but a brother was a brother, and Lord Tony hadn’t shown any signs of departing the garden.

Esther had had two more days to observe Lord Percival, though from a distance. Ever since she’d appeared in Zephora Needham’s sitting room on Lord Percival’s arm, a silent conspiracy had arisen among the eligible young ladies. They might plunge daggers into one another’s backs in their attempts to win Lord Percy’s notice, but they were united in their determination to keep Esther from his lordship’s company.

“And when you’re done replacing the flowers in the front hallway and the green parlor, then you can check on the bouquets in the library, conservatory, music room, and upstairs corridors.” Lady Morrisette smiled broadly and folded beringed fingers on the blotter of her escritoire. “I do hope you’re enjoying yourself, my dear. These little tasks taken from my shoulders are such a help, and your mama was most insistent that I add you to the guest list.”

Like blazes. Mama had consented to send Esther only because Michael had already been invited and Lady Pott’s maid was nominally available to tend to Esther’s clothing.

“The company is wonderful, my lady, and I have always enjoyed working with flowers.”

Particularly when it would mean Esther had a sharp pair of shears in her hand. Sir Jasper was

proving persistent, and the house party had two more weeks yet to run. She curtsied and collected a footman to accompany her to the conservatory, only to encounter Michael lounging on a bench under the potted palms.

“Michael, are you hiding?”

He got to his feet and aimed a pointed look at the footman.

“If you’d start on the roses?” Esther asked, passing the fellow the shears. He bowed and withdrew, though first he perused Michael in a manner not quite respectful.

“I am enjoying a moment of solitude. I’ve never met such a pack of females for dancing and hiking and promenading until all hours.”

Esther regarded her cousin with a female relation’s pitiless scrutiny. “You’re up until all hours playing cards, Michael. The young ladies have complained to this effect. And you’re losing.”

He sank back down on the bench. “You can’t know that. A gentleman expects a few losses when he’s wagering socially.”

That he would admit that much was not good. Esther took the place beside him. “If you socialized more and wagered less, I would not have such cause to worry.”

“I always come right sooner or later, Esther.” He assayed a smile that would not have fooled their nearly blind grandmamma. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

She could lambaste him, she could lecture him, or she could accept the olive branch he was holding out. “I have found some interesting poetry in the Morrisette library, and Quimbey is a wonderfully down-to-earth fellow.”

“Also a confirmed bachelor.”

“One more thing to like about him. Promise me you won’t play too deeply, Michael. You cannot afford the losses, and I cannot afford the scandal.”

“We are not widely known as cousins by this august assemblage, so cease carping, Esther Louise.” He rose and extended a hand to her. “I’ve seen Lord Tony Windham on your arm from time to time. Any chance you could reel him in?”

Like a carp? “He’s friendly, nothing more.” And he’d appeared more than once when Jasper Layton had come sidling about, a coincidence Esther was not going to examine too closely.

“You could try being friendly, Cousin.”

This went beyond bad advice to something approaching interfamilial treason. Esther propped her fists on her hips and glared at her cousin. “As far as these people are concerned, I have no dowry, my come out was two years ago, and I’m too tall. Do you know what friendliness would merit me in this company?”

Michael’s handsome features shuttered as Esther’s meaning sank in.

A banging of the conservatory door spared Esther whatever protest Michael would have made.

“There you are!” Lord Tony Windham covered the length of the conservatory in double time. “Miss Himmelfarb, I have need of your company this instant. Sir, you will excuse the lady. She has promised to walk the gardens with me immediately.”

He nodded at Michael, who offered Esther the merest glance to ascertain her consent before stepping back. “Miss Himmelfarb, good day. Lord Anthony.”

“Right, good day, good afternoon, good morning.” Lord Anthony linked his arm through Esther’s and lowered his voice. “Time is of the essence, my lady. You must attend to the flowers in the rose salon immediately.”

This was not the affable, smiling Lord Tony whom Esther had come to know in recent days. This was a fellow with urgent business on his mind.

“I must?”

“Indeed. It is of utmost importance that you do.” He hustled her along, not stopping until they were outside the door of the parlor in question.

The closed door.

“Lord Anthony, what’s afoot here?”

He opened the door and gave Esther a gently muscular shove. “My thanks for your company.”

The tableau that greeted Esther spoke for itself. In a dress far too low cut for daylight hours, Charlotte Pankhurst reclined on a chaise, while Lord Percival stood over her, looking exasperated.

“Miss Himmelfarb.” He bowed to her very low, his expression one of banked relief. “A *pleasure* to see you. Miss Pankhurst is feeling unwell, and I was just about to—”

The door from the blue salon next door opened abruptly, revealing Lady Morrisette and several of the other older women in attendance.

“I knew I heard voices!” Lady Morrisette’s shrill observation rang out over the room while her cronies crowded in behind her.

“It’s well you’re here, my lady,” Esther said before Charlotte could open her fool mouth. “I came in to check on the flowers and found Miss Pankhurst feeling poorly. Lord Percival stopped by and offered his aid when he perceived the lady was in distress. Perhaps the physician should be summoned?”

The distressed lady—for she clearly was distressed *now*—bolted to a sitting position. “That will not be necessary.”

Lady Morrisette rose to the challenge after the merest blink of frustrated disbelief. “Perhaps it was the kippers at breakfast, my dear. They don’t always agree with one. How fortunate his lordship and Miss Himmelfarb were here to render you aid.”

Charlotte’s expression turned from mulish to murderous as Lord Tony came sauntering in. “Greetings, all. Percy, the horses are being saddled as we speak, and you’re not yet in riding attire. Miss Himmelfarb, I believe you were to join us?”

This was farce, but from the look in Charlotte’s eyes, deadly farce.

Esther turned a dazzling smile on Lord Tony. “Just let me change into my habit, your lordship. Miss Pankhurst, I wish you a swift recovery.”

She curtsied to all and sundry, spared a dozen wilted bouquets half a thought, and sidled past Lord Tony into the hallway.

“Oh, Miss Himmelfarb!” Lady Morrisette’s voice jerked Esther to a stop as effectively as if Esther were a spaniel upon whose leash the woman had tramped.

“My lady?”

Esther’s hostess approached, glancing to the left and right as she did. “Charlotte is my goddaughter, and one can’t blame her for trying. I’ll understand if you have to depart early.”

What was the woman saying? “Are you asking me to leave?”

“Oh, good Lord, no.” Lady Morrisette’s smile was feral. “What ensues now should be very interesting indeed. I’m simply saying if you do decide your mother has an ague, for example, or your younger sister should come down with lung fever, then I will be happy to make your excuses to the company. I know my goddaughter, and she does not deal well with disappointment.”

A warning, then. “I appreciate your understanding. If you’ll excuse me, I must change into my riding habit.”

Lady Morrisette gave Esther a little salute. “Go down fighting, I always say. Enjoy your *ride*.”

The innuendo was cheerful, vulgar, and snide. Contemplating that Parthian shot, Esther felt as if she’d been the one to consume a quantity of bad kippers—and in the next two weeks, the feeling could only get worse.

* * *

Percival Windham did not believe in shirking his responsibilities. He boosted Esther Himmelfarb into the saddle, arranged her skirts over her boots, and remained standing by her stirrup.

“I am in your never-ending, eternal, perpetual debt, Miss Himmelfarb. I cannot thank you enough for your timely appearance in that salon. I’d received a note, you see, ostensibly from Lady Morrisette.”

Several yards away, Tony was fussing with his horse’s girth, no doubt sensible that the moment called for groveling.

“You should thank your brother, my lord, though I cannot think why he didn’t simply intervene himself.”

The lady’s words bore a slight chill, something more than politesse but less than indignation. This did not bode well for a fellow who’d reached the inescapable conclusion that he’d met his one true love.

“Had Tony come upon us alone in that room, he would have been honor bound to relate what he saw to our mother, Her Grace, and she would have been delighted to accept Miss Pankhurst as a prospective daughter-in-law. You see before you a man in receipt of nothing less than a divine pardon, Miss Himmelfarb, and you the angel of its deliverance.”

“That’s laying it on a bit thick, your lordship.”

Had her lips quirked? Was humor alight in her lovely green eyes?

“It is the God’s honest truth, madam. You will consider what boon I might grant you in repayment.”

He left her with that offer to consider—a stroke of genius if he did say so himself—and swung up onto his bay gelding. Two grooms mounted up on cobs, while Tony climbed onto a leggy gray.

“Would you like to see Morelands, Miss Himmelfarb? It’s not five miles east cross-country.”

“Lead on, your lordship. Any hour out of doors on such a lovely day is time well spent.”

Esther Himmelfarb rode with the casual grace of one who’d been put in the saddle early and often, and while her habit was several years out of fashion, her sidesaddle was in excellent repair and superbly fitted to her seat.

Five miles passed quickly, with Tony falling behind a dozen yards to confer with the grooms.

“Let’s take the next turning. There’s somebody I’d like you to meet.”

At his suggestion, Miss Himmelfarb nudged her mare to the left, down a bridle path that ran between two high hedges.

They hadn’t gone twenty yards before she drew her horse up. “You wanted me to meet somebody in a graveyard?”

"I did, in fact." He swung down, handed the horse off to a groom, and assisted the lady to dismount. She put her hands on his shoulders and slid to the ground, the closest they'd stood in days, close enough that his good intentions could be assailed by the scent of lavender and the feel of a slender female waist under his very hands.

"Come." Percy grasped her gloved fingers in his. "Mrs. Wood bides here. This is the Windham family plot. All the best people are to be found in its confines."

She gave him a look suggesting he'd gone barmy, but kept pace as he circled the small plot. Tony, may the Almighty bless and keep him, had signaled that he'd assist the grooms to water the horses at a small burn a furlong away on the other side of the hedges.

"When I was a small boy and periodically suffused with indignation, I'd come here to seek consolation. Peter always knew where to find me."

He led her to a bench under an enormous oak.

"Peter would be the Marquess of Pembroke?"

"Tony still calls him Petey, if you can credit that." He drew her down to the bench and kept her hand in his. He was not going to part with that pretty feminine appendage until Doomsday or something of equal magnitude required it.

"Who is the cherub? Eustace Penhaligon Drysdale Fortinbras Windham? That's a lot of names for somebody who lived only... five years."

"My older brother, though I never knew him. He fell from his pony, and that was that. Peter says Eustace was a daredevil but always laughing. My mother adored him, or so my father says."

"It would break my heart to lose a child, and how your mother must have prayed for you and Lord Anthony, joining the cavalry and crossing the seas."

In the quiet, pretty graveyard, their hands joined, he wanted to tell her that being with her, was comfortable in a way he hadn't experienced in all his varied undertakings with the fair sex. Esther Himmelfarb's company gave him a sense of coming home to a place he'd never been but always hoped existed.

"You would pray for your children, Esther. May I call you Esther?"

She did not withdraw her hand, but she pulled away somehow in silence. "When we are private, you may."

"Are you going to remind me that we're of different stations, *Esther*? Your grandfather was an earl. I'm a commoner, and I associate with whom I please."

"I will pay for that scene in the rose parlor, your lordship. You will not. Commoner you might be, but I am to all appearances undowered. I did not take, I am plain, and I have not ingratiated myself to the people who matter."

She was utterly convinced of her words, also utterly wrong.

"You are lovely. I'm glad you did not take, or some other fellow would have long since snatched you up, and I respect mightily that you have not ingratiated yourself with people who think they matter."

She straightened, and Percival realized his tone was nearly argumentative.

"You mentioned a boon, your lordship."

The female mind was not to be underestimated. "Don't ask me to ignore you, my dear. You've proven that you're a loyal friend, and don't tell me you can't use a friend too."

Friendship was progress, wasn't it? The exact dimensions of friendship with a female would be

new territory for him, but the term seemed appropriate for the circumstances, and to Percival Windham, all females were deserving of beneficent regard, at least initially.

His new, reluctant friend was clutching his hand rather snugly, too. “I want you to teach me how to kiss.”

While Percival calculated whether he could peel off her glove and press his lips to her knuckles, Esther withdrew her hand and rose, pacing down a raked gravel walk to little Eustace’s headstone. To pursue, or to sit on the hard bench and drink in how lovely, how right, she looked among the Windhams of days past?

And how blessedly convenient her request was to Percival’s own plans for the lady.

He stuffed his gloves in his pocket and let himself stand behind her, close enough to drink in her lavender scent and to appreciate that, in riding attire, a woman was a more approachable creature indeed.

“You want me to teach you to kiss?”

She turned, the headstone at her back, which meant a marble angel’s outstretched wings protected them from view. “I want you to teach me much more than that, Percival Windham, but there’s a limit to my presumption—and to my folly. You are reputed to be proficient at kissing, and I would avail myself of your expertise.”

Kissing was wonderful folly, though when undertaken with this woman, it was also going to be in absolute earnest.

“Esther, if folly and presumption and those other obfuscations were not a consideration, what boon would you ask of me?”

She stared at a point several inches above his heart for a long, lavender-scented moment.

“I am a poor relation in training.”

Which made no sense, because upon inquiry, it turned out that Herr Jacob Himmelfarb was rumored to be quite well fixed. “And you’re a veritable hag, and children run from you when the moon is full.” He caught a strand of golden hair fluttering around her chin and tucked it back over her ear. “Ask me, Esther. I can deny you nothing.”

She stared at his chest so hard, she was perhaps trying to see his heart beat as it thundered between his ribs.

“Teach me to kiss, and I shall be content.”

No, she would not. If he had anything to say to it, she’d be burning with frustration and unspent lust.

Or perhaps, if God were generous and the lady willing, spent lust.

“We have an agreement.” He brushed his lips over her cheek, not touching her anywhere else. “I shall teach you to kiss in exchange for your having spared me a lifetime of marital misery. I do not regard this as an adequate boon to compensate you for your kindness and quick thinking, but it’s where we shall start.”

Blond brows drew down as she tugged off a riding glove and touched two fingers to the spot on her cheek where his lips had wanted badly to linger. “That’s it? You kiss my cheek and announce we have a bargain?”

“Your first lesson: anticipation or surprise should be part of any kiss that seeks to leave an impression. And rest assured, my dear, when it comes to kissing you, I shall be impressive indeed.”

He bussed her other cheek and drew away.

This did not appear to mollify the lady, nor was it intended to. “You have only two weeks, my lord. I hope the entire course of your pedagogy is not limited to lectures.”

Oh, how starchy she sounded. How determined.

“There will be practical instruction as well, Esther my dear.” *And lots of it.*

Three

Percival fell silent for a moment, and then Esther felt warm male fingers closing around her hand. He brought her knuckles to his lips and pressed a kiss there, then did not let go of her hand.

“How would you describe that kiss, Miss Himmelfarb?”

He wanted to *talk* about kissing? With *Miss Himmelfarb*? “I’d describe it as brief and uninteresting. Proper.”

She put as much disgust into her description as she dared, and the dratted man chuckled. When Esther would have wrenched her hand free, he tightened his grip on her fingers. “Tell me about the kisses you’d like to receive, Esther. I must have some sense of my goal, for I am very intent on reaching it.”

He had an odd way of showing his intentions.

“I want kisses I’ll never forget,” Esther began, speaking slowly because this topic—the exact nature of the kisses she sought—was not one she’d considered.

Not one she’d been bold enough to consider, and certainly not one she’d ever been encouraged to consider.

“I want kisses that I can feel through my whole body, through my heart and soul. I want kisses that render me speechless and helpless with longing for more kisses just like them. From you, I want kisses so... *profound* that every time I catch the scent of cedar and spices, my knees go a little weak and I smile in a way that makes all the gentlemen around me, even the old men, take notice and smile a little too.”

He was rubbing his thumb slowly across her knuckles, as if waiting for her to go on.

“More than that,” Esther said, “I suppose I want kisses that defy description.”

“Passionate kisses?” Oh, how casual he sounded.

“Not only passion. I’ve been mauled and slobbered over. A man’s passion strikes me as an undignified, selfish thing.”

“Then you want kisses to inspire your own passion?”

She had the sense he was toying with her, trying to verbally back her into some corner where her dignity and her wits could not join her. Before common sense or some equally inconvenient virtue could stop her, Esther pushed him back so he sat on the headstone, and situated herself with a knee on either side of his hips—a somewhat athletic undertaking, given her riding skirts.

“Enough talk, Percival Windham.” She fisted a hand in the hair at his nape. “I’m tired of talk, and you promised, and I will not be put off by your lectures and interrogations. All day long I step and fetch and smile and pretend, and just this once, I want somebody to attend me. The other girls know to make the men toady to them, but all I get is—”

He kissed her, a fleeting press of warm, soft lips to her mouth. “Do hush, love. You’ll bring Tony with the grooms, and at the very least, for such kisses as you describe, we deserve privacy.”

Esther felt his arm encircle her waist, snugging her to his larger frame, and then a series of little tugs to her scalp.

“You are destroying my coiffure, Percival. Do you know how long I must work to arrange a coronet just so?”

“About five minutes, I’d guess. The rosebuds are a nice touch, but I want to see how long your braid is.”

Esther dropped her forehead to his shoulder and let him have his way with her hair. Maybe he thought that little nothing of a buss qualified as a kiss; maybe he kissed ladies only with their hair in complete disarray. “This cannot have anything to do with kissing lessons.”

“Tell me about your day, Esther. What did you have for breakfast?”

Her braid came slithering down her shoulders to rest along her spine, a kind of hair sigh to go with the soul weariness weighting her limbs and the frustration weighting her heart. More questions, though this question she could answer. “I like chocolate first thing in the morning, and warm scones with butter and strawberry jam.”

Something brushed her ear—his nose? “My mother prefers strawberry jam. Do you like raisins on your scones?”

“I do not. They taste foul when they burn. You are plundering my hair.”

“Just loosening a few pins.”

She cuddled closer, purely enjoying the feel of his hands in her hair. “I haven’t a lady’s maid, though Matilda Pott’s maid is looking after my clothes.”

“Hah. You’re helping her look after Lady Pott’s gowns. You smell even better up close, Esther Himmelfarb. You taste good, too.”

His tongue, soft, damp, and unhurried, had slipped along the place where her neck and shoulder joined. The sensation was both warm and shivery. “Do that again.”

“As my lady wishes.” He lingered over it this time, caressing her flesh with his tongue. It wasn’t kissing exactly; it was more than kissing and made her want to taste him in return.

“Your hair is like moon glow in my hands. I want to see it spread over a pillow by candlelight.” He spoke very softly, the words tickling her ear, until he closed his mouth around her earlobe. “I want to see you naked, but for this glorious, silky hair, Esther, and a smile of welcome for me.”

This was love talk, silly nonsense men concocted to make ladies want to shed their clothes—and it was working. Esther squirmed and realized that Percival Windham’s talk was having an effect on certain parts of his anatomy as well.

How... lovely. How intriguing. “What else?”

He laughed quietly. “Now who has the inconvenient questions? I want to make love to you, of course, endlessly, all night, until you are limp with pleasure and neither of us can move.”

Esther lifted her face from his shoulder, needing to see his eyes. “All I sought were kisses, Percival. You need not flatter and dissemble.”

His expression in the shadow of the angel’s wings was hard to read, but he wasn’t smiling. “Give me your hand, love.”

She obliged, and he brought their joined hands down between their bodies.

“Feel that. A man can’t fake desire. A kiss between a man and a woman should always have a little desire in it.”

If this thick column of flesh was his idea of a *little* desire... Esther withdrew her hand and felt her cheeks flush. “You haven’t even kissed me yet.”

“Nor shall I.”

For a devastated instant, she thought he was reneging, except his hand fisted on her braid, gently but implacably, and Esther understood in the next second what he was about.

He was hers to kiss. Here in this small, secluded graveyard, peace filling the air and cherubs and angels looking on with eternal smiles, Lord Percival Windham was hers.

“Esther?”

Not so casual now, and how she loved hearing her name on his lips. “I’m thinking.”

Marveling at the possibilities. She made him wait for a few heady moments while she reveled in the feel of *his* hair in *her* hands, while she traced the shape of *his* ear with *her* nose, and she settled herself on the ridge of his erection. The luxury of time he gave her was a sumptuous gift, one she indulged in shamelessly.

“How does it feel when I do this?” She shifted her weight on him minutely, bringing on all manner of pleasurable sensations.

“It does not hurt. Will you kiss me, Esther?”

There was a “but” in his it-does-not-hurt, one Esther could not fathom. She hitched closer and wished she were in her nightclothes, or in nothing at all.

“Esther, *please*...”

Ah, the glory of hearing that hoarse, pleading whisper, of feeling it against her bare skin. Gently, slowly, Esther settled her mouth on his, treasuring everything about the moment.

The sound of their clothing rustled when she shifted, and his arm tightened around her.

The feel of his clean-shaven cheek against her palm as she cradled his jaw.

The scrape of his riding boots as he spread his legs and closed his fingers in her hair.

The sweet lemony taste of his tongue seaming her lips.

He keeps lemon drops in his snuffbox.

For long, long moments, that was Esther’s last coherent thought. She became nothing more than the female half of a passionate, unforgettable, indescribable, *profound* kiss, and how long she existed in that blissful state she could not have said, though for the duration of their kiss, Percival Windham was both storm and refuge, both the inspiration for her desire and the frustration of it.

When Esther at last subsided against his shoulder, she was panting and wishing her clothing to Hades—she was also wishing *his* clothing to Hades—and enjoying the feel of his hand stroking slowly, slowly over her hair.

“Can you describe that kiss, Esther Himmelfarb? I surely cannot.” There was wonder in his voice, awe even.

“My first kiss?” A modest description, also a confession of sorts. She wanted him never to stop touching her hair in that soothing caress and yet, as long as he touched her in that way, she would have no means of reassembling her scattered wits.

“Our third kiss, my love.”

“Fourth, if we’re to be precise.”

“Third—the little nothing before was just the appetizer. Let me hold you.”

He was counting their kisses. Esther hoarded up that realization and did indeed let him hold her, and hold her, and hold her. At some point, he shifted and rose with her cradled against his chest, and still she did not stir. He carried her—her, Esther Himmelfarb, whom the dainty, petite Charlotte had described as Amazonian—down the walkway to the wooden bench, then took a seat directly beside her.

Esther retrieved her riding glove from a skirt pocket and slipped it on, the better to control the impulse to touch Percival Windham’s hair, to cradle his palm once more against her cheek.

When Anthony came up the walk, whistling an up-tempo version of “God Save the King,” Esther was still sitting beside Percival Windham, not touching him but wondering how—how on earth—she

would describe the kisses that just passed between them.

* * *

Esther had regrets. She regretted not packing more of her best gowns; she regretted her family's assumption that she could be any kind of aid to Michael in his marital machinations and any kind of check on his wagering impulses. She regretted bitterly that there hadn't been time to devise some other plan for rescuing Lord Percival from Charlotte Pankhurst's infernal schemes.

More than any of that, Esther regretted that she'd asked Percival Windham only for mere kissing lessons.

"He didn't even blink," she informed an enormous white cat curled at the foot of her bed. "Desperate spinsters must importune him for kissing lessons the livelong day."

The cat squeezed its eyes closed, eyes that sported the same startling, lovely, rosemary-in-bloom blue boasted by Percival Windham's eyes.

Esther paced the confines of her small chamber. "I have been accosted, you see. I have been groped and slobbered over, I have been propositioned, and I have even been proposed to."

She shuddered at the memory of Baron Bagshot's proposal. She'd had to help him up from his genuflection, and given the baron's fondness for his victuals and the unreliability of his septuagenarian knees, the undertaking had been ungainly.

And he'd been so unabashedly *hopeful*.

"I was supposed to consider myself fortunate, for he assured me I'd quickly be a widow and well fixed. What sort of bride wishes her husband into the grave?"

The cat rearranged itself to a sitting position.

"Percival isn't the least bit conceited." Esther regarded the cat, a creature born with a full complement of conceit. "He's easy to talk to, and he smells good, and when he lifts one from a horse, one feels... dainty."

Dainty was a novelty and precious. No other man had conjured this feeling in Esther's breast, as if she might shelter in his arms, lean upon him, and enjoy conversing with his chin instead of enduring his conversation with the tops of her breasts.

"He has a determined chin, nothing retiring about it. I am in a sad case when I am besotted with a man's chin... The way he uses his hands is equally enchanting, firm and... firm."

Esther sat on the bed and picked up the cat, who had commenced to groom itself and looked none too pleased to be interrupted.

"My mama still berates us in wonderfully precise German when we transgress. She's very practical, and I know exactly what is meant when a man and woman become lovers, cat."

Because Esther was scratching the nape of the beast's neck, a comforting vibration began to rumble forth from her confidante.

Esther whispered, her lips close to the cat's elegant fur. "I should have asked him to become my lover. This is a house party, we're sophisticated people, and even a poor relation in training is entitled to a few lovely memories."

The cat began to knead Esther's shoulder through her nightclothes.

"Naughty kitty." She cuddled the cat closer, mentally assuring herself, for the thousandth time,

that asking Lord Percival for his kisses had not been foolish and she would not regret it.

She would, however, regret not asking him for more.

* * *

The Marquess of Pembroke was a blond, shambling giant with genial features and a heartwarming devotion to his wife and daughters. As his father studied him, Pembroke sat by a mullioned window and pretended to read some thick tome, though no doubt a pamphlet on grafting roses or distilling perfumes lay between the pages of Pembroke's book.

Pembroke pushed his glasses up his nose then rubbed the heel of his right hand absently against his sternum. The gesture belonged on an old man, but in recent years had become alarmingly characteristic of the Moreland heir.

His Grace launched himself into the room, lest he be found spying on his oldest surviving son. "Is your indigestion acting up?"

Pembroke blinked, set the book aside, and rose slowly. "Not particularly. Good day, Your Grace."

"And the same to you. I trust your lady fares well?"

Bella had been present for last night's meal, it being Her Grace's decree that the family dine together in the evening, though formality had always characterized His Grace's dealings with his sons.

"She's out riding with the girls. It's a fine day for a hack. Was there something I might do for you, Your Grace?"

His Grace did not remark the infrequency of Pembroke's own ventures on horseback. As a younger man, Peter, like his brothers, had ridden like a demon—when his mother would not get wind of it—but marriage, or that ache in the man's chest, had sobered the marquess considerably.

His Grace gestured to the settee. "May I sit?"

"Of course. Shall I ring for tea?"

God's holy, everlasting balls... Their dinner conversation was the same. A parody of dialogue.

His Grace flipped out the tails of his coat and appropriated the middle of the sofa while Pembroke subsided into his reading chair. "Tea won't be necessary. Her Grace would like us to attend the last week of the Morrisette house party. The children needn't come, of course, though I'm sure Lady Morrisette will make accommodation if you insist."

He rather hoped the children would come, for both of his granddaughters were delightful young ladies who liked for their grandpapa to read to them and tell them tales of life at court.

Pembroke took off his glasses and fished a handkerchief out of his pocket, no doubt mentally fashioning a response while polishing spotless lenses.

"You never refer to her as my mother, as our mother. Did you know that?" Pembroke's tone was not accusing, it was merely curious, perhaps carefully curious.

From parody to farce—or tragedy? "The duchess is rather attached to the privileges of her station. Is there a point you would make, Pembroke?"

"I love my wife." Pembroke's chin came up a bit as he said this.

"Your sentiments do you credit." The duke's answer was swift and sincere.

Also, apparently, surprising to them both.

Pembroke rose and stood facing the window, which looked out over the stables and nearer paddocks. “I have wondered how my parents contrived to have four children, given what I know of my progenitors now. She’s set the dogs on Percy and Tony.”

She being Her Grace, of course, and the implied criticism being that His Grace had done nothing to stop her matchmaking—which he had not.

“Percival and Anthony are of an age to be taking spouses. You were younger, and your union has been blessed.”

Pembroke shot a look over his shoulder. “I believe you mean that.”

“I most assuredly do, and with your brothers married, perhaps you and your marchioness will finally have some peace. Ten years is long enough to bear the entire brunt of ducal expectations.”

Blond brows rose, as if Pembroke’s circumstances could not possibly have figured into the duke’s thinking where Percival and Tony were concerned.

“I’ll tell Bella we’re to join the house party.”

A change of subject, but in Pembroke’s tone, the duke divined the truth: Pembroke would ask Arabella if she would mind very much spending just a few days placating Her Grace with a social outing. Bella would turn up stubborn, convinced if she agreed and they attended, then Pembroke would be even more miserable than she. Much fuming and many portentous looks would be served up with dinner for the remainder of the week.

And in the end, they’d both go, and both hate it. Perhaps they’d even slide a hair closer to hating Her Grace.

Managing a large and prosperous duchy was simple compared to dealing with one small, relatively civil family. His Grace rose to stand beside his son.

“Anthony is in clandestine pursuit of the Holsopple heiress, who is not trying very hard to elude capture. She’s had several seasons to lark about, and refused any number of offers. Her Grace is making overtures to the girl’s mother, and thus the entire idea will be Her—*your mother’s* invention, provided Anthony and his love do not elope first, and provided I can manage to communicate as much to your baby brother.”

Pembroke folded his glasses and stuffed them into a pocket. “And Percy?”

“Percival is acquitting himself cordially to all and sundry. I predict that when he falls, he’ll fall hard and without respect to where Her—your mother would like him to fall. Do I take it you are not inclined to join the house party?”

“Bella despises those gatherings.”

“As do I.”

This bit of honesty proved too much for Pembroke’s reserve. The marquess aimed a rare, sympathetic smile at his father. “Is it time for your lungs to act up?”

“My lungs—? Oh, I think not. Twombly has defected from his post as Her Grace’s favorite gallant, and I am afforded a rare opportunity to escort my wife. I will make your excuses to her regarding your attendance, yours and Lady Bella’s.”

“My thanks, Your Grace.” The relief in his son’s eyes was hard to look on.

“For God’s sake, Pembroke, Her Grace behaves as she does only because she cannot abide the idea that any of her children should be unhappy. She’s neither evil nor unreasonable, just very determined.”

“If you say so, sir.”

His Grace took his leave, and Pembroke’s nose was back in the book before the duke had left the parlor. The duchess was determined, mortally determined, but her ends were perfectly justified. Nonetheless, it was Pembroke’s lady wife who’d carried the burden of the duchess’s disappointment for nigh a decade. The duke held his daughter-in-law in great affection, and enough was enough.

As His Grace sought the duchess to relay word that Pembroke and his marchioness would not be joining the house party, an uncomfortable thought occurred to him:

Unlike Pembroke, Percival would not have needed his papa to serve as a go-between with the duchess. Percival would have told his mother he wasn’t inclined to attend, and no matter how Her Grace fumed, pouted, and twisted the thumbscrews of maternal guilt, Percival would not have yielded.

Given the way Pembroke rubbed at his chest and kept company with books and rosebushes, the day might come when the dukedom fell into Percival’s hands.

And that would not be an entirely bad thing—for the dukedom.

* * *

“My full name is Percival St. Stephens Tiberius Joachim Windham. I am very thankful His Grace could contain my mother’s excesses and limit her to four names for each child. Quimbey has eight baptismal names of at least three syllables each. What about you?”

Esther gave herself a moment to memorize his lordship’s entire name—Percival St. Stephens Tiberius Joachim Windham. “I am Esther Louise Himmelfarb, plain and simple.”

“You have told two falsehoods, my dear. You are neither plain nor simple. When is your natal day?”

Esther answered that question, just as she’d answered so many others, and all during his lordship’s polite interrogation she was aware of a chorus of crickets chirping in the moon-shadowed garden. She was aware of Percival Windham sitting so close to her, the heat of his muscular thigh along hers was evident through the fabric of her nightgown and wrapper. She was aware of his scent and aware of the way his voice in the darkness felt like an aural caress.

Most of all, though, she was aware that two days after promising to teach her how to kiss—and two long, restless nights—he most assuredly had not kissed her again.

“I have a question for you, your lordship.”

“Percy will do, madam. You are quite forgetful about my request that you abandon the formalities.”

He sounded amused, while Esther wanted to grind her teeth. “I named a boon to you when we visited your family plot, and you agreed to grant it. Do you consider the obligation discharged, or have you forgotten my request?”

Without any change in his lordship’s posture, the quality of his presence beside her shifted, as did the nature of the darkness surrounding them. The moon was a thin crescent in the sky, and the night was mild. From beyond the walls of the kitchen garden, an owl hooted, making Esther think of all the mama mice grateful their children were safe in bed.

Bed, where she ought to be.

Though not alone. For once in her sensible, lonely, pragmatic existence, Esther Himmelfarb did not want to go to bed alone. This realization had come to her as she'd sat in Lady Pott's tiny dressing room, mending a hem at Zephora Needham's request. Lady Pott had been snoring off her brandied tea in the next room, and the billowing ball gowns on their respective hooks had felt like so many cobwebs clinging to Esther's life.

Percival's fingers, strong and warm, closed over Esther's hand. "If you think for one instant I could forget either kissing you or the prospect of kissing you again, Esther Louise, you are much mistaken."

I want to see you naked, but for this glorious, silky hair, Esther, and a smile of welcome for me. She recalled his words, and they made her brave—or reckless.

"I want to see you naked, sir."

He went still beside her then drew her to her feet. "Not here."

If not here, then somewhere—anywhere. She did not care, provided he granted her this wish, because a man in want of his clothing was often a man in want of his wits—her grandmother had told her that, and with a wink and a laugh too.

"Where are we going?"

He tugged her along a path that led away from the house. "Somewhere private, safe from prying eyes and gossiping tongues. If you're to make free with my person—and I with yours—I want there to be no hurry about it."

And yet, *he* was hurrying. Hurrying Esther toward the dark expanse of the home wood, a tangled, overgrown place she'd ridden through with Lord Tony just yesterday. A nightingale started caroling, or maybe Esther was simply noticing the birdsong as they traveled into deeper shadows.

"How can you possibly see where we're going?"

"I have excellent night vision, and I scouted the terrain last week."

He'd been thinking of trysting places even a week ago? The notion brought a serpent into the garden of Esther's anticipation. She shook her hand loose from his. "Have you—?"

He rounded on her and linked his arms over her shoulders. "Of course not, not with anybody else, nor will I."

She prepared to launch into a lecture, a stern description of what she expected of him during the remaining days of the house party, but he drew her into his embrace. "Do you think I could share a kiss such as you bestowed upon me two days past and then casually dally with another? Do you think I'd wait in the garden, night after night, hoping for another quarter hour's conversation with you, then turn easily to the likes of the Harpies and Hair Bows lurking in the alcoves?"

He sounded a touch incredulous, maybe even exasperated. Esther tried to tell herself his sentiments were superficial gallantries.

Herself wasn't inclined to listen. She leaned into him. "I want to make love with you."

His hand on her back went still, and Esther felt his chin resting on her crown. "My dear, there are consequences to such decisions, potentially grave consequences."

She might conceive, though the timing made that very unlikely. "I am prepared to accept those consequences."

"Are you?" Had his embrace become more snug?

Was he *arguing* with her? The darkness prevented Esther from reading his expression, so she gave in to an impulse—one that would inspire him to put his lovely mouth to ends better suited to her

plans than arguing.

She slid her hand down the muscular plane of his chest, over his flat belly, down to the gratifyingly firm—dauntingly sizable—bulge behind his falls. “Enough talk, Percy. Make love with me.”

He pushed into her hand for a moment, once, twice, then led her farther into the woods, to a clearing lit with the meager moonlight. In moments, his cloak was spread on the soft grass and Esther was flat on her back, while he loomed over her, blocking out the stars.

“You must be sure, Esther. There can be no undoing what happens now, no regretting it.”

So earnest, so unlike the shallow cavalier she’d seen across the room not two weeks ago.

He would not be earnest and careful like this with other women. As he untied the bows of her dressing gown, Esther knew the relief of certainty. He would be charming and lighthearted, tender even and generous, but he would not be so... serious. For that, she loved him—loved him a little more.

She trapped his hands in hers. “You first.”

He sat back on their makeshift blanket and had his waistcoat unbuttoned in seconds. “You want to see the goods, do you? Ought I to be flattered or nervous?”

His shirt followed, drawn right over his head.

“You ought to be neither. You ought to be naked.”

“*We* ought to be naked. I would never have taken you for pagan, my dear. It’s a fine quality in a woman, a latent streak of paganism.” He sat back to tug off his boots. Esther hiked herself to her elbows and wished she hadn’t wasted the full moon on proprieties and insecurities.

“I’m nervous, if you must know.”

He left off unbuttoning his falls to peer over at her. “You will enjoy this. You’ll enjoy *me*. That’s a vow, my lady. You may say good-bye to your maidenly vapors. They have overstayed their welcome.”

He sat back and worked his breeches over his hips, moving without a hint of self-doubt. Moving as if... he might be concerned she’d change her mind.

What a cheering thought. When he prowled over to her side, naked as the day he came into the world, Esther had cause to regret that she hadn’t scheduled this coupling for the broad light of day.

“You are a beautiful man.” She ran a finger down one muscled bicep. “Beautifully strong, beautifully smooth and warm to the touch, beautifully brave...”

He caught her hand and wrapped it around a part of him Esther hadn’t had the courage to examine yet. “Beautifully aching for you.”

And for all his swaggering and social nimbleness, Percival Windham was also a man capable of patience. He let her explore with her fingertips, with her palms, with eyes and nose. Let her consume him with her senses, until Esther was again flat on her back, this time with a naked Percy Windham crouched over her and her nightclothes frothed around her in the moonlight.

“We either turn back to our separate paths now, Esther, or we forge ahead together. The choice is exclusively yours.” He laced his fingers with hers where her hands lay amid her unbound hair on the cloak. The feel of that, of his hands linked to hers, was both a portent and a reassurance.

“Together,” she said. “Now, let us be together.”

She braced herself to feel him probing at her body, but he surprised her with lazy, sweet kisses, teasing kisses and big, manly sighs, until she was a mindless puddle of female wanting beneath him.

“Percival, please.”

“Soon.”

His idea of soon was *maddening*. “Now.”

He nudged about, in no hurry at all. Purely at her wit’s end, Esther lunged up with her hips and found herself... found herself a lover. The sensation was wonderful and strange, and yet when several moments of silence and immobility went by... “Percival, will you move?”

His hand came around to cradle the back her head. “You’re all right?”

Only a few words, but so tender.

“I am mad for wanting you,” she began. “You have no sense of dispatch, and I am relying on you entirely to know how to go on, as difficult as relying on anybody for anything is for such as I, but I take leave to doubt whether—”

He laughed—a low, happy chuckle signaling both affection and approval—and he *moved*, a lovely, sinuous undulation that soothed as it aroused as it fascinated.

“You can move too, love. Move with me.”

Esther’s body had a sense of dispatch, a sense of soaring, galloping pleasure in the man she’d chosen for her first intimate encounter. She moved as he’d suggested, and found he knew things, marvelous, subtle things about how to leave a woman breathless with wonder and panting with ecstasy.

Percival Windham knew that a woman’s ears were marvelously sensitive. He knew that patience on a man’s part was an aphrodisiac. He knew exactly when to increase the tempo and depth of his thrusts, when to cradle Esther’s head so she could cry out softly against his throat. He knew to hold her just as closely as her pleasure ebbed, and to hold her more closely still when an urge to weep tugged at her happiness.

For the rest of her life, Esther would treasure—and miss—Percival Windham and the things he knew.

And yet... Percival braced himself over her, giving her just enough of his weight that the night breezes cooled her skin without leaving a chill. She took a whiff of cedar and spices and stroked her hand through his unbound hair.

“What about you, Percival? Are you to have no pleasure for yourself?”

“If I endured any more pleasure, my love...”

She stopped his inchoate blather with her fingers over his mouth. “No flatteries, no prevarications, Percival. I have withheld nothing from you. Nothing. I only wish...”

He snuggled closer, a large, fit man, to whom Esther was sure the term “sexual athlete” might be accurately applied, and yet he’d been so careful with her.

He shifted, so his lips grazed her neck. “What do you wish?”

His hair was so marvelously soft, as soft as moonlight. “I wish I knew how to render you as witless and befuddled as I am, as...” *in love*. That would be trespassing against common sense, so she compromised. “As helpless.”

A beat of silence went by, while Esther feared her limited disclosures had overstepped whatever the rules of dalliance permitted, but then Percival began to move, slowly, powerfully.

Intimately. “My love, you already have.”

Hours later, when the crickets had gone quiet and the nightingale no longer stirred, Percival retied the bows on Esther’s nightclothes, wrapped her in his cloak, and put himself to rights while

Esther watched through slumberous eyes. He carried her—effortlessly—through the gardens and up three flights of steps to deposit her onto the little cot in the little garret.

He sat at her hip then leaned down to kiss her on the forehead.

“I will see you in my dreams, my lady, and they will be sweet dreams indeed.”

She murmured something about cracking the window—she was already half dreaming herself—felt a cool, sweet breeze waft into the room, and heard the door latch click shut in the darkness.

When she rose in the morning and went down to breakfast, eager to see by daylight the man with whom she’d shared such wondrous intimacies by moonlight, she learned that Percival Windham, along with his brother Anthony, had quit the premises entirely.

“Do I take it you’re jaunting into Town with me to ride chaperone on any trysts I might stumble into?”

Anthony sounded put out as only a younger brother can when saddled with the unwanted company of an elder sibling. Percival tossed a coin to the coaching inn’s stable lad and swung up onto Reveille before answering.

“I have pressing errands in Town, and the last thing I want is to be a party to your amorous endeavors.”

Anthony considered him from Anthem’s back. “Are you perchance going to pay a call on the O’Donnell creature? Get the manly humors back in balance?”

The very idea had Percival aiming his horse away from the inn yard at a brisk trot. “The O’Donnell creature and I are not now nor were we ever an item of significant interest, I’ll have you know.”

Anthony’s gelding easily kept pace. “You were of interest to her, or it certainly seemed that way last month.”

“My wallet was of interest to her, until some general offered her a more lucrative arrangement. I wish her well.” He also spared a thought for the general, because the poor fellow was taking up with the most mercenary female Percival had ever made the mistake of allowing into his bed.

“I rather like Mrs. St. Just.” Anthony rather liked everybody, including attractive, friendly Dublin-born redheads of easy virtue.

“You are trying to get rid of me, Anthony, but you need not bother. I will not be your duenna for any passionate interludes you have planned with Miss Holsopple, nor will I be calling on the fair Mrs. St. Just. She departed for Ireland prior to the Heckenbaum house party, and while her charms were considerable, our liaison is at an end.”

And what an odd relief that it was so. Both Mrs. St. Just and Cecily O’Donnell were beautiful, intelligent, sexually experienced, and worldly wise—also interested only in exploiting a man’s base urges for financial gain, though the St. Just woman seemed to genuinely enjoy Percival’s company. No matter how generously Percival reimbursed them, neither lady would ever demand kissing lessons from him; they would never listen to his memories of service in Canada; they would never understand—he, himself had not understood—that for Her Grace to send sons into the cavalry had to have been particularly difficult.

“I’m going to ask Gladys to elope with me.”

Percival brought his horse back to the walk. “Why in blazes would you tell me such a thing? Am I supposed to stop you or abet you?”

“Both. Neither. I got a note from Gladys, you see, and it’s confounded complicated.”

Anthony was cheerful by nature, but this plan of his had him sounding morose.

“Are you sure she’s the one, Anthony?”

“Yes.”

Anthony was also not decisive by nature, and yet, Gladys Holsopple had his unequivocal allegiance. What was it going to be like, to know Esther Himmelfarb had granted to Percival the same, immediate, unquestioning devotion? To know she accepted it from him?

“Why not honor your Gladys with the usual approach? You ask her papa for permission to court,

you ask her, you set a date, the ladies make a great fuss, you wait...”

“That waiting business can be problematic.”

Percival digested that for about a quarter mile. “How far along is she?”

Anthony heaved the sigh of unmarried prospective fathers the world over. “That’s part of the confounded problem. She isn’t sure she is, she isn’t sure she... isn’t. Not all fillies are the same, and we only had three occasions, so to speak.”

Three? “Fast work, Brother, and once is enough.”

Though if Anthony’s situation with Gladys bore any resemblance to Percival’s with Esther, once would never, ever be enough.

“She’s all up in the bows over this, and it tears at a man, to know his lady is upset and he can do nothing to comfort her.”

It tore at a man simply to be parted from his lady. “So you will comfort her now and hatch up desperate plots. I hope you do not have need of them, but I will do all in my power to aid you.” The words should not have been necessary—Tony was his *brother*—but the relief on Tony’s face suggested the assurances were appreciated.

“And you too, Perce. If you and the Himmelfarb girl need reinforcements, we’re here for you, Gladys and myself.”

“My thanks.”

Except Gladys was under her mother’s watchful eye in Town, an elopement would see both parties haring off to Scotland, and winning the Himmelfarb girl’s heart was an uncertain undertaking, regardless of how passionately she’d shared her body.

* * *

“You look as tired as I feel.” Michael tugged on Esther’s sleeve and led her to a dusty little room full of guns, game bags, and other hunting accoutrements. “Are you getting any rest at all?”

Esther glanced around, her gaze landing on a stag’s head mounted on the opposite wall. The animal’s glass eyes stared at a preserved hare crouching on a set of quarter shelves in a corner.

“House parties are fatiguing,” Esther said. “In your case, I’d say they’re impoverishing as well.”

Michael’s gaze narrowed as he pushed the door closed with a booted foot. “I’m trying to express concern for you, and your response is to nag? Even a cousin finds that tiresome behavior in a female.”

Was he concerned? Esther gave herself leave to doubt that. “Lady Morrisette remarked last night after dinner that she will make it a point to oppose you at whist, because she’s sure to increase her pin money that way.”

“Women’s gossip. She opposes me at whist so she might make free with her hands on my person under the table, while our partners likely do the same across the table.”

Esther thought back to the previous evening, when Sir Jasper and Charlotte Pankhurst had completed the foursome at Michael’s table.

“You might well be right, but, Michael, I am worried for you. These people are above our strata. We’re tolerated here to make up the numbers, and they are not our friends. Your folly would provoke their amused scorn, not their sympathy.”

He crossed his arms while his expression became superior. “And what of you, Esther

Himmelfarb? Lurking in gardens with a ducal spare? That's more than a bit ambitious, I'd say, even for an earl's granddaughter."

An arrangement of silver hunting flasks sat on the quarter shelf below the hare. The flasks were going a bit tarnished, but they'd make satisfying missiles fired at Michael's head.

"Were you spying on me, Michael?"

"I was taking a bit of air, Cousin, and heard voices on the other side of the garden wall. *Percival St. Stephens Joachim Windham* was getting quite friendly with you."

He'd forgotten a name—Tiberius. Thank God the wall had been high and solid.

"I can visit with whom I please, Michael, and regardless of how I'm spending what little spare time I have here, you are supposed to be courting the ladies, not financial ruin."

Michael apparently decided on a tactical retreat. "What can you tell me about Herodia Bellamy?"

And this was likely the point of Michael's "concern." He was losing badly at cards, and instead of browsing the available brides himself, he expected Esther to do his scouting for him.

"Marriage is intended to resolve a lack of companionship, Michael, not a lack of coin."

His smile was quick and genuine. "You sound exactly like Uncle Jacob. Marriage can solve both. The best families have known this for generations and prosper as a result. Tell me about the Bellamy girl."

There was no reason not to, though Esther eyed the flasks with longing. They would make such a loud, satisfying crash pitched against the old speckled mirror above the mantel.

"Herodia is a trifle too smart for her own good. She's bored silly but knows better than to get tangled up in anything truly disgraceful. Engage her mind, and she'll notice you."

"I'd rather engage her mind than spend my days complimenting hair bows." Michael looked thoughtful. "I'm also hoping I might make progress with the Needmore heiress now that the Windhams have gone larking into Town."

Esther barely refrained from clutching her cousin's arm to wring further details from him, though she manufactured an indifferent expression rather than pique Michael's curiosity. "I wasn't aware they'd departed from the gathering And her name is Needham."

Michael began a perambulation of the room, inspecting the hunting paraphernalia and trophies as he wandered. "Lord Percy is partial to mistresses with flaming red hair and lush proportions; at last report he had at least two of that description meeting his needs in Town. Lord Tony probably went along for similar entertainments, or perhaps they share—though I ought not to offer such speculation in your company. Where do you suppose Lord Morrisette killed this thing?"

A man would do that—leap in conversation from mistresses to hunting trophies and be oblivious to the non sequitur, or maybe not even grasp that there might be one. "It's a skunk. Perhaps he purchased it from somebody who's hunted in the New World."

The animal was probably very pretty when alive. Lush black and white fur ended in a graceful plume of a tail, and yet in death, the beast's eyes bore the same blank stare as every other prize in the room.

"Well, I'm off to hunt a bride or perhaps some sport more entertaining than dodging Lady Morrisette's overtures." He paused by the door and regarded Esther for a moment. "You're too decent for a gathering like this. I'm surprised Aunt and Uncle let you attend."

"I'm nominally under Lady Pott's wing, when she's awake. You'd best be going lest somebody

remark our tête-à-tête, but I truly wish you'd limit yourself to farthing points." Esther wished as well she could tell her numbskull cousin she'd been "permitted" to attend mostly to keep an eye on him.

Michael pursed his lips in a sulky pout. "Schoolboys play for farthing points."

When the door clicked softly closed behind him, Esther informed the hare, the skunk, the stag's head, and a four-foot-long silver-and-black snake twined around a limb above the mantel, "Even schoolboys know their debts of honor must be paid."

And Esther knew that Lady Morrisette had endless tasks waiting, and yet, this dusty, ghoulish closet-shrine to idle masculinity was probably the closest thing to a refuge Esther might find. She took a seat on a worn leather hassock and tried to absorb that Percy Windham had made passionate love with her, tucked her up in bed—*left her there*—and gone off a few hours later to disport with not one but two beautiful mistresses.

Her parents' marriage had been a love match, but Esther knew such unions were unusual in the better families—the titled families.

The world certainly expected her to be celibate, but what right had she to expect *Percival* would be celibate?

"Every right," she assured the skunk. For the duration of one brief house party, he might have at least limited his attentions to her. She remained on her hassock, mentally lecturing herself for treasuring memories that clearly were of no moment to her lover.

The feel of his hands in her hair.

The sound of his voice in the darkness.

The feel of his body joined carefully and intimately with hers...

"Miss Himmelfarb." Sir Jasper had opened the door so quietly, he was inside the room and had the door closed again before Esther noticed him standing under the stag. "Of all the ladies to find being private with the impecunious Mr. Adelman."

Esther remained seated. If the only rank she could assert was that of lady, then assert it, she would. "Is he impecunious, or unlucky in his choice of games?"

"Touché, my lady." He slouched closer, the dusty light making his face powder appear another artifact of zoological preservation. "Though it appears I'm the one in luck at the moment. I don't hear Lady Zephora whining for her tea, and the word at breakfast was that the Lords Windham had gone off to revive themselves with some sophisticated sport in Town. Quimbey is out shooting hares, and here you are"—he came to a halt beside Esther's hassock, which had the disagreeable result of putting his falls at her nose level—"all by yourself, at your leisure at last."

His fingers brushed her chin, a hint of threat in his touch. Esther tried hard not to move, not to flinch. He wasn't hurting her; he wasn't even groping her.

But he was *insulting* her. For all Percival Windham might at that very moment be bathing with both of his mistresses, Lord Percy had not offered Esther insult, nor had he taken liberties beyond what she'd willingly shared.

Esther batted Sir Jasper's hand aside so stoutly, she had the gratification of seeing surprise on his face as she rose, brushed past him, and left him to the company of creatures already dead, stuffed, mounted, and gathering dust.

Five years of making war on colonials had impressed upon Sir Jasper several important lessons—lessons not taught on the hallowed playing fields of Eton.

First, what counted was neither who had better form, nor who charmed the spectators, nor who looked better on a horse. What counted in any contest was who won.

Second, marching about in straight lines, forming up into squares, and keeping a bright red uniform spotless was so much lunacy when the enemy soldiers respected no rules, could melt into the woods like wraiths, and used any weapon at hand to advance their cause.

Third, a baronet's succession was as important to the baronet as a duke's might be to the duke.

With those verities in mind, Sir Jasper waited in the conservatory at teatime, knowing it to be Mr. Michael Adelman's favorite place to avoid company.

"Are you considering a career in botany, Mr. Adelman?"

The younger fellow startled as Sir Jasper emerged from behind a thriving stand of some enormous cane plant.

"Sir Jasper. I enjoy the quiet here. I assume you do as well, so I'll leave you to it."

Not so fast, pup. "Before you scamper off to the charms of our fair companions, might I enquire as to when you'll be redeeming your vowels?"

Mr. Adelman was dark haired, handsome by any standard, and smooth cheeked. Not a scar to be seen on his physiognomy, which Sir Jasper told himself he did not hold against the fellow. That such a one should be welcome to share closets and whispered confidences with Esther Windham, however, was not to be borne.

Adelman drew himself up, though he was no taller than Sir Jasper. "One doesn't typically carry large sums about to social gatherings, sir."

"Precisely." Sir Jasper withdrew a gold watch and flipped it open. "But when said entertainments are of several weeks duration, one can certainly send to his man of business for a bank draft." He glanced up from the watch, flicking it shut and dropping it back into his pocket. "You do have a man of business?"

Adelman positively flushed with indignation. "Had I known you were so precipitous in collecting social debts, I would have already notified him." Adelman brushed back the skirt of his coat and hooked a thumb in his waistcoat pocket, a lovely pose—casual, cocky, and designed to flaunt excellent tailoring. "Do you rule out the possibility that I will regain my losses?"

"Indeed, I do." Sir Jasper offered his snuffbox, an elegant accessory of gold and onyx. "The play to be had in such genteel surrounds has palled. Name a date, Mr. Adelman, and I'll have my man of business attend yours at the location of your choice."

Adelman had no natural talent for dissembling. This was what made him a bad card player, but also what caused Sir Jasper an unwanted stirring of pity. Dueling was good sport when a man was a crack shot, but Adelman was only a couple of years down from university, a plain mister, and apparently of some value to Esther Himmelfarb.

While resistance from a worthy female was all part of the game, her outright antipathy would be a nuisance under intimate circumstances.

"I will offer you a compromise, Mr. Adelman. Either produce the coin you owe me by the first of the week, or I will appropriate from you something I consider to be of equal or greater value."

Sir Jasper whiffed a pinch of snuff into his left nostril, while Adelman looked away.

"The first of the week is too soon."

“The first of the week is three days from now. You have all the time in the world to procure the means. I would, however, advise you to avoid the gambling offered by our hostess.”

“I am not unlucky—” Adelman puffed up like a peacock.

“No, you are unaware, which can be remedied. The ladies cheat, you see, and the gentlemen—your charming self included—overimbibe, and thus the odds are not at all what you think they are. I bid you a pleasant day and will expect remuneration within seventy-two hours.”

Sir Jasper sauntered off, content with the exchange. Watching Adelman fidget away the next two days, then hare away at the crack of dawn three mornings hence, would be entertaining—and God knew entertainment was in short supply at this gathering—and it would leave Esther Himmelfarb without her preferred swain.

All in all, a productive little chat.

* * *

His Grace the Duke of Quimbey was tall, rangy, had kind blue eyes, a nice laugh, and was not one for standing on ceremony. That he was twice Charlotte’s age was of no moment. No unmarried duke was too old, too stout, too much given to the company of opera dancers, or even too impoverished for an ambitious, well-dowered girl to discount as a marital prospect.

As Charlotte let herself into the small chamber under the eaves, she assured herself Quimbey was also not too enamored of Esther Himmelfarb. His Grace had attached himself to the lady’s side since the Windham menfolk had departed the day before, and no amount of flirting, teasing, or scheming had dislodged him.

“But one well-placed billet-doux ought to shine a very different light on the perfect Miss Esther Himmelfarb.”

At the very least, such a note, when made public, would get the girl sent home in disgrace, leaving her betters with a clearer field upon which to pursue and divide up the marital spoils in the final week of the house party. Since appropriating the note from its intended means of delivery, Charlotte had spent a day weighing options and making plans, and those plans, oddly enough, brought her to a chamber so unprepossessing as to rouse a niggling sense of guilt regarding her schemes.

Esther Himmelfarb’s room was plain to the point of insult. The mirror over the vanity had a small crack near the base, the carpet was frayed where it met the bed skirt, and the single small window was clouded with age and grime. The only point of elegance was a white cat, enthroned on a chair upholstered in faded pink brocade.

The cat took one look at Charlotte and quit the premises, leaving Charlotte to consider where a letter might lie in plain sight without being immediately noticed—a delicate decision.

“Why, Miss Pankhurst, what a delight.”

Sir Jasper lounged in the doorway, for once free of wig and powder. His blue eyes traveled over her figure, up, down, pause, down farther. The expression in them as he sauntered into the room was not kind.

That expression gave Charlotte a salacious little thrill, truth be known. Sir Jasper’s bearing had the casual elegance of the career soldier, his manners were exquisite, he did not suffer fools, and neither did he cheat at cards or make life difficult for those who did.

He also had wonderfully muscular thighs.

“Sir Jasper.”

He came closer, his gaze thoughtful. “Am I to believe that my good fortune in finding you here results from your desire to spend time with your dear friend, Miss Himmelfarb? When last I saw her, she was instructing Quimbey on the proper approach to fouling another’s ball at croquet. His Grace was listening attentively.”

Sir Jasper had prowled closer, bringing a faint whiff of roses to Charlotte’s nose. Too late, she realized that she was alone in a bedroom with a single male, and the door barely open behind him.

“I suppose I’d best go join Miss Himmelfarb at the croquet game.”

He snatched the letter from Charlotte’s hand so quickly, indignation took a moment to battle its way through her surprise. “Give that back, sir.”

Sir Jasper stepped away, unfolded the note, and took it over to the little window.

“‘My dearest and most precious Esther—’ a sincere if unimaginative beginning. ‘After such pleasure as I have known in your company, any parting from you is torture. Rest assured I will return to your tender embrace as soon as I am able. Until we kiss again, my love, you will remain ever uppermost in my thoughts, and I shall remain exclusively and eternally, yours. Percival.’”

Sir Jasper refolded the note but did not return it, even when Charlotte held out her hand for it. “The signature is not in the same hand, it isn’t even in the same ink.”

Drat all men with keen eyesight. “It’s close enough.”

“Windham would not have been stupid enough to sign such a note. No one will believe it’s from him.” Sir Jasper didn’t believe it was from Percy Windham; that much was obvious.

Charlotte crossed the room and plopped down on the bed. “Some fellow left that note on her sidesaddle. A groom found it and gave it to my maid to leave in Miss Himmelfarb’s room. I chose to assign authorship to Lord Percival, because he’s highborn enough that the scandal won’t matter to him, and enough of a rascal that everyone will believe he’d dally like this. Quimbey is so decent he’d just marry her, and that entirely defeats the point of the exercise.”

Sir Jasper considered the note again and set it on the vanity. He joined Charlotte on the bed, making the mattress dip to the extent that she fetched up against him, hip to hip. “You are a naughty woman, Miss Pankhurst. I may, to a minor degree, have underestimated you—or possibly your determination in matrimonial matters.”

He sounded not exactly admiring, but neither was he criticizing her.

“Miss Himmelfarb has to be got rid of,” Charlotte said, in case the idea was too subtle for the baronet’s masculine brain. “She’s ruining all of our chances, at Quimbey, at Lord Tony, Lord Percival, *at you*.” The last was an afterthought added at the prodding of feminine intuition.

Sir Jasper took the bait—he also took Charlotte’s hand. “I do not flatter myself a mere baronet would be worthy of one of your station, my lady, but with a small exercise in forgery—the signature really should match the body of the note, my dear—there’s a way I might be of service to you.”

His hand was surprisingly warm, his grasp firm. A baronet was no prize, of course, but that didn’t mean a lady couldn’t enjoy spending some time with him.

“Close the door, Sir Jasper. If we’re to discuss forgery, then privacy is in order.”

“Why a fellow has to racket about Town for two days, and then hop on his destrier in the teeming rain, ruin his boots, his lungs, *and* his disposition in a headlong dash for the hinterlands is beyond my feeble powers of divination.” Tony emphasized his harangue with a cough.

Percival handed off cape and gloves—both sopping wet—to a footman. “Our boots will dry out. I could not leave Miss Himmelfarb here undefended save for Quimbey’s dubious protection any longer than necessary.”

“Necessary is a relative term.”

Tony was entitled to grumble. Thrashing their way back to the Morrisette estate on the muddy tracks that passed for the king’s highways had been an ordeal; waiting another day to rejoin his intended would have been torture.

“Why, my lords!” Hippolyta Morrisette paused in the entrance to the high-ceilinged foyer to join her hands at her breastbone. “Riding about in this weather will give you an ague, and then your dear mother will ring a peal over my head for a certainty—not that we aren’t glad to see you again!”

There was something sly in her greeting, for all its effusiveness. Percy bowed without taking her hand. “My lady, greetings. If I might be so bold as to ask the whereabouts of Miss Himmelfarb?”

The gleam in Lady Morrisette’s eye became calculating. “Surely you don’t intend to greet a young lady in all your dirt, my lord?”

“Yes,” Tony said, an edge to his tone, “he most certainly does. He about killed the horses for that very purpose. Best oblige him, my lady.”

She glanced from one young lord to the other, and apparently decided to heed Tony’s advice.

“This way.” She swept toward the back of the house, and Percival followed, Tony bringing up the rear with boots squeaking and squishing.

The guests were assembled in the largest informal parlor, which was fortunate. It meant as he wound his way through the east wing, Percival had a few moments to organize his thoughts despite the screaming need to see Esther again, to make sure she’d weathered his absence without mischief befalling her.

The same instincts that had warned Percival when his superiors had sent him off on doomed errands were urging him to shove Lady Morrisette aside and ransack the house, bellowing Esther’s name until she was again in his arms.

Which would not do. Her Grace would have an apoplexy if word of such behavior reached her.

Lady Morrisette paused while a footman opened the parlor doors, and too late, Percival understood the ambush he’d charged into: Her Grace *and* His Grace sat reading a newspaper at the same table by the window where Esther Himmelfarb had been playing cards more than two weeks ago.

“Possible hostiles near the window,” Tony muttered, coming up on Percy’s shoulder.

Nothing possible about it, and yet, there was Esther, embroidering in a corner on a settee, Quimbey sitting beside her and looking entirely too content, while the rest of the room looked askance at the recent arrivals.

“Look who I found in the foyer!” Lady Morrisette’s cheerful announcement had all heads turning, but where Percival had expected to see welcome in Esther’s eyes, he saw guardedness.

She said something to Quimbey, who smiled like a man besotted, then went back to her embroidery.

Percy could not take his eyes off Esther—though she was *ignoring* him. “My apologies to the

company for the state of my attire, but my errands in Town were urgent.”

The Pankhurst girl rose, as if she'd leave the room or say something, but her gaze went swiveling from Percy to Esther and back to Percy.

“Percival, what can you be about?” His mother's tone was dry as dust. “Disgracing yourself and tracking mud all over Lady Morrisette's carpets. Take your brother and see to your wardrobe.”

She turned a page of the newspaper laid out before her, paying no more heed to her sons than if they had been footmen caught in an indecorous exchange. His Grace neither followed up with a ducal rebuke nor interceded for his sons—of course.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace.” Percival bowed to his mother. “Before I take my leave, I would address Miss Himmelfarb in private.”

Sir Jasper Lay-About cleared his throat. “Perhaps Miss Himmelfarb isn't interested in what you have to say.”

The supercilious ass offered his suggestion from a pose by the fireplace, one leg bent, an elbow propped on the mantel. In full morning finery, he was the picture of gentlemanly grace. The urge to knock the presuming idiot on his backside was nigh unbearable.

“Not now, Perce,” Tony whispered. “Get the girl; then deal with the buffoon.”

Esther was watching him, but there was no welcome in her eyes. Quimbey would not have trespassed, and Esther would never have yielded to Sir Jasper's importuning... and yet.

As Percy watched her, unease curled more tightly in the part of a man's gut that could save his life if he listened to it. “Then I'll say my piece to her here.”

Like a marionette whose strings had been jerked, Charlotte Pankhurst came to life. “Esther Himmelfarb, how could I have forgotten! I have been remiss, and I do beg your pardon. I promised to give you back the correspondence you gave me for safekeeping, and it completely slipped my mind.”

As the girl withdrew a folded piece of paper from her workbasket, Esther turned to regard her. “I gave you no correspondence, Charlotte.”

“Oh, now don't be coy!” With a flourish and an odd glance at Sir Jasper, Miss Pankhurst started to read. “It's signed by Sir Jasper. ‘My dearest and most precious Esther.’” She paused long enough to take visual inventory of her rapt audience, while Percival's hand went to the place at his side where his sword hilt would have been.

“Silence, woman!”

He'd bellowed indoors, an infraction guaranteed to give his mother the vapors, but over by the window, the duke had placed a hand on his duchess's wrist.

Charlotte Pankhurst clearly had a longing for death, for she *smirked* at Percival. “Sir Jasper isn't taking exception to having his billet-doux read in company. It's just a note, my lord. Sophisticated company such as this would never take such a thing seriously.”

Esther had risen, her fists clenched at her side. “It's not a note I ever received, Charlotte, nor would I have given you anything for safekeeping.”

She hadn't received it?

She hadn't received it?

For three days she'd been left wondering, alone, thinking all manner of untoward things? The very notion was...

It wasn't to be borne.

Percival regarded the woman he loved, willing her to meet his gaze. “Then my dearest and most

precious Esther, you must allow me to recite it for you—and I am remiss for not signing my love letter. In future, I will remedy the oversight, and you may be certain all my love letters will be addressed to you.” The room went silent, and for the first time, Esther’s eyes held something besides self-possession. She looked at him with hope, with a wary, wounded variety of the emotion, one that cut Percy to the heart.

He took a breath, gathering his courage, and prepared to offer his heart. “My dearest and most precious Esther, after such pleasures as I have known in your company, any parting from you is torture. Rest assured I will return to your tender embrace as soon as I am able. Until we kiss again, my love, you will remain ever uppermost in my thoughts, and I shall remain exclusively and eternally, yours.”

After an interminable beat of silence, Esther’s eyes began to sparkle. “Say it again, my lord. Please. More slowly this time, for surely if such a note had found its way to me, I would have read it a thousand times by now.”

Behind him, Tony was shifting from one squeaky boot to the other. Charlotte Pankhurst was looking like a little girl who’d forgotten her lines at the church play, while Percy’s heart starting dancing a jig.

“My dearest and *most* precious Esther.” He declaimed the words, hoping every servant in the corridor and every gossipmonger in the room was committing them to memory. “After such pleasures as I have known in your company—”

“Cease this nonsense at once!” Her Grace did not rise, likely because His Grace still had her by the wrist. “Percival Windham, you will not be publicly making love to a mere earl’s granddaughter. I know not what spell she has cast, nor do I care. Pack your effects, and take yourself back to Morelands.”

The joy in Esther’s gaze winked out. Without moving, she wilted where she stood, and nobody, not one person in the entire room, remonstrated with the duchess for her rudeness.

Percival crossed the room and linked his fingers with his intended, turning a glower on his mother. “I apologize for the abrupt and public manner of my declaration, but Your Grace will apologize to Miss Himmelfarb.”

“I will do no such thing. I permit you to socialize in hopes you’ll attach a suitable prospect, and this is the thanks I get? You may go back to the Canadian wilderness if you think to comport yourself thus.”

The duke cleared his throat. Tony groaned.

Percival tucked an arm around Esther’s waist. “I have resigned my commission, Your Grace. I have no doubt my intended would follow the drum cheerfully did I ask it of her, but I have no wish to subject her to such hardships.”

The duchess sniffed. “Your intended—”

“My beloved intended,” Percival shot back. “Whose father has given me permission to court her, and whose finger will soon be wearing this modest token of my esteem, if she’ll have me.”

Ringed declarations were all well and good, but a man ought to be judged by his actions, too. Percival withdrew a small parcel from his pocket, fished the ring out of the cloth he’d wrapped it in, and took his beloved by the hand.

“Esther Louise Himmelfarb, will you—”

She put a finger to his lips, and his heart stopped. “No, I will not.” She caressed his lip

fleetingly then dropped her hand. “Not without your mother’s blessing.”

What the hell?

Across the room, His Grace finally bestirred himself to speak. “Hear your lady out, Percival, for I think she has the right of it.”

The duchess speared Moreland with a look that pronounced him daft or possessed of three heads, but she held her tongue too.

“I love you as well, Percival Windham,” Esther said. She wasn’t offering a performance for the assemblage, though, she was speaking straight to Percival’s heart. “Nothing would please me more than to be your wife and the mother of your children. You saw me when I was supposed to be invisible. You treated me like a person, not a fixture in service. Your manners were those of gentleman in the best sense of the word. You listened—”

He did not interrupt her. He let her gather her dignity, because in part she was offering a reproach worthy of a Dissenting minister to her supposed betters. “You *listened* to me and took my welfare seriously. Of course, I would be honored to be your wife, but your mother loves you too.”

A soft gasp from the direction of the duchess suggested Esther had scored a hit, but she went on speaking. “Her Grace is protective of those she loves, as a mother should be. I don’t give that”—Esther snapped her fingers crisply before his nose—“for permission from a duchess to wed the man I love, but I care very much for a mother’s blessing.”

Somebody sighed. Not the duchess. She sniffed again, but it wasn’t a sniff of disapproval.

Quimbey offered his handkerchief to Lady Zephora. Sir Jasper led a distraught Miss Pankhurst from the room. Tony’s boots had gone silent.

The duchess rose and opened her mouth, then shut it.

Esther turned to face the older woman, though Percival did not for an instant think of turning his most precious, dearest, most *stubborn* beloved loose.

“Please, Your Grace.” Esther swallowed, and it felt to Percival as if she might have tucked herself more closely to him. “Your Graces. I love your son, my affection for him is as fierce as it is sudden—and as it is surprising even to me. I know he would bring consequence, wealth, and comfort to the union, but I care not for the gifts he can give me with his hands. I seek only the gifts he promises me with his eyes.”

Another silence stretched while the duchess groped for her husband’s hand, and Percival tried to will his mother to see reason.

“But you’re not...” Her Grace’s expression went from glowering to puzzled to bewildered. “George? She’s not... She hasn’t...” Like the sails of a ship drifting into the eye of the wind, her indignation luffed, slowed, then died away. “Moreland? What are we to make of this?”

Had he not heard the words himself, Percival would not have believed. Agatha, Duchess of Moreland, had *in public* turned to her spouse for reassurances. The expression on Moreland’s face was far from incredulous. The duke was smiling faintly at his duchess and stroking her hand with his fingers.

“Young people today,” Moreland said in dismissive tones. “All is high drama with them, though given these passionate declarations, one can hope Percival and his lady will at least be enthusiastic about providing us grandchildren.”

His Grace emphasized the point by kissing his wife’s knuckles and keeping her hand in his.

Grandchildren. Oh, of course. Moreland had dangled before the duchess the ultimate prize, the

trophy awarded on behalf of duty that would serve so wonderfully in the name of love.

“We can assure you of that,” Percival said. “If we have your blessing.”

Esther, in a gesture that boded well for their marital union, held her silence—and his hand.

The duchess drew herself up and laced her arm though the duke’s. “Come along, Moreland. If we’re to have a prayer of seeing the ceremony properly planned, there is much to be done.”

But the duke didn’t immediately lead his wife from the room. He instead tucked her hand over his arm and paused, giving her a look that was positively doting. “And if I am to have a prayer of arranging the settlements adequately, I must of course consult with my duchess. And remind me, my dear, was it the Holsopple girl you had in mind for Anthony?”

They processed from the room, dignity very much in evidence.

When the door had closed behind them, Tony squished across the room and clapped Percival soundly on the shoulder. “Well done, you lot. Madam, my lady hostess, regardless of the hour, we’ll be having your best champagne, as it appears congratulations are very much in order.”

Quimbey started the applause, Lady Pott thumped her cane repeatedly on the floor, Lady Zephora and Miss Needham wept openly in the arms of whatever swain had presented himself at the convenient moment.

While Percival kissed his ladylove.

* * *

“Come along, you.” Percival looped his arm through Esther’s, and before she could start in with the lectures Her Grace had assured her were necessary for the proper training of a prospective husband, she was being escorted down the garden path.

“Percival, you must stop kidnapping me like this.”

“No, I must not. I must become accomplished at it, so that even when we are knee-deep in little Windhams, I can still steal you away on a moment’s notice.”

Esther stopped walking and tried to glower at him. “Which will only ensure the parade of little Windhams continues without ceasing.”

His smile was blissful. “Precisely. I had a letter from your cousin Michael. He finds life as a colonel in the cavalry very much to his liking.”

“Have I thanked you for that?”

“No, you have not, not as a properly grateful fiancée ought to. I will accept your thanks on our wedding night, along with any other generosity you feel inclined to bestow on me. Tony says Sir Jasper and Lady Lay-About have departed on a wedding journey to Rome. No doubt there will be war on the Continent within the sennight.”

He was incorrigible, also very passionate. Two fine qualities in a man destined to raise up a large brood of children. Esther couldn’t help but smile as they resumed walking. “Sir Jasper claimed he would have offered me marriage.”

“You would not have suffered that buffoon for an instant—would you?”

“Of course not.” Though the hint of belligerence in the question—and uncertainty behind it—was gratifying. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you, Percival.”

He held back a branch of an encroaching lilac bush for her, reminding her of a spring night in the

darkened wood weeks ago.

“I adore your interrogations, Esther.”

He particularly liked it when she interviewed various parts of his male anatomy, an undertaking at which she’d grown increasingly bold.

“My question is this: Have you thought of names?”

“Names? I rather enjoy it when you use the German endearments. I’ve never been anybody’s dearest handsome treasure before.” He’d dropped into a German accent, imitating Esther’s papa, with whom Percival spent many hours arguing politics.

He’d also brought Esther’s hand to his lips, there to kiss and nuzzle at her knuckles, her palm, her wrist...

“Percival, the wedding is still two weeks off, and we must exercise some restraint.”

The Moreland gardens were lovely, giving way to a landscaped park that eventually led to the home wood. For today’s outing, Percival had captured her from the duchess’s company and taken her straight through the French doors and down across the terraces, leaving Her Grace to fume and pace and ring for Lady Arabella’s soothing presence.

“Restraint, indeed. Were I not exercising restraint, Esther Louise, you’d be tossed over my shoulder.”

He could do it, too, and had on more than one occasion.

“I was not referring to endearments such as you might imagine you hear when my wits go begging. I was referring to names you might like for these little Windhams you’re so enthusiastic about.”

He fell silent, which was something Esther also loved about him. He could bluster and tease and even—when he and her papa were enjoying their after-dinner drinks—shout, but he was also capable of contemplative silence.

“What are you trying to tell me, Esther?”

“I am trying to tell you that our frequent and enthusiastic bouts of passion have led to their natural consequence. I will be lucky to fit into my wedding dress.”

He dropped her hand, subjecting Esther to an unwelcome bout of uncertainty.

“You’re sure?”

She nodded, finding the bed of red roses of interest. They had thorns, of course, but they were beautiful and hardy, and their scent was incomparable.

“When, Esther?”

His question was quiet, his expression unreadable.

“The first time, I think. I haven’t had my... I haven’t bled since that first time.”

He stepped closer and enfolded her in a gentle embrace. For a long moment he said nothing. Her bellowing, blustering, teasing, beloved fiancé said not one word.

And then, very softly, his lips at her ear. “Bartholomew, I think. Uncle Bart is Her Grace’s favorite brother, though she’d never say so. He put me on my first pony and supported my decision to buy my colors.”

“It’s a good name.” Though on a daughter, it might be a trifle awkward.

The moment didn’t call for pragmatism, though. Percival remained silent, holding her, until Esther realized—budding wifely instinct, perhaps—that he was *moved* beyond words. In her arms, he felt particularly warm, and there was a huskiness to his voice suggesting strong emotion.

She remained in his embrace a long while, the scent of the roses rising around them, the soft summer air stirring a lock of Percival's unbound hair against her cheek.

"Are you all right, Esther? Carrying a child can be hard on some women."

"I have never felt a greater sense of well-being than I have since accepting your proposal, Percival Windham."

In the sigh that went out of him, Esther realized he'd needed to hear her say that. He would probably need to hear her say that many times in the ensuing months, years, and—God willing—decades. Fortunately, it was the simple truth.

He kissed her ear and nuzzled her temple. "I will take such good care of you, my dear, that short of the benevolent intercession of the Almighty Himself, nobody could take better care of you."

"I know. I'll take care of you too."

"And of our children."

Another sweet moment passed, and then Esther took her Percival by the hand—he seemed to have lost some of his customary boldness—and led him into the home wood. When they emerged in time for tea some hours later, not even Her Grace remarked the grass stains Percival had acquired on the knees of his breeches.

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This story is my first published novella, and as always when an author takes a new direction, there are thanks due. Deb Werksman, my editor, first suggested I try a shorter format. Dominique Raccah, my publisher, gave the OK to acquire the work and has been enthusiastic about its positioning. The usual suspects at Sourcebooks—Skye, Susie, Cat, and Danielle—deserve much thanks for putting up with a dynamic schedule. My thanks also go to my dear readers, who have come to hold Percival and Esther in almost as much affection as I do. Their Graces didn't encounter entirely smooth sailing once married, but that's another story...

About the Author

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Grace Burrowes hit the bestseller lists with both her debut, *The Heir*, and her second book in The Duke's Obsession trilogy, *The Soldier*. Both books received extensive praise and starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*. *The Heir* was also named a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year, and *The Soldier* was named a *Publishers Weekly* Best Spring Romance. Her first story in the Windham's sisters' series—*Lady Sophie's Christmas Wish*—received the *RT Book Reviews* Reviewers' Choice award for historical romance and was nominated for a RITA in the Regency category. She is hard at work on more stories for the Windham sisters and has started a trilogy of Scottish Victorian romances, the first of which, *The Bridegroom Wore Plaid*, will soon be on the shelves.

Grace lives in rural Maryland and is a practicing attorney. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached through her website at graceburrowes.com.