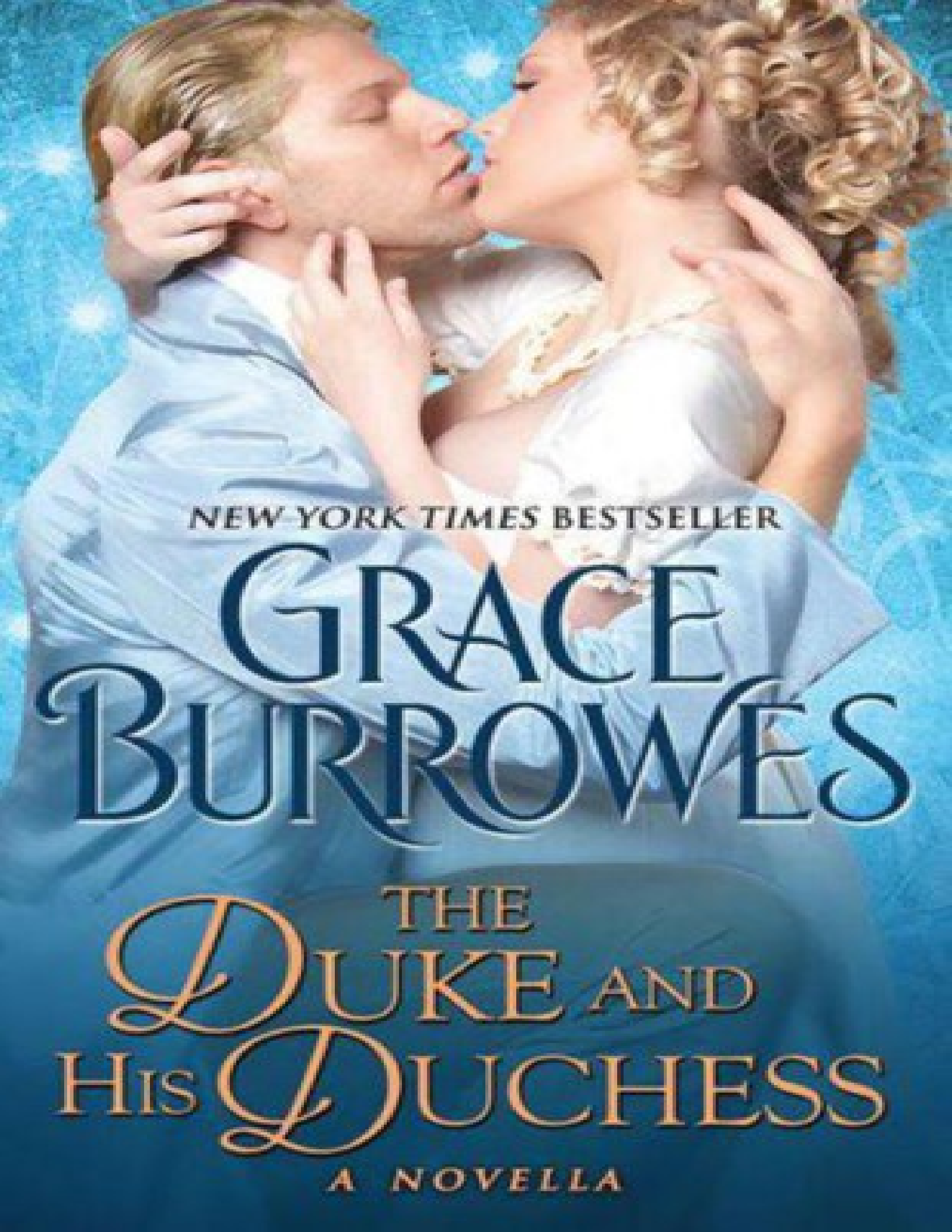




NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

GRACE BURROWES

THE
DUKE AND
HIS DUCHESS

A NOVELLA

THE
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HIS DUCHESS
A NOVELLA

GRACE
BURROWES

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To couples who've hit rough patches, which is to say, all couples, eventually.

One

"You're young and have all your teeth." George, His Grace, the Duke of Moreland made this state of affairs sound as if Percival had committed a double hanging felony. "If you swive this wife to death, you can always get another."

Lord Percival Windham's brothers reacted to the duke's observation predictably. Tony shot Percy a look of commiseration while Peter—more properly the Marquis of Pembroke—pushed back from the card table.

"I find myself ready to retire," Peter announced. He rose and bowed to the duke. "Your Grace, pleasant dreams."

Peter's younger brothers merited a nod, one conveying more than a touch of sympathy. On this topic at least, the heir to a dukedom could delegate dealing with an irascible old peer to the spares.

"You two are sorry company for an old man," His Grace spat. "Fetch me a footman that I might preserve myself from the tedium to be endured when you won't allow me so much as a finger of decent libation."

Tony and Percy each got a hand under one of His Grace's elbows and boosted the duke to his feet. Tony pushed the chair away, and then—only then—His Grace shook off his sons' hold. "Think of me as you're getting drunk yet again." He glowered at each son in turn. "And I meant what I said, Percival. Your lady wife has dropped four bull calves in little more than five years of marriage. In my day, a gentleman didn't trouble his wife beyond the necessary, and certainly not when he could afford to take his rutting elsewhere. Her Grace would have agreed with me."

Percival didn't dignify that scold with a response, though Tony—brave man—murmured, "Good night, Papa," as they handed the duke off to a stout, blank-faced footman.

When the door was closed and a thick silence had taken root, Percival went back to the table and started organizing the cards.

"He's wrong, Perce." Tony's path took him to the decanter. "Her Grace would not agree. She'd say Esther's duty was to provide as many sons as you and the good Lord saw fit to get on her. Her Grace was a terror when it came to the succession."

In Percival's hands, the queen of diamonds turned up first. "The old boy may have a point. Esther has done her duty to the succession."

And at what cost? She fell into bed exhausted each evening, though never once had Percival heard her complain.

With decanter in hand, Tony took himself and a glass of brandy to the side of the

game room where darts were played. A stout surface of Portuguese cork surrounded the scarred circular target, the pits and gashes growing fewer closer to the center.

"I would better prosecute a game of darts were I in my cups," Tony muttered, taking aim. "You will not be the death of your wife, Perce. His Grace is mourning, is all, and not going about it very well."

Percival kept his hands busy organizing the cards, all the pips going in the same direction, from highest to lowest, suit by suit. "He's not only mourning, he's dying. Can a man mourn his own incipient passing?"

Tony shot him a look. "You're sounding ducal again. Incipient passing? I say it's Peter we have to worry about most. His Grace has enough spleen left to live to be a hundred. He and Her Grace had a few cordial years there toward the end—largely as a function of your success populating the nursery, if you ask me."

When Percival had the deck stacked in perfect order, he cut and shuffled, then shuffled again. The snap and riffle of the cards soothed him, putting him in mind of years spent soldiering—and shivering—in Canada. "How long has it been since Peter ventured outside?"

A dart went sailing toward the wall only to land several inches from the target. "Damn. He sits out on the terrace when the weather's fair. Once a man turns forty, he's entitled to a more sedentary schedule."

Sedentary? In his youth, Peter had been a robust, blond giant. Heir to a dukedom, he'd been the biggest prize on the marriage mart in every sense. When he'd departed on his Grand Tour, half the ladies in London had gone into a decline. And now... Peter's blond hair was going silver, his complexion suggested he abused arsenic when he never touched the stuff. Worst of all, Peter looked at his half-grown daughters like a man who'd reconciled himself to heartbreak.

Percival reorganized the cards, this time starting with hearts. "Maybe it's Peter's incipient death His Grace is mourning."

"This is maudlin talk, Perce, and you've hardly touched a drop all night." Tony fired a second dart toward the wall, only to have it bounce off the edge of the target. "Rotten, bloody luck."

"Rotten, bloody aim. You need to focus, Anthony."

And Percival might well need a mistress. The notion that his father could be right was loathsome.

"You need to get drunk and go swive your lady," Anthony countered. "Moreland's carping because Her Grace booted him out of her bedroom once I came along. He doesn't want to see you and Esther come to the same sorry pass."

The things Tony knew—and the things he let come flying out of his fool mouth. "Esther has given us an heir, a spare, and a pair of Tonys," Percival observed. "Perhaps there's

been enough swiving in my marriage."

A Tony. In Moreland family parlance, any son younger than the spare was a Tony, a hedge against bad luck, and a prudent course every titled family with sense followed. Some were blessed with an abundance of Tonys.

For the third dart, Tony set his drink aside, toed an invisible line on the oak parquet floor, and narrowed his gaze at the target. "You love your wife, Percival. You fell arse over teakettle for her the moment you laid eyes on her. You'd break Esther's heart if you took your favors elsewhere, and I don't give a hang what Polite Society, senile dukes, or their departed wives have to say on the matter."

The dart flew true, hitting the bull's-eye with a decisive thunk.

People tended to underestimate blond, amiable Tony, and Percival had a hunch Tony liked it that way. "Is Gladys carrying again?"

Tony pulled two darts from the cork and picked the third up from the floor. "One suspects she is." His smile was bashful, pleased, and a trifle scared.

"Can't one simply ask his wife? The girl is forthright to a fault, Anthony." Something Percival adored about Gladys, especially when the rest of the family shied away from difficult truths like a royal court fleeing the plague.

"One cannot." Tony put the darts on the mantel and set his half-full glass beside them. "One, as you well know, waits patiently for that happy day when one's wife reposes her trust in one with news of an inchoate miracle, and then one prays incessantly for months, until said miracle is squalling in one's nursery."

In this, Tony was not the hail-fellow-well-met, he was wise.

The ace of hearts was missing, which wasn't possible, because the damned thing had been present and accounted for moments ago. Percival began at the top of the deck, thumbing through card by card. "Canada was good training for marriage, wasn't it? Hazards on every hand, hardship, boredom..."

God in heaven, was that what his marriage had become?

"I get a decent complement of howling at the moon, or at my lady wife, so I'm content," Tony said. "Believe I'll give the girl my regards while the night is yet young."

With fatuous smile firmly in place, Tony saluted and took his leave.

While Percival hunted in vain for the damned ace of hearts.

"I love you," Esther Windham whispered to the fellow in her arms. "I will always love you, and love you better than any other lady loves you. I love my husband too." Also better than any other lady loved him, though lately, that love had taken on a heaviness.

Esther's regard for Percival had acquired an element of forbearance that troubled her, because it went beyond the patience any couple married five years endured with each

other from time to time. Percival was a doting father, a dutiful son, a loving husband, and yet...

"Is he asleep?" Little Bart had crept to his mother's side on silent feet—a surprising accomplishment for a lad who could shriek down the rafters with his glee and his ire. "Can we go yet?"

"Hush." Esther leaned over and kissed the top of Bart's head. He already hated when she did that. "You'll wake the baby."

Impatience crossed Bart's cherubic features but he knew better than to commit the nursery equivalent of high treason. He was solid, stubborn, charming, and in line to become the Duke of Moreland. The charm and stubbornness would serve him well, though Esther had learned to steel herself against both. She rose with the baby and put wee Valentine in his crib, gave the nursemaid a smile—for the next hour at least, there would be peace in the nursery, provided neither the baby nor two-year-old Victor woke up—and extended her other hand to Gayle.

Gayle was not charming in the same way his brother was. He was serious, curious, and sweet natured. He and Bart got on famously, thank a merciful God.

"Will we sail boats?" Bart asked, yanking on Esther's hand as they headed for the stairs. "We can do Viking burials again, can't we? Will Papa come, too?"

"Papa is busy today, but yes, we can do Viking burials. Gayle, what would you like to do?"

This was her one afternoon a week to spend with the children, the one she and Percival had vowed and declared would be inviolate. The one the children looked forward to.

The one she used to look forward to, too.

"Pet the kitties."

"A lovely notion." Though Bart would scare most of the kitties away, all except the shameless old mamas who seemed to know a kitten favored by a child might find an easy life as a pantry mouser rather than the rigorous existence awaiting the barn cats.

When they reached the ground floor, Bart pelted off in the direction of the library, there to collect paper from the duke's desk. Esther paused long enough to tell a footman—old Thomas—to have a brazier and some spills prepared for the services to be held at the stream.

Outside the library door, Gayle dropped her hand and peered up at her. He had beautiful green eyes, the same as Bart. Victor's eyes were a slightly darker hue, and baby Valentine's eyes had lost nearly all traces of their newborn blue.

"Mama?"

Esther dropped to her knees. Gayle did not shout his sentiments, even in his most sanguine moods. "My dear?"

She pushed soft auburn curls away from his face. He'd been born blond, but his hair was darkening as he matured. He tolerated her affection silently, a little man more preoccupied with his inner world than most his age.

"If you could do anything you wanted to do this afternoon," Gayle asked, "what would you do?"

Esther turned, braced her back against the wall, and slid to a sitting position. "I'm not sure." This question, and her reply to it, caused a lump in her throat. Many things brought a lump to her throat. "I might take a nice long nap."

She was treated to a frown that put her much in mind of her husband. "A nap isn't fun. We're supposed to have fun for our outings. Petting the kitties is fun."

"You don't like the Viking burials, do you?"

The frown did not dissipate. "Was Grandmama a Viking?"

In the way of little minds, he'd skipped across several ideas to connect two disparate concepts. He did this a lot, which fascinated Esther as much as it worried her.

"Gayle, we did not put your grandmother's body on a ship, light the ship on fire, and send the ship out to sea. That was for great Viking warriors, for kings long ago and far away. Nobody does that anymore."

"Grandpapa won't go away on a ship?"

Ah.

Esther pulled him into her lap, a warm, sturdy bundle of little boy full of questions and fears a mother could only guess at. He bore the scent of hay, suggesting some obliging footman had already stood guard over a sortie to the haymow, where the boys play Highwaymen and Pirates and Damned Upstart Colonials.

Why did little boys never play Dukes and Earls?

"His Grace will go to heaven when God sees fit to call him home. Grandpapa has lived a long, honorable life, and St. Peter will throw a great fete when His Grace strolls through the pearly gates."

"Will Grandpapa need a footman to help him?"

Such worry in such a small body. "He will not. He will strut."

This caused a smile. "Like Papa?"

"Like all of my menfolk." Esther blew on the back of Gayle's neck, making the sort of rude sound boys delighted in.

She thought he'd squirm away then, but he sighed, little shoulders heaving up with momentous thoughts, then down. "Will Uncle Peter strut when he goes to heaven?"

Gracious God.

"He will strut, and he will shout to everybody that he has come home." Dear Peter probably hadn't shouted or strutted since Esther had met him five years ago.

Now Gayle did scramble to his feet. "Will I shout and strut when I go to heaven? Will I

be as big as Bart?"

Esther rose, though it was an effort that left her a trifle light-headed. "You will carry on as loudly as anybody, and my guess is you will become very proficient at strutting. You are a Windham, after all. As for being as big as Bart, you are as big now as Bart was when he was your age."

This concept, that Bart was merely half a lap ahead in the race to adult height, always pleased Gayle. "I want to make birds with my paper, not ships that burn."

"We can do both." Though Bart would want to throw rocks at the birds when they became airborne, and Gayle—in a perfect imitation of His Grace—would point out that burning ships was a waste of paper.

Esther followed her son into the library, where Bart—appropriately enough—was already seated at the desk, sturdy legs kicking the air as he folded paper into some semblance of ships.

While the boys argued halfheartedly about which was more fun—birds or ships—Esther sank into a chair and tried not to think about whether she'd be capable of strutting into heaven when her turn came.

No, she would not, though in heaven, she would get a decent nap. She would get as long a nap as ever she wished for.

"Madam, you have a leaf in your hair."

Esther glanced over at Percival, her expression confirming that she'd misinterpreted her husband's attempt at friendly repartee as censorship. Percival reached forward to tease the little bit of brown from the curls at Esther's nape. That she had time to picnic and lounge about should please him, but had she really sat through dinner with a leaf in her hair?

The instant Percival's fingers were free of her hair, she moved away. "How was Squire Arbuthnot?"

A year ago, heavy with child, she would have moved into her husband's touch.

"Rather the worse for drink, as usual, but the man can ride better drunk than I can sober. And he understands drainage, whether we're talking about the contents of the wine cellar or boggy terrain." Boggy, stinky, insect-laden, unplowable, useless land, such as graced too many acres of Moreland property. "I was damned lucky Comet didn't come a cropper."

His lady wife was already in a nightgown and robe, depriving him of the pleasure of undressing her. Something about her posture suggested that Percival—a man with five years of marital reconnaissance under his belt—had best wrestle off his own boots.

Esther sat at her vanity and pulled pins from the coronet of braids encircling her head.

"Did you come to any conclusions in your time with Arbuthnot?"

"I concluded His Grace has spent many years establishing a presence at court, and more years railing against the buffoonery of the Whigs, but he has neglected his acres." Which surely counted as a greater offense than being comely and having all one's teeth. "Putting things to rights here will take years."

Esther rose from her vanity and approached him. He could see she was tired, see it in the shadows beneath her green eyes, in the tightness around her mouth. Even so, his body warmed and his heart sped up in anticipation of her touch. Was not the uxorial embrace a married man's greatest comfort at the end of a wearying day?

Her fingers went to his cravat. "Have we coin to put things to rights?"

Percival lifted his chin, while in his breeches, something else did not lift at all. "Coin is not a cheering topic, Esther. After dinner, I tried to bring up the need for improvements on the home farm and the tenant farms. Peter stared at his cards as if whist were some arcane Eastern invention. Tony took up a post by the sideboard, and His Grace started lecturing me on my shortcomings."

Though that lecture hadn't been half so objectionable as a single remark earlier in the week regarding a dead wife.

"Shall I approach His Grace?" Esther asked. She drew Percival's cravat from around his neck, draped it over his shoulder, and started on his shirt buttons.

She sounded quite serious. "You?"

"We are operating on the same allowance you were allotted upon our marriage, Husband, and yet we are also now blessed with four children."

Children did not eat much. Their clothes were small and passed down from one to another, and the boys were too young to need tutors. Still, there were aspects of raising a family that loomed as terra incognita to Percival, and his wife was tired. He took Esther's hands in his, finding her fingers cool. "Esther, have you need of more coin?"

As he asked the question, he realized she was wearing a robe she'd had when they'd wed, more than five years previously. Then it had been a rich emerald velvet, now the elbows had gone shiny with wear.

"I have no need of coin beyond the pin money established in my settlements, but two nursery maids for four little boys is rather a strain."

A strain. He dimly perceived she might be telling him that strain devolved to her, and his father's crude barb came back to him. Because the topic was difficult, Percival took his wife in his arms, the better to read her reactions.

"What sort of strain?" Esther bore the scent of roses—she'd always borne the scent of roses—and that alone made some of his fatigue fall away.

"Valentine does not yet sleep through the night. Victor is also prone to wakefulness. Somebody is always cutting a new tooth or scraping an elbow. Winter is coming, and with

it, illness is a given. Boys destroy clothes hourly—this is their God-given right, of course—and the house staff cannot be bothered sewing clothes for the children of a younger son. Boys also need toys, books, games, things to edify and distract. They need linens—Victor abhors sleeping in a crib when Bart and Gayle have their own beds, but I haven't the nerve to ask for another bedroom for Bart and Gayle. Bart wants a pony, but you well know what it will mean if you procure one for him."

She paused. He kissed her cheek. Perhaps her monthly approached, though it had been a rare visitor in their marriage. "Bart will share with his brothers?"

"He will not share, meaning Gayle must have a pony too, and somebody must teach the children to ride. Each boy must have proper attire, we must have pony saddles made or purchased, a groom must be detailed to care for their mounts and ride out with them, and there is no money for any of it."

Must, must, must. He knew better. He knew better than to launch into an explanation of how to solve those petty annoyances that loomed so large in her weary mind, and yet, he spoke anyway.

"I spent several years in His Majesty's cavalry. I can teach the boys to ride, I can instruct them on grooming, saddling up, and so forth. I'll speak to the housekeeper about making a room available for Bart and Gayle. We've space enough." Endless leaking corridors of space, in fact.

Esther dropped her forehead to his shoulder. This was not a gesture of relief or thanks. In fact, it dawned on Percival that she was standing in his embrace, meek and obliging, but her arms were not around her husband. They remained at her sides.

"You can speak to the housekeeper all you like, Percival. Nothing will change."

A frisson of alarm snaked down from Percival's throat to his vitals. The resignation in his wife's tone was complete. She'd given up on this issue, and Esther Himmelfarb Windham was not a woman to give up, ever.

"Why does nothing change? Does she expect the boys to be crammed four to a room until they're off to university?"

He hadn't meant to speak sharply, God help him. He'd meant to tease.

Esther moved off, toward the enormous bed in which they'd made four noisy, boisterous children. Well, three—Bart's conception had been a rustic antenuptial interlude that would forever give Percival pleasant associations with alfresco meals.

"The housekeeper took orders only from Her Grace. For the past year, Mrs. Helstead has maintained that she'll answer only to His Grace or Almighty God. Lady Arabella is the logical intercessor, but Peter's wife is too preoccupied with her own concerns to intervene, and I haven't wanted to trouble His Grace without your permission."

Percival shrugged out of his shirt and shucked his breeches. On the bed, his darling wife wasn't even watching, which was fortunate, because nothing noteworthy had been

revealed.

Surely, her monthly was looming. Had to be, though he would not dare ask her.

"Speak to His Grace, Wife. He dotes on the boys." And who wouldn't? A more charming, dear band of rascallions had never graced any man's nursery.

On the bed, Esther heaved up a sigh like a dying queen reclining on her funeral barge. He hated this, hated decoding every nod and nuance. "What?"

"I will speak to His Grace, but he will forget, Percival. He will agree to see to the matter, and then lose sight of it all together." The bed creaked on its ropes as she sat up and punched the pillows into her preferred contour. "He's failing. His energy, his memory, his will. When Her Grace died, she took a part of him with her, maybe the best part."

And what was that supposed to mean?

Percival tended to his ablutions, torn between the impulse to state his own list of woes and worries, and the desire to kiss his wife's miseries into oblivion.

Though where would that lead? They'd never resumed relations after a birth without Esther finding herself again in an interesting condition within a few months. At least one thing was clear: if he wanted to keep a mistress—and he was not at all sure that course held appeal—he'd have to find a way to scare up more coin first.

From the bed, Esther's voice was a sleepy murmur. "The boys said to tell you they missed you."

Why would his sons miss him? He stopped by the nursery every morning before he rode out. There, he listened to Bart and Gayle's mighty plans for the day, dandled Victor for long enough to make the boy giggle and laugh, and cuddled Valentine for at least a moment—providing the dear little fellow was not in need of a change of nappies.

Sometimes, Percival even stayed for a few moments because... just because.

"Do you know whom I missed today, madam?" He tossed the flannel in the general direction of the privacy screen and climbed onto the bed naked. "I missed my wife."

She was on her side, facing away, so he couldn't measure her reaction to this announcement.

"I missed the mother of my children, and I missed the boys too. What say we plan a picnic before the weather turns up nasty again? This mild spell cannot last. We'll bury a few Vikings at sea—"

He stopped mid-crawl toward his wife and subsided against the mattress.

Bloody, bedamned hell. Today was Thursday. Thursday was their day to spend time with the children en famille, though lately Percival had been absent at those gatherings more than he'd attended them. The dead leaf in Esther's hair took on particular significance.

"Esther? I'm sorry. I hadn't meant to dine with Arbuthnot, but the man is a font of information, and if I can get the high meadow drained, it's excellent pasture. We need

more pasture... I am sorry, though. I'll tell the boys tomorrow morning."

He rolled over and slipped an arm around her waist. Was she losing flesh, or had he just forgotten what she felt like when she wasn't carrying?

"Esther?"

She twitched. In sleep, his composed, poised wife twitched a fair amount. She also sometimes talked in her sleep, little nonsense phrases that always made him smile. He kissed her cheek and rolled onto his back.

"I miss my wife." Lying naked in the same bed with her, Percival missed his wife with an ache that was only partly sexual.

He considered pleasuring himself and discarded the notion. The flesh was willing—the flesh was perpetually willing—but the spirit was weary and bewildered. He'd blundered today, as a husband and a father. He'd blundered as a son, too, in his father's estimation, and very likely he was blundering as a brother in some manner he'd yet to perceive.

Beside him, Esther's feet twitched. She'd told him once she often dreamed of their courtship, a brief, passionate, fraught undertaking that now seemed as distant as Canada.

Percival rolled away from his wife and let her dream in peace.

Esther felt a wall rising in the middle of the Windham family, for all they appeared to be placidly consuming a hearty English breakfast.

His Grace commandeered the head of the table, of course. Esther tried to picture quiet, soft-spoken Peter in that location and couldn't. Opposite His Grace, at the foot, the chair remained empty, though as the senior lady of rank and next duchess, the position belonged to Peter's wife, Lady Arabella.

Peter sat at his father's right hand, Arabella next to her husband, and Esther below Arabella. Across the table, Percival hid behind a newspaper on the duke's left, Tony inhaled beefsteak and kippers next to his brother, and across from Esther, Tony's wife, Gladys, took dainty nibbles of her eggs.

Had Esther wanted to, there was no way she could have nudged her husband's foot under the table, casually touched his hand, or murmured an aside to him. When had they decided to sit as far apart from each other as possible? When had she decided to sit on the side of the invalided heir?

"You'll be going up to London, Pembroke." His Grace glowered at a buttered toast point while the rest of the table exchanged glances at this news. "I've been asked to sit on a commission to study the provisioning of the army overseas. Damned lot of nonsense, but one doesn't refuse such a request."

He bit off a corner of the toast while a pained silence spread. Peter hadn't been off the

property even to go to services for at least two years. A trip to the stables left him exhausted, and if he missed an afternoon nap, he had to absent himself from dinner.

Esther lifted the teapot. "More tea, Your Grace?"

"I don't want any damned tea. If you bothered to familiarize yourself with the indignities of old age, you'd never offer such a thing."

Gladys shot Esther a sympathetic look. Percival slowly, deliberately, folded his newspaper down and stared at his father.

Please, Percival, I beg you do not—

"I'll thank you not to rebuke my lady wife for a proper display of table manners, sir."

Lady Arabella laid her hand on Peter's sleeve; Tony paused in the demolition of his breakfast.

"Perhaps I might serve on this committee?" Tony suggested. "Been to Canada, after all, and it's not as if I'm needed here."

"You?" Tony might have been old Thomas the footman for all the incredulity in the Duke's tone. "It's time you took a damned wife and stopped frolicking about under every skirt to catch your eye."

This time the sympathetic look went from Esther to Gladys.

"Tony and I will both go," Percival said, passing his newspaper to Peter and rising. "Scout the terrain, get a sense of what's afoot. Pembroke can come up to Town when the decisions are to be made, and of course, we'll keep you informed, Your Grace. Ladies, I bid you good day. I'm off to wish my offspring a pleasant morning."

For just a moment, bewilderment clouded the duke's faded blue eyes. Before anyone else could speak, though, he rallied. "Daily reports, if you please, and don't stint on the details. I know not which is worse: the Whigs, the colonials, Wales's ridiculous flights, or the dear king's poor health. Madam"—he turned his glower on Esther—"you will stop hoarding that teapot. A man needs to wash down his breakfast, such as it is."

Esther passed the teapot to Arabella, and nobody looked at anybody. The king had recovered from his difficult spell more than a year ago, while Esther feared the duke's was only beginning.

Percival squeezed his father's shoulder. "We'll keep you informed regarding all of it." He bowed and withdrew, while Esther tried to puzzle out what expression had been on her husband's face during that last exchange.

Compassion for the old duke, whose confusion was becoming daily more evident, had been the predominant sentiment. Percival was pragmatic, also capable of clear-eyed understanding. That he neither judged his father nor ridiculed him warmed Esther's heart.

Good sons turned into good fathers.

Another emotion had lurked behind the compassion, though. Esther pushed her eggs around rather than watch as Tony tucked into yet another portion of rare steak.

Percival had been relieved at the prospect of leaving Kent and bidding in London with his brother over the coming winter. Esther was not relieved, not relieved at all to think of her husband decamping for the vice and venery of the capital, while she remained behind to deal with teething babies and ailing lords.

Two

"Why is it," Percival asked his five-year-old son, "every woman I behold these days seems exhausted?"

Bart grinned up at his father and capered away. "Because they have to chase me!"

For a ducal heir, that answer would serve nicely for at least the next thirty years. Percival caught the nursery maid's eye. "Go have a cup of tea, miss. I'll tarry a moment here."

She bobbed her thanks, paused in the next room to speak with the nurse supervising the babies, and closed the nursery-suite door with a soft click of the latch. Percival did likewise with the door dividing the playroom from the babies' room, wanting privacy with his older sons and some defense against the olfactory assault of Valentine's predictably dirty nappies.

"I swear that child should be turned loose on any colonial upstarts. He'd soon put them to rout."

Gayle glanced up from the rug. "He's a baby, Papa. Nobody is scared of him."

"Such a literalist. Some day you'll learn about infantile tyrants. What are you reading?"

Gayle, being a man of few words, held up a book. Bart, by contrast, was garrulous enough for two boys.

"Shall I read to you?"

Bart came thundering back. "Read to me too!"

Percival glanced out the window. The morning was yet another late reprise of the mildness of summer, but to the south, in the direction of the Channel, a bank of thick, gray clouds was piling up on the horizon.

"I have to ride into the village today and meet with the aldermen, then stop by the vicarage and be regaled about the sorry state of the roof over the choir. When that task is complete, I'm expected to call on Rothgreb and catch him up on the Town gossip, which will be interesting, because I haven't any. My afternoon will commence with an inspection of—"

Two little faces regarded him with impatient consternation.

"Right." Percival folded himself down onto the rug, crossed his legs, and tucked a child close on each side. "First things first."

He embarked on a tale about a princess—didn't all fairy tales involve princesses?—and the brave hero who had to do great deeds to win her hand.

"Except," Percival summarized, "the blighted woman fell into an enchanted sleep."

"Then what happened?" Bart asked, budging closer.

"He..." According to the story, the fellow swived her silly—"got her with child," rather—which was what any brave hero would do after a rousing adventure. "He kissed her."

"Mama fell asleep."

That from Gayle, who wasn't the budging sort. The little fellow's brows were drawn down, the same sign his mother evidenced when she was anxious.

"Keeping up with you lot would have anybody stealing naps," Percival said.

"Not a nap." Gayle sprang to his feet and went to the middle of the carpet like an actor assuming center stage. "She faded."

He collapsed to the rug with a dramatic thump, lying unmoving, with his eyes closed for a few instants before scrambling to his feet. "Old Thomas says the ladies do that when they're breeding. Bart wondered if we should bury her at sea."

"I did not. I said if she died, then we should bury her. She wasn't dead. She woke right up."

Gayle put his hands on his skinny hips. "You did too, and then she took a nap right there on the ship."

The ship being the picnic blanket, Percival supposed. "You saw her fall like that, both of you?"

Two solemn nods, which suggested this development was of more import to them than their inchoate argument. Percival set the book aside and held out one arm to Gayle while wrapping the other around Bart.

"Old Thomas is right." He tucked both boys close, as much for his own comfort as theirs. "Ladies sometimes fall asleep like that when they're peckish or their stays are too snug or they're breeding." Though Esther wore jumps, not stays, and never laced them too tightly.

"Mama breeds a lot," Bart observed.

"Your mother has fulfilled her obligation to the succession admirably."

"That means she does," Gayle translated. "She napped a lot too, when I wanted to fly my birds."

"Your birds are stupid," Bart observed.

Percival squeezed the ducal heir tightly and kissed the top of his head. "Rotten boy. Your little brothers will gang up on you if you keep that up. They'll leave Valentine's nappies under your bed."

Gayle smiled a diabolically innocent smile at this suggestion.

"Your mother likely needed to catch up on her rest, and she knew you two could be counted on to protect her while she did. I'm sorry I wasn't there to join you."

And he was sorrier still that by this time next week, he'd likely be in London, miles and miles away from his children, unless...

"Percival?"

Esther stood in the doorway, tall, slim, and elegant in a chemise gown of soft green and gold. The morning sun gave her a luminous quality, and with her standing above them, Percival was reminded that his wife was a beautiful woman.

Also quite pale.

"You've caught me out. I chased off the nursery maid to cadge a few moments with my first and second lieutenants. Won't you join us?"

Bart scooted free, and Gayle followed suit. "Good morning, Mama!" They pelted up to her, each boy taking her by the hand, Gayle waiting silently while Bart chattered on. "Papa was reading us a story, but he didn't finish. He said we can shoot down Gayle's stupid birds on our next outing."

When Percival expected Gayle to enter the verbal melee with a ferocious contradiction, Gayle's gaze strayed to the door, behind which baby Valentine, King of the Dirty Nappies, held court.

Esther moved into the room, a boy on each side. "I'm sure your father said no such thing. I thought we might work on drawing tigers this morning though, and tigers might try to catch the birds as they flew away."

"Tigers!"

Why did Bart shout everything, and why did nobody correct him for it?

Percival unfolded himself from the floor. "You'd make a very poor tiger indeed if you can't be any quieter than that. Why don't you creep down to the library and have a footman fetch you some paper?"

More paper in addition to whatever they'd wasted making Gayle's birds. No wonder coin was in such short supply.

The boys crept away, growling and swiping their paws in the air, leaving Percival alone in daylight hours with his wife. His tired, lovely wife who had fainted the previous day and not told him about it. He slid his arms around her and drew her against his body.

He would not be a clodpate like he'd been the previous night.

He would ask her about her health. He would ask her how she felt about him going to London. He would compliment her on their children—a surefire strategy for happy marital relations.

The scent of roses came to him as she relaxed against him. "Madam, we can lock that door, you know."

She pushed away, smiling. "Only to scandalize all and sundry when the boys start pounding on the other side."

The interlude was unexpected, and Percival was glad for it. They so rarely had privacy when they weren't both tired and full of the tensions and trials of the day. "Will you sit with me for a bit, Wife?"

She gave him a curious look and let him lead her to the table near the window.

Which would not do. He changed course and took a seat in the largest reading chair the nursery had to offer, which was quite large indeed.

He gave a tug on her wrist, and she tumbled into his lap. "Percival!"

"Hush, madam. You and I have cuddled up in this chair when you were magnificently gravid. We fit nicely now."

She harrumphed and gracious God-ed once or twice under her breath, then settled easily enough.

"How are you, wife of mine? And I did not suggest Bart could stone Gayle's paper birds."

She relaxed against him. When had his wife gotten so lithe? So... skinny?

A practical, unappealing thought came to him: in London, a man did not have to pay for a mistress. Court was a very proper place, true, but outside of court, merry widows and straying wives were thick in the corridors. The idea of stepping into a dark alcove with some peer's well-fed, deep-bosomed spouse—all painted and powdered the better to display her wares—was vaguely nauseating.

Though Esther had fainted. A considerate husband did not overly tax his wife.

Said wife snuggled closer on a soft rustle of fabric. "Boys are bloodthirsty, especially in company with one another. You were kind to offer to go to London. How long do you think you'll be gone?"

Too long. Holding her like this, the quiet morning sunshine firing all the red and gold highlights in her hair, Percival felt two emotions well up and twine together.

He kissed her brow, yielding first to the tenderness assailing him so unexpectedly. "I don't know how long I'll be away. There's always warfare in some corner of the realm. We leave the Americans to their wilderness only to find some raja has taken the Crown into dislike. Colonials don't fight fair. Our boys line up in neat rows, muskets at the ready, while the natives fire at them from up in the trees or while dodging about in the underbrush. The wilderness ensures only the conniving and determined survive, and the colonials have been breeding those qualities for centuries."

She tucked herself against his chest. "If I haven't said it before, Percival, I'm saying it now: I am glad you resigned your commission. England expects much of her military, and I would not know how to go on were you lost to me."

The tenderness expanded as she lay against him, soft, pretty, rose-scented, and dear. He posed the next question quietly. "Esther, are you carrying again?"

Because if she were, it might explain the despair trying to choke its way past the tenderness.

"Thomas tattled on me?"

That was not a no. Percival closed his eyes and prayed. Not a prayer for wisdom or for guidance or for strength to know how to stretch their coin yet further, not even a prayer

for strength to endure.

He sent up a prayer for his wife.

How long had it been since Esther had enjoyed her husband's embrace? Between the baby being not quite weaned, the older boys climbing all over her, and Victor grabbing at her hands and skirts, Esther often felt her only privacy was in the bath, and then only if her husband did not walk into the room and offer his dear and dubious brand of "assistance."

Something he hadn't done in... quite some time.

And yet, Percival still wore the sandalwood scent he'd used when they courted, and she still loved it. She still loved how his hands felt caressing her back in slow, smooth sweeps, still loved that he could tease about locked doors and broad daylight.

Loved him.

The realization brought relief, because it was also true she didn't always like the man she'd married, and often didn't agree with him.

"I don't know if I'm carrying. My monthly is not regular." Hadn't been regular since she'd started keeping company with her husband. Percival shifted beneath her while Esther tried to recall if they'd even had relations since last she'd bled.

His hand on her back went still. "Ah."

What did that mean? Ah?

"Do you want more children, Percival?" In the name of marital diplomacy and not shouting at Percival when anyone could hear, she refrained from bellowing: You can't possibly want more children, can you, Percival? Not so soon...

He was silent for a moment while his fingers resumed tracing the bumps of her spine. Esther strongly suspected he wanted some daughters. Once upon a time, they had both foolishly admitted to wanting a large family, equal cohorts of sons and daughters.

"I want my wife to be healthy and happy more than I want anything in the world."

He sounded like he meant it, also like he only realized he meant it as the words left his lips.

"I'm in good health. I'm just... tired."

"Tired to the point of fainting, Esther?" He kissed her brow again, something he did with breathtaking tenderness.

"Thomas should be pensioned. I swore him to secrecy, and I was light-headed only because I stood up too fast."

When she had been pregnant, she'd expected the occasional swoon, though none had befallen her. Ladies in the country, particularly women with a baby at the breast, wore front-lacing corsets without stiff reinforcement and were thus able to breathe easily.

Esther closed her eyes and let herself enjoy the languor her husband was weaving right there in the nursery.

“Come to London with me, Esther.”

In his way, that was a question, an invitation phrased as an order. Put like that, the idea of leaving Morelands, with its confused duke, its ailing heir, and its upset household staff held a wistful sort of appeal.

“I’m still nursing Valentine every evening. He won’t settle without it.” And sometimes, the little mite woke up fretful in the night, and Esther indulged him again because nothing else consoled him. The man who snored the night away beside her might have known this. He might also have known that most midwives swore breastfeeding made it harder to conceive babies in close succession.

Percival was quiet in the manner that told Esther he was strategizing, weighing alternatives, considering angles. The military had lost a great general-in-the-making when Percival had sold his commission. Esther felt not the least twinge of guilt over their loss.

“I would miss you, were you to remain here,” Percival said. This time he kissed her closed eyelids. “Keeping the army in decent boots and dry powder is important too. Lives depend on it.”

Despair tried to push aside the sense of sanctuary Esther felt in her husband’s arms. His Grace was failing, Peter’s health was precarious, and in London, Percival would be assailed by all those seeking to curry the favor of the Moreland heir, which he could well be in a very few years.

“I will miss you, but the children need me, Husband.” And her husband did not need her. Esther tucked closer rather than face the question of whether she needed him. “I never wanted to be a duchess.”

Bad enough she was Lady Esther.

“If God is merciful, we will dodge the title for many years, and Arabella is yet young enough she could have a son.”

Arabella hadn’t had intimate congress with Peter for years. To hear the lady tell it, her husband simply wasn’t up to the exertion. Despair tightened its hold when Esther recalled that London boasted women aplenty willing to grace her husband’s bed.

“I will miss you very much, Percival. Perhaps by the holidays I can wean Valentine, but to leave the children here, alone, in winter...”

“I know. A doughty old duke, a preoccupied, ineffectual heir, Arabella and Gladys absorbed with their daughters... I know.”

His understanding was something new. Esther cared neither from whence it sprang nor whether it grasped the particulars of her concern. The idea of contending here without him, each meal a battleground, each day a trial...

She did need him, and perhaps in every way that counted, she was losing him. The thought made her want to cling and beg and weep, none of which would contribute meaningfully to the instant discussion.

And then her husband said something that put the urge to weep in a different light, a light of intense relief.

"Come to London with me, Esther. Pack up the children, the nursery maids, the whole kit, and come with me. In London, we'll have command of the entire house staff, none of this squabbling over whose job it is to fetch the coal to the nursery. His Grace won't bark at you one moment and forget who you are the next."

Five years ago, all Esther could see was that Percival Windham had been far above her touch, gorgeous, and possessed of blue eyes that seemed to understand much and give away little. She had adored him for his gallantry, charm, and forthright manner.

Over time, the forthright manner was proving his best quality, and Esther rose to the challenge before common sense could lodge a protest.

"I'll need some time to pack."

His hold on her became fierce. "I can give you three days, and then, by God, the lot of us are getting free of this place."

The way he kissed her suggested prisoners of war had never looked forward to escape with as much desperation as her husband felt about this trip to Town. Esther was just deciding she had the energy to kiss him back with equal fervor when the door burst open and Bart declared, "We found the paper, and we're ready to make tigers now!"

"Why doesn't Gladys use a wet nurse?"

If Tony thought Percival's question absurd, too personal, or indicative of premature dementia, he didn't show it.

"No coin," Tony replied. "A wet nurse is something of a luxury, and I'm the impecunious youngest son. Then too, Gladys says children get attached to their wet nurses, and my lady wife is very particular about who gets attached to whom."

No coin, perhaps this, rather than the parenting biases of the mercantile class from which both Esther and Gladys sprang, was why Esther had also eschewed a wet nurse.

The horses walked along for another furlong before Percival comprehended that Tony was referring to his wife's opinion on mistresses. In Canada, he and his brother had spent hours on horseback like this, tramping through wilderness as yet ungraced with roads. The distances rather forced a man to parse his companion's silences.

"She told you as much, did she? No other attachments for you?"

Tony stared at his horse's mane, which lay on the left side of its neck—an oddity, that. "She said in so many words that he who goes a-Maying will come home to find his wife

has gone a-straying.”

“My sister-in-law is a poetess. What happened to your gray gelding?”

“Sold him. A man can ride only one horse at time.”

The poetess was married to a philosopher, and this jaunt to London was looking to be a very long, cold trip indeed.

Percival stretched up in his stirrups then settled back into the saddle. “At least the roads are frozen. God help us if it warms up this afternoon.”

“More likely to snow or sleet,” Tony said, gaze on the sky. “Even so...” He swiveled a glance over his shoulder at the traveling coaches lumbering along behind them.

“Even so, God have mercy on anybody trapped in a coach with my children,” Percival finished the thought. And then, because he had no one else with whom to discuss the situation, and because, for all his impecunious-younger-son blather, Tony had always kept his confidences, Percival added, “There’s something amiss with my wife.”

Tony darted a glance at his brother then fiddled with his reins. “Esther Windham would no more go a-straying—”

Percival cut that nonsense off with a glower. “Your defense of the lady’s honor does you credit, of course, but not everybody is preoccupied with straying, Anthony.” Intriguing topic though it might be. “Did you notice, when the coaches were being loaded, that Gladys had to direct the footmen and nursery maids and so forth?”

“Gladys likes to direct. It’s one of her most endearing features, and has many interesting applications. She frequently directs me to disrobe in the middle of the day, for example, and ever her servant, I, with an alacrity that would astound—”

“Must you sound so besotted? Gladys is remaining at Morelands and had no cause to be involved in the packing. A woman normally likes to take charge of her own effects.”

This silenced the besotted philosopher for nearly a quarter mile. “The Windham ladies are friends, I think. Being daughters-in-law to a difficult duchess did that for them, and Peter and Arabella were lonely before we sold our commissions.”

“Arabella, certainly.”

With Peter, it was harder to say, since he was frequently to be found in the intellectual company of that pontifical nincompoop, Marcus Aurelius, or others of his antique and gloomy ilk.

“What do you think is wrong with Esther, Perce? She seems hale enough to me, if a bit harried.”

That was some encouragement. Tony noticed more than most gave him credit for—or he had prior to his marriage.

“She fainted on her last outing with the boys, before the weather changed.”

“She’s breeding?”

Percival wanted to shout at his brother for leaping to the obvious conclusion. Wanted

to knock him off his damned horse and pound him flat. "Possibly."

"For God's sake, Perce, use a damned sheath. Better some sheep give up its life than you overtax your wife. The succession is assured four times over, and Gladys and I may yet bring up the rear with a few sons of our own."

"Sheaths can break." Did break, with alarming frequency.

"Bloody bad luck. Condolences then, or congratulations. Both I suppose." Tony was studying the road ahead with diplomatic intensity. "Maybe you'll get a girl this time. Girls are"—his expression turned besotted, again—"they're magical. I can't describe what it's like when a daughter smiles up at her papa or takes his hand to drag him across the nursery."

Sweet suffering Christ.

"Esther claims she just stood up too quickly, but I asked Thomas about it. Damned old blighter had to think first—said he was sworn to secrecy and would not betray her ladyship's confidences."

Comet made a casual attempt to nip Tony's gelding, proof positive nobody was enjoying this journey.

Tony nudged his horse up onto the verge beside the wagon rut. "Good man, Thomas. When nobody else can reason with His Grace, Thomas can talk sense to him. Calls him Georgie, like they were mates."

Anthony seemed intent on providing one irritating rejoinder after another. Percival forged onward despite his brother's unhelpfulness.

"I told Thomas I knew Esther had fainted, and wanted him to confirm particulars only. It was a protracted exercise in yes-or-no questions. I swear I'm going to pension him come summer."

"You're not going to pension anybody, and neither is Peter. His Grace has the staff's complete loyalty, and well you know it."

"Anthony Tertullian Morehouse Windham, I am well aware of the strictures upon our household." The plaguey bastard smiled, and as much to knock him figuratively off his horse as anything else, Percival got to the heart of the matter. "My wife lied to me."

Tony grimaced. "Not good when the ladies dissemble, though in a small matter one can overlook it."

He was asking, delicately, if the matter had been small.

"She said she'd fainted because she stood up too quickly. Thomas had it that she'd stumbled twice on the way to the stream and had been waiting for the footmen to spread the blanket—just standing there—when she collapsed."

"That, Percy, is not good. Not the lying, not the collapsing, none of it. What did you do to provoke her into keeping such a thing from you? Are you having a spat, because if so, the best way to get past it is behind a closed door, fresh linens on the bed, and not a

stitch of clothing between you.”

Just as Percival would have spurred his horse to the canter in lieu of backhanding his brother, a coaching inn came into view.

Of course, they would have to stop. The coachy would want to water the horses and give them a chance to blow, the footmen would cadge a pint, the nursery maids would need the foot-bricks reheated, and the older children would need a trip to the jakes.

And Esther.. Esther who'd been trapped in the coach all morning with their children? Percival turned his horse for the coaching yard and wished to Almighty God he knew what his wife needed.

“Look! Look right there!”

Maggie's head was forcibly shifted between her mother's hands, so she had to stare out the window of the coach.

“That's him! I knew it! That's your father, Magdalene! He's very handsome, isn't he?”

“Yes, Mama.” Even at five years old, Maggie knew not to disagree with Mama. This so-called papa was all wrong though. He looked more serious than handsome. His horse was brown, not white. And he wasn't wearing a handsome wig like Mama's gentlemen friends did. Most telling of all, this papa fellow completely ignored his daughter when she was sitting in a closed carriage not ten yards away.

Her papa, her real papa, would never ignore her like this. He'd smile at her and have treats in his pocket for her and buy her a pony. He'd read stories to her and tell her she was pretty. He would not let Mama slap her so much—Mama was a great one for slapping. Mama slapped the maids, the potboy, her little dog.

Slapping wasn't so bad, not as bad as the yelling and breaking things, and the weeping that happened when Mama had a row with a gentleman friend.

A little part of Maggie wished the fellow on the wrong-colored horse was her papa—provided he didn't like slapping. Miss Anglethorpe said there were men who didn't.

Maggie knew there were also men who did.

This man must have caught sight of Maggie gaping at him from the carriage window, because he paused in the middle of his conversation with some other gentleman on horseback, raised his hat to Maggie, and winked at her.

At her.

Maggie's knuckles went to her mouth in astonishment. She'd raised her hand to wave at him, when her mother yanked her away from the window.

“He mustn't see you—yet. Not until the moment is right. The situation requires delicate handling if Lord Percival is to do his duty by you.”

As the carriage rolled away, Maggie sat on her hand rather than reach out the window

and wave to the man. When she got home, though, when Miss Anglethorpe had taken her medicine and gone to sleep, and Mama was off with the gentlemen, Maggie would creep from her bed to the mirror in the hall.

She was going to learn to wink. She would practice until she got it right.
Just like her... like that man.

"Please, let this child fall into a peaceful slumber and wake up healthy and happy in the morning."

Esther murmured her prayer quietly, because Valentine was not yet truly fussing. He was whimpering and fretting, sufficiently displeased with the remove to Town to be waking several times a night. The ties on Esther's nightgown gave easily, and she put the child to her breast without having to think about it.

He latched on with the desperate purpose of a hungry infant, while Esther closed her eyes and wondered why even this—a mother's most fundamental nurturing of her baby—should provoke a sensation of despair so intense as to be physical.

While Valentine slurped and nursed, Esther examined the feeling suffusing her body. Despair was the prominent note, followed up by... desolation. A sense of being utterly isolated, though she was intimately connected to another human being.

"Esther?"

How long had Percival been standing in the shadows just inside the playroom door?

"You're home early."

She wasn't accusing him of anything—though it might have sounded like it.

"Wales overimbibed, and the footmen took him to his chambers, so the rest of us were free to leave." Percival crossed the room and threw himself into the other chair. He drew off his wig in a gesture redolent of weariness, and hung the thing over the top of the hearth stand like a dead pelt. "Have I mentioned lately that I hate court?"

He hated the pomp and powder, which was not the same thing.

"You enjoy the politics."

He also enjoyed watching Esther nurse their children. She'd thought that endearing, once upon a time.

Valentine having finished with the first breast, Esther put him to the second. Before she could tend to her clothes, Percival leaned over and twitched her shawl higher on her shoulders, covering up her damp nipple. He excelled at such casual intimacies, thought nothing of them, in fact. He touched her as if she thought nothing of them either.

Esther allowed it, though all that despair and desolation had been crowded back by a healthy tot of resentment borne on a rising tide of fatigue and a strong undercurrent of anger.

"I do enjoy politics," he said, sitting back and stretching out his legs toward the fire. "I've been approached about running for a seat in the Commons."

"I suppose that makes sense." Belatedly, Esther realized Percival was asking her opinion. She mustered her focus to consider the matter, despite her bad mood, because he was her husband, and he was a good husband. "We would have to be in Town more, and the stewards and tenants are looking to you for direction at Morelands."

"Yes."

He stared at the fire, which meant Esther had time to study him.

He looked... not old exactly, but mature. The last vestiges of the handsome young officer had been displaced by a gravity that wasn't at all unattractive. He was barely thirty, though she'd found a gray hair on him their first morning in Town.

She had said nothing about that.

"What are you thinking, Percival? Valentine and I will keep your confidences."

His smile was a mere sketch of what he was capable of when intent upon charming, but it had been real. "We would have to entertain. You would have to go out and about. Tony can take on the duties at Morelands—he's better suited to cajolery and flattery than I'll ever be—and it isn't as if the succession has been neglected."

At that last observation, Percival ran a finger over Valentine's cheek. The child released the breast on a sigh of great proportions for such a small fellow.

"He's done carousing," Percival said, reaching for the baby. "Ready to sleep off a surfeit of motherly love."

Esther let him have the baby and was grateful for the assistance. Percival—veteran of many postprandial interludes with his sons—put a handkerchief on his shoulder, tucked Valentine against his chest, and patted the small back gently.

"You're not enjoying this remove to Town, are you, Esther?"

The question was unexpected, awkward, and brave. "The children are not settling in well. Babies like their routine, and Bart and Gayle were used to rambling in any direction at Morelands. Here, we must arrange outings to the park. Then too, the servants haven't sorted themselves out yet."

Percival sighed, sounding much like his young son, but nowhere near as content. "I suppose it's human nature for them to feud. I wasn't asking about the children or the servants, though. I was asking you, Esther. You're not happy here."

With the part of her that loved him, Esther knew he wasn't accusing her of anything. "I wasn't happy at Morelands."

For a long moment, the only sound was the hissing and popping of the fire. Percival had ordered that wood be burned in the nursery, claiming it was healthier for small lungs than the constant stink of coal smoke.

Valentine burped. A single, stentorian eruption followed by another contented-baby

sigh.

"Your son enjoys healthy digestion, madam." She expected Percival to hand the baby back to her, but he kept the child tucked against his shoulder. "And as to that, I don't see how you could have been happy at Morelands. I doubt if anybody is happy at Morelands, save the livestock and the pantry mouser."

Percival had not been happy at Morelands. The realization struck Esther along with a pang of guilt. She was tired, lonely, and out of sorts, and her husband—in the same sorry condition himself—was offering her understanding. When he could have fallen exhausted into bed, he'd sought her out and extended this marital olive branch.

Another silence ensued, this one more thoughtful.

"We should go to bed, Percival. You don't often get in at a decent hour, and you need your rest too."

She was dodging behind the mundane realities, but her husband did not accommodate her.

"Esther, I am worried about you. Organizing this trip seems to have overtaxed you, and you fainted again yesterday morning. A moment earlier, and you would have fallen to this very carpet here with Valentine in your arms."

Esther closed her eyes against this unforeseen assault. She knew how to handle blustering and shouting. Percival's rages against this or that governmental excess or insult to the Crown were mere display, and his frustrations at Morelands resolved themselves with regular applications of hard work.

But this... concern devastated her. "You must not trifle over female vapors. I will recover my strength directly. If you want to stand for a seat, we can entertain, attend all the necessary functions, and flit about Town from now until Michaelmas."

Percival rose and crossed into the next room, Valentine in his arms. When he returned to the playroom, having cleared the field of noncombatants, he resumed his seat and advanced his forces again.

"I think you should consult a midwife, Esther, if not a physician."

She did not want a doctor or a midwife. She did not even want a nap. What Esther wanted, just then, was her husband's embrace. The impulse was surprising, but it did not fade as it ought. "I am not sickening, Percival, and as far as I know, I am not carrying."

He should know that too. They slept together and shared a bedroom. Some husbands might not notice a wife's bodily cycles, but Percival was in nowise some husbands. Reconnaissance came to him as easily as command.

"You'll think about it? A little bleeding can rebalance the humors."

He wasn't wrong, and yet Esther had parted with enough blood in her various lying-ins to feel rather possessive about the quantity yet flowing in her veins. "I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask."

And then, just when she thought the skirmish had played itself out, he took her prisoner. Scooped her up against his chest and carried her from the room, the spoils of an altercation Esther hadn't seen coming and certainly hadn't won.

An officer could raise his voice when the situation warranted, could swear a bloody streak, drink himself into oblivion, and order some miscreant flogged for serious transgressions.

A husband and father had no such outlets, not with children sleeping in the next room and a wife who looked so lovely and sad nursing her infant that Percival wanted to tear his hair in panic.

In his arms, Esther felt light as a wraith, and her very docility scared him worse than the French, the Indians, or the wild creatures of the Canadian forest ever had. She offered not even a "Percival Windham, put me down," across the length of the entire house—and with such a precious burden, he did not hurry.

He deposited her beside their bed then divested her of her robe. "To bed, madam, and you will sleep in tomorrow. If you are fatigued, and you refuse to consult medical authority, then you will submit to my authority when I tell you to rest."

His authority was nonexistent with her. He'd known that before they married and had delighted in her independence. A man in love was a fool.

While he tried to glower at her—please God, let his glowers be more effective with the children than they were with his wife—she met his gaze. He knew that look, knew that obdurate, mulish expression, and felt a predictable response to the challenge it portended. His blood quickened in anticipation of a great row—maybe their most rousing argument so far—when Esther slowly, deliberately, crossed her arms and inched her nightgown up over her head.

Sweet suffering Christ. Like a damned upstart colonial, she was launching a sneak attack.

"I've missed you, Percival. Perhaps you'd like to get into this bed with me."

She flung the words at him like a gauntlet, an accusation of intentional neglect that was not at all fair. Then the infernal woman plastered herself—her entire naked, warm, lithe self—against him and took his mouth in a kiss.

"Esther..."

Holy God, she felt wonderful. His hand, sliding down the elegant turn of her flank, gloried in the absence of flannel and propriety. Could a man's hands be hungry? For his surely were—for the feel of her, for the exact contours and shifts of her muscle and bone beneath his palms. Her nudity, so rare in recent months, topped any argument his reason might have put forth about their mutual need for rest, or a man not pestering his wife

beyond the necessary.

This was necessary. It was necessary that Percival fling his clothes away between kisses; it was necessary that he heave his wife onto the bed like he hadn't since the early weeks of their marriage. It was as necessary as his next breath that he climb over her and trap her body beneath his, the better to plunder her mouth with his own.

And then—because he was not just a husband and father, but also a man still in love, it was necessary that he try to exercise some damned restraint.

"I should find a sheath, Esther." Though the sheaths were clear across the room, secreted somewhere in the wardrobe—halfway to Canada, according to the compass needle pointing directly at Percival's wife.

She got her mouth on him again, sank her teeth into his jawbone, not enough to hurt, but enough to distract. "Sheaths break. Love me." To emphasize her words, she traced his lower lip with her tongue, dipping inside his mouth then feinting back.

"Esther, I am concerned for—" Worried sick, he was. Somewhere beneath the tempest of passion she was evoking, he was worried for her, for their marriage, for his family. Nigh distraught with it.

His cock, however, was distraught in an entirely different and—just at that moment—more convincing manner.

"Love me."

"I do. I do love you, dammit, but for the love of God, if you don't stop—" He went on the offensive, covering her mouth with his own, trapping her hands beneath his against the pillow.

She went still, breasts heaving beneath him, a tease and retreat of puckered nipples against his chest. By the narrowing of her eyes, he realized she understood what even her breathing did to him.

"I love you," he said again, more softly. A plea this time. "Let me love you."

She closed her eyes, as much surrender as he would get from her in a duel he neither understood nor welcomed. When he kissed her cheek, the grip of her fingers in his shifted, became a joining of hands rather than a prelude to whatever sexual hostilities she had in mind when she'd challenged him with her nudity.

"I love you, Esther. I will always love you."

How to love her was becoming both increasingly obscure and increasingly more important.

Joining with her, though, remained within his gift, thank God. For a small eternity, he kissed her. He reacquainted himself with the texture of each of her features, used his lips and his nose—Esther had once admitted to an affection for his nose—to map her face. He used the tip of his tongue to trace her lips, then paused to rest his chin, then his cheek, against her hair.

He loved her hair, loved the golden abundance of it spilling over her shoulders before she trussed it up in thick, shiny braids.

When she began small, restless movements of her hips, he settled between her legs and by lazy, comforting increments, threaded himself into her body.

How had he forgotten this? How had he lost the memory of that first, beautiful, soft sigh near his ear when he pushed himself inside her?

Before they'd found a rhythm, before he'd given her a hint of satisfaction, he damned near spent, so startling was the depth of pleasure he found in his wife's body. She flung herself against his thrusts, strained against him, and made a solid bid to wrestle Percival's control from his grasp. While Percival held the balance between a ferocious determination to please his wife and the equally ferocious effects of sexual deprivation, he dimly perceived that something besides desire had Esther in its grip.

The first shudder went through her; then she bucked against him, signaling that he could follow her into pleasure. He thrust hard, then harder as she clung and moaned, then harder still.

His last thought—a desperate flight of imagination surely—was that Esther's passion was real, but as she shook and keened and beneath him, she was wrestling not only with desire but also with despair.

Three

"Esther, this remove to Town has you looking peaked and wan. Percival must be beside himself."

Gladys had sent word that another day cooped up at Morelands would give her a megrim, and Tony, apparently having a full complement of prudence and a mortal fear of his wife's megrims, had collected his family from the country accordingly.

Having rested for all of one night, nothing would do but that Gladys would muster the troops for an outing to the park, regardless of the cold, regardless of anything.

"I haven't bounced back from the upheaval," Esther replied slowly. She could be honest because the boys were in the next coach back, with the maids and Gladys's eldest daughter.

Gladys glanced over at her sharply. "From the move? You haven't bounced back from the move up here?"

"Not from that either." Dawning truth was not always a comfortable thing, but there was relief in it. "From Valentine's birth, I think."

The coach clattered along past the dormant trees and dead grass of Grosvenor Square. Gladys peered out the window then huffed a sigh.

"It was worse for me with Elizabeth. I thought I'd never stop weeping. Her Grace, of all people, was a comfort."

The idea that Her Grace could have been a comfort to anybody was intriguing. "How?"

"She'd lost Eustace, you'll recall, when he was only five. She said a mother must not give in to the melancholy, that your children will always be with you in some regard, despite that you must send them out into the world. I think she also cornered Tony and told him to cosset me within an inch of his life."

"As if he doesn't anyway?"

They shared a smile, though as conversation again lapsed, Esther marveled that she and Gladys hadn't had this discussion before. Perhaps, with six children between them under the age of six, they'd been too busy.

Melancholy was a serious word, a potentially dangerous word. "I don't weep, much. Hardly at all, but there's a sense..."

Gladys barged into the silence. "Your heart aches abominably after the baby arrives. When I was girl, we used to go to Lyme in the summer. I'd stand on the beach in my bare feet and let the water swirl about my ankles. After Elizabeth was born, I felt like something was dragging at my ankles the same way, taking all my happiness and pulling it out to sea. I'd cry at anything and nothing."

In for a penny... "Did you faint?"

"Not until Charlotte came along."

Another shared smile, nowhere near as merry.

"I don't think I'm carrying again." Though after last night... Last night had been a mistake in some senses, and much needed in others. Esther hadn't completely sorted the whole business out, but she'd slept well, and she had not made arrangements to consult any physicians.

Nor had Percival brought it up again at breakfast.

"Esther, lower the shade." Gladys reached over and unrolled the leather that covered the window.

"Why are we shutting out the last sunshine we might see for days?"

"Because that beastly O'Donnell woman was sitting in her open carriage, flirting right there in the street with some poor man."

"She must earn her living too, Gladys." Esther could be charitable, because Percival had assured her early in their marriage—early and often—that he'd been ready to divest himself of the drama and greed of professional liaisons.

At the time, she'd believed him. Through a crack between the window and the shade, Esther studied Cecily O'Donnell, one of Percival's former mistresses—the tabbies had been all too happy to inform a new bride exactly where her competition might lie. The lady's coiffure was elaborate and well powdered, a green satin caleche draped over it just so. Her white muff was enormous, her attire elegant to the point of ostentatious, and in her eyes there was a calculation Esther could see even from a distance of several yards.

The carriage rolled past Mrs. O'Donnell's flirting swain, and Esther thought of Percival's words from the previous night: I do love you. I'll always love you.

She'd believed him then. She still believed him in harsh light of the winter day.

"Good of you to receive me, Kathleen."

Percival bowed over the hand of a woman he had seen little of in the previous five years, and had seen every inch of prior to his marriage. Her hands were still soft, her smile gracious, and her modest house welcoming.

And yet, she had aged. The life of a courtesan was a life of lies, of making the difficult look easy and fun, when it was in truth dangerous and grueling. Percival knew that now, now that he was married.

Or maybe he'd always known it, only now he could afford to admit his part in it.

Kathleen St. Just rose from a graceful curtsy. "My lord, you look well. May I offer you refreshment?"

He loathed tea, and he did not want to consume anything under her roof for reasons

having to do with Greek legends regarding trips through the underworld. He parted with her hand.

"Nothing for me, and I won't take up much of your time. I trust you are well?"

She glanced around the room, which, now that he studied it, was also showing a few signs of wear. By candlelight, the frayed edge of the Turkey carpet would not be obvious, nor would the lighter rectangle on the wall where a painting had hung.

In the harsh light of day, the decor had deteriorated significantly.

"I'm well enough. I hear you are a papa now." She led him to a sofa Percival recognized from his visits here more than five years ago. He sat as gingerly as he could, having taken his pleasure of the lady more than once upon its cushions.

This sortie was proving damned awkward, but sending a note would not do.

"I am blessed with four healthy sons, if you can believe it."

She considered him. Her hair was still a rich, dark auburn, her eyes a marvelous green. Even without her paint and powder—especially without it—she was a beautiful woman, and yet... the bloom was off her. She'd been, in cavalry parlance, ridden hard and put away wet too many times, and all the coin in the world could not compensate her for that.

"And your lady wife? How does she fare?"

The question was a polite reminder that Kathleen St. Just did not permit married men among her intimate admirers—or she hadn't five years ago. Percival had liked that about her—respected her for it.

"It's about my lady wife that I have presumed to come to you."

He rose, the damned sofa being no place to discuss Esther's problems.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like something to drink, my lord?"

My lord? She'd seldom my-lorded him in the past, but there was comfort in the use of the title now. Kathleen was a fundamentally considerate woman, something he hadn't appreciated enough as a younger man.

"Nothing, thank you." He paced away from her to peer out her back window. In spring, her tiny yard was a riot of flowers, but now it was a bleak patch of dead, tangled foliage and bare earth, with a streak of dirty snow by the back fence. "I need advice, Kathleen, and information, and I cannot seek them from the usual sources."

"I will not gossip with you, my lord. Not about anybody. I know how you lordly types like to revile one another by day then toast one another by night."

He turned and smiled at her. "You know, my wife frequently takes that same starchy tone with me. I have always admired a formidable woman."

He'd confused her with that compliment. Beautifully arched brows drew down. "Perci—my lord, what are you doing here?"

He admired women who could be direct, too.

"My lady wife is sickening for something, and she won't consult a physician. She didn't refuse me outright when I suggested it, but she has a way of not refusing that is a refusal. Whatever's wrong with her, it's female. You always had a tisane or a plaster to recommend when I was under the weather, and your remedies usually worked."

Kathleen left the sofa too and went to the sideboard. None of the decanters were full—in fact, they each sported only a couple of inches of drink. Her hands on the glass were pale and elegant, though the image struck Percival as cold, too. He swung his gaze to the bleak little back garden, where a small boy was now engaged in making snowballs out of the dirty snow.

"You love your wife, I take it?" In the detachment of her tone, Percival understood that the question was painful for a woman who would likely never marry and never have any pretensions to respectability again.

He kept his gaze on the small boy pelting the back fence with dirty snowballs. The boy had good aim, leaving a neat row of white explosions against the stone wall at exactly the same height. "I love my wife very much, else I would not be here."

Kathleen said nothing for a moment while the snowballs hit the wall, one after another. "Describe her symptoms."

He did as best he could while the boy ran out of ammunition and knelt in the snow and mud to make more.

"Is she enceinte?"

Percival shook his head, much more comfortable watching the busy little soldier in the back garden than meeting Kathleen's gaze. "She doesn't smell as if she's carrying."

Kathleen came to stand at his shoulder. "What on earth does that mean?" A touch of their old familiarity infused the question. Just a touch.

"My wife always bears the scent of roses. I don't know how she accomplishes this, because she doesn't use perfume. Maybe it's her soap or the sachets in her wardrobe. It's just... her, her fragrance. Blindfolded, I could pick her out from a hundred other women by scent alone. When she's carrying, there's more of a nutmeg undertone to the scent. Very pleasant, a little earthier. I realized it with the second child, and it was true with the third and fourth, too."

He glanced over at her and saw she was watching the boy too. The look in her eyes reminded him of Esther—whose name he had managed not to utter in this house—when she was nursing Valentine. Sad, lovely, and far, far away.

"My guess is nothing ails your lady that time will not put to rights, my lord. She is likely weakened by successive births and weary in spirit. My sister has nine children, my brother's wife eight. You must be considerate of her and encourage her to rest, eat good red meat—organ meat, if she's inclined. Steak and kidney pie or liver would be best. Under no circumstances should she be bled; nor should she conceive again until her

health and her spirits are recovered. You should get her out for light exercise for her spirits—hacking out or walking, nothing strenuous.”

Esther loathed organ meat. He’d never once in five years seen her eat either liver or kidney.

“How long will it take her to recover?”

Kathleen crossed her arms and considered him. She was a tall woman and did not have to peer up but a few inches to meet his gaze. “You might ask a midwife, or one of those man-midwives becoming so popular among the titled ladies.”

“I’ve yet to meet a member of the medical profession not prone to gossip and quackery—unless you can suggest somebody?” This was what he’d come for—a reliable reference. The ladies of the demimonde could not afford to jeopardize their health, especially not in its female particulars.

“Let me think for a bit. If some names come to mind, I can send them to you.”

“That would be appreciated.” It would also let him end this very awkward interview. As Percival gave Kathleen his direction, the little boy had abandoned his play and disappeared from the back garden. Percival wondered vaguely to whom the child belonged, that he was allowed to play unsupervised on a day that was growing colder, for all it was sunny.

Kathleen showed him to the door, and in her eyes, Percival might have seen either disappointment or relief that he was going.

The entry hall was devoid of flowers—Kathleen had always loved flowers. That he knew this about her was both melancholy and dear in a sentimental sense that made him feel old.

He paused as he pulled on his gloves. “Kathleen, do you need anything? Is there something I might do for you?”

No servants, no flowers. Scant drink in the decanters, paintings likely pawned... She was succumbing to the fate of all in her profession who overstayed their dewiest youth.

She looked haunted, like she might have asked him for a small loan then loathed herself—and him—for sacrificing this last scrap of pride to practicalities. A door banged down the hallway, and the small boy came pelting against Kathleen’s skirts.

The lad said nothing, but turned to face Percival with a glower worthy of many a general. The knees of his breeches were wet and muddy, his hair was an unkempt, dark mop, and his little hand—red with cold—clutched a fistful of his mother’s skirt.

“Hello, sir.” Percival said. This fellow looked to be about Bart’s age, perhaps a bit older, and every bit as stubborn—which was good. Boys should be stubborn. “A pleasant day to you.”

Kathleen smoothed her hand over the lad’s hair and said something to him in Gaelic. The boy looked mutinous, but swept a bow and muttered “G’day, m’lord.” The glower

never faltered.

As Percival took his leave, he realized why he'd felt such an immediate affection for the pugnacious young man: Kathleen's son had the exact same shade of green eyes that Percival's own boys shared. The same stubborn chin Gayle sported, the same swooping eyebrows Victor had had since birth, the same tendency to muddy his knees Bart delighted in.

Amazing how small boys could come from such different stations and be so alike.

Mama grabbed Maggie by her shoulders and turned her forcibly toward the water. "Those boys are your brothers."

There were two of them, scavenging the verge for rocks to throw at the ice forming along the edge of the Serpentine. One boy was blond, the other had hair several shades darker than Maggie's red hair, and both—like most boys—were good at throwing rocks.

"I would rather have sisters." Sisters would not be doing something as silly as breaking ice that was just going to form again.

Mama's fingers pinched uncomfortably on Maggie's shoulders. "Be glad at least one of them is male. Your papa's papa and your papa's older brother are in poor health and failing rapidly, but should one of them outlive your father, that blond boy will become the next duke."

Mama sounded fiercely glad about this. Maggie had no idea why. From what little she knew, being a duke was also silly.

"Who is that lady?"

"That pale Viking creature is your papa's wife, and may he have the joy of her." Mama fairly snarled this information. Maggie would have bruises from the way Mama gripped her shoulders now.

"And the other lady?"

"Lord Tony's wife, your papa's sister-by-marriage. Why Lord Tony married a horse-faced Valkyrie when he could have had his pick of the heiresses escapes me. Windham men are headstrong. Remember that."

Remember it for when? Unease shivered down Maggie's limbs along with the cold. "I need the necessary."

Mama shook her. "No, you do not. I told you to go before we got in the coach."

Which had been ages ago, since Mama had taken to lurking in the park and rolling around Mayfair by the hour, hoping to catch another glimpse of Maggie's papa.

And yet, Maggie wanted desperately to get away from those laughing, rock-throwing boys and the pretty blond lady smiling at her red-haired friend. Their very joy and ease made Maggie anxious.

"I really do have to go, Mama. I'm sorry."

Of course, Mama slapped her. A slap against a cold cheek had a particular pain to it, a sting and a burn made worse for the frigid air. Maggie would remember that, and she would not cry—crying was for babies.

"You vile little rat," Mama hissed. "Everything I do, every single thing, is for your benefit, and yet you must whine and carry on and foil all my plans. I should have left you as a foundling on the steps of the lowest church in the meanest slum—"

Maggie cringed away, expecting the inevitable backhanded blow, but down by the water, the boys were no longer throwing rocks. They were staring at her and at Mama. They weren't laughing anymore.

"They're watching you, Mama."

All of them, the boys, the two ladies, a nursemaid who had a tiny girl by the hand, a footman near the boys, and a second nursemaid. All of them had gone still, watching Mama raise her hand to strike Maggie again.

That hand lowered slowly and straightened the collar of Maggie's cape. "Let them watch. The performance is just beginning. Come along."

Maggie had to run to keep up with Mama on the way back to the coach, run or be dragged. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the boys were still watching, and so was the tall blond lady.

Papa's wife was pretty, and she looked worried—for Maggie. The lady kept watching until Mama bundled Maggie into the coach, and even as the coach pulled away, Maggie peered out the window and saw her watching still.

When I grow up, I want to be a Viking creature too.

Esther regarded her husband over a glass of hearty red wine—she preferred white, but somebody had mixed up the menus, so a roast of beef had been served instead of fowl.

"Have another bite, my dear." She obligingly nibbled from the fork he proffered. "Did you enjoy the outing to the park today?"

"I did, and I think the boys did too, very much." She had enjoyed most of it, despite the chill. She was also enjoying her husband's attentions, which had been marked throughout the meal. "Is there a reason we're dining in our chambers, Percival?"

"Tony and Gladys sought some privacy."

This had the ring of an improvised untruth. Tony and Gladys found privacy throughout the day, and sometimes didn't bother to find privacy when they ought. Esther munched another bite of perfectly prepared beef and cast around for a way to brace her husband on the day's events.

"And what did you find to do with yourself today, Percival?"

He studied the next bite of beef skewered on the silver fork. "This and that. Have you given any more thought to consulting a physician?"

"I have not." Nor would she, not when all that ailed her was a crushing fatigue and a passing touch of maternal melancholia. "You're neglecting your meal, sir."

He studied braised carrots swimming in beef juices. "Peter has not left his chambers since we departed for Town. He doesn't come down for meals."

Esther's ire at Percival's mention of a physician faded. She spoke as gently as she could. "Hectoring me to see a doctor will not restore your brother's good health, Husband."

He sat back, his expression unreadable. "Will you come riding with me tomorrow? Take a short turn in the park at midday?"

He was up to something, though Esther had no idea what. Percival worried about Peter, about the duke, about the infantry in the colonies, and about the king's health.

And her husband worried about her.

"Of course, I'll ride with you, weather permitting." She'd be in the saddle by midday if she had to be carried to the mews. "Have you given any more thought to a seat in the Commons?"

That was stab in the dark, because no matter how she studied him and reviewed the day's events, Esther could not fathom what burr had gotten under Percival's saddle. Peter had taken to his bed before, and Arabella jollied him out of it eventually.

They finished the meal in silence, and when the dishes had been removed, Percival confirmed Esther's suspicion that he was pursuing some objective known only to him—for now.

"I'm for bed, Wife. You will join me?"

She'd like nothing better, unless it was to have an honest answer from him regarding his present preoccupation. Not until they were in bed, side by side and not touching, did it occur to Esther that her husband might be feeling guilty.

Last night might have resulted in conception—it probably had, in fact. They were that fertile—that blessed—as a couple.

"Percival?"

"My dear?"

"Do you regret last night?" She could ask that in the dark. She could not ask him what was wrong and what she could do to help him with it. Beneath the covers, she felt his fingers close around her hand.

"I could never regret making love to my wife."

Another prevarication, though not exactly an untruth. Esther rolled against his side, hiked a leg over his thighs, and felt his arms encircle her. She remained silent, and that was a form of prevarication too.

What Esther wanted to say, the words that were burning to fill the darkness of that bedroom, had to do with a single, sharp moment etched into her memory from their visit to the park.

Cecily O'Donnell had emerged from her coach when the boys had vanquished a patch of ice along the Serpentine bank. She had towed a small child with her. A girl sporting hair as red as Mrs. O'Donnell's was revealed to be beneath her striking green caleche.

Esther had been helpless not to watch as the solemn child had regarded Bart and Gayle hurling their rocks, laughing, and carrying on like boys who'd been cooped up too long.

The girl was stoic, not succumbing to tears even when slapped stoutly by her mother—for she had to be Mrs. O'Donnell's child. She had her mother's generous mouth, had her mother's red hair. If Esther had to guess the girl's age, she'd place her a year older than Bartholomew at least, based on height and also on a certain gravity of bearing. She was pretty now and destined for greater beauty in a few years.

A year before Bart had been conceived, Percival would have been in Canada. The realization was no little comfort.

"I cannot fathom why any man of sense would argue for the purchase of more ammunition without also advocating for more uniforms. Muskets won't fire if the fellows holding them are perishing from cold. Men can't march if the jungle has rotted their boots."

Tony rarely became agitated, though his fussing was welcome.

Percival steered Comet around a pile of pungent horse droppings steaming in the middle of the path. "Their argument is, we should outfit our fellows in something other than scarlet regimentals. Our boys might as well have targets painted on their backs."

"But in the smoke and noise of battle, when the cannon have been belching shot in every direction, those scarlet uniforms are all that keep a man from being killed by his own troops."

This was also true, and morale was somehow bound up in the traditional uniforms too.

"There are no good solutions to some problems," Percival replied, "and in any case, cannonballs are easier to requisition than new uniforms. If I asked you to head back to Morelands, would you go?"

Tony's horse was not as fastidious as Comet. At the next evidence of another horse's recent passing, the gelding plodded right through, landing his off hind foot in the middle of the rank pile.

"You are going to be head of the family soon, Perce. I don't think you're facing this as squarely as you ought. If you want to dispatch me to Morelands, to Morelands I will go."

Gladys understands.”

Esther understood too, about some things. “Peter is bedridden again. Because Arabella is preoccupied with her spouse, His Grace is no longer coming down for meals either.”

Tony’s lips pursed. Around them, few others had braved the park’s chill this early. Sunlight bounced off the Serpentine in brittle shards, and Percival wondered if he ought to cancel his outing later in the day with Esther.

“His Grace isn’t one for pouting,” Tony observed. “What does old Thomas say?”

“Old Thomas is posting me regular reports. Says His Grace is off his feed, too.”

Which was alarming. The duke Percival recalled from boyhood had been a hale, articulate, supremely self-possessed man, the equal of any occasion. The elderly, confused fellow at Morelands bore only the saddest resemblance to Percival’s sire.

“I’ll go, Perce. Gladys will want a day or so to shop and organize, but I’ll go.”

“My thanks.”

They both fell silent as they came around a bend in the path. A woman sat perched on an elegant bay mare several yards ahead, the lady’s unpowdered hair nearly matching the horse’s gleaming coat.

And not a groom to be seen.

Percival’s every instinct told him this was an ambush. Seeing Kathleen St. Just had brought the past to mind, and for Percival, that past included Cecily O’Donnell. Their paths had not yet crossed this trip, and Percival had been hoping to avoid the woman altogether.

While Percival liked Kathleen, respected her and wished her well, his association with Cecily O’Donnell was a small collection of expensive, rancid memories and uncomfortable regrets.

“Your lordships, good morning!”

The O’Donnell had always been abominably forward. Percival nodded coolly and urged Comet along the path.

She turned her horse to more completely block the way, which was bloody stupid when she was on a mare and Percival was on a frisky young stallion. “Oh come now, Percy! Can’t you greet an old friend? And, Tony, you never used to be unfriendly.”

Percival had the odd thought that even Cecily O’Donnell would not have approached him had he been with his lady wife. Would to God that he were.

“Madam, good day.” He did not so much as touch his hat brim.

“Tony, you’ll run along now. Dear Percy and I have things to discuss in private.”

She’d drenched herself in some musky, sweet scent redolent of patchouli, and she used singsong tones another, much younger and sillier man might have taken for flirtation.

Tony, bless him, stayed right where he was and uttered not a word of greeting.

Percival let Comet toss his head restively. "I have nothing to discuss with you, madam. Unless you want to provoke my stallion to an unseemly display, you'll move aside."

Though in truth, it was the mare who might deliver a stout kick to the stallion if she were crowded.

"You are in error, dear man, and I am partly responsible. My apologies." The devil himself could not have offered less sincere regrets to St. Peter.

Percival shot a look at his brother. Tony would ride around and haul the woman's horse off the path by the bridle at the first indication from Percival, but then, the damned female would only pop out from behind another bush at some more public moment.

"Anthony, if you would oblige the... woman." For she wasn't a lady.

Without acknowledging Mrs. O'Donnell in any way, Tony steered his gelding back a few yards on the path. A little privacy, no more, which was exactly what Percival intended.

"What can you possibly have to discuss with me, ma'am? When you threw me over for some admiral five years ago, I withdrew from the field without protest. I am happily married"—he delighted in telling her that—"and your circumstances now are of no interest to me whatsoever."

And yet... the morning sun was not kind to a woman who'd been plying a strumpet's trade practically since girlhood. Kathleen St. Just had looked tired, sad, and worried, while Cecily O'Donnell appeared as brittle and cold as the ice on the nearby water. Her hair, once her crowning glory, looked as if it had been dulled by regular applications of henna, and her skin, once toasted as flawless, looked sallow.

Pity was a damned nuisance when coupled with a man's regrets.

Percival waited until Cecily had turned her horse then allowed Comet to walk forward. "What do you want?"

"I'm a reasonable woman, Percy. What I want is reasonable too."

Part of what she wanted was dramatics. This aspect of her personality was one reason ending their casual association had been such a relief.

"You'd best spit it out. Both my father and brother are ailing. I may well be leaving for Morelands this afternoon." Forgive me, Papa and Peter.

"I know."

She let the echo of that broadside fade. She'd been spying on him, or at least keeping up with gossip. Neither was encouraging.

"Anybody who's been to the theater would know. Get to the point."

"I've missed you, Percy."

Oh, for the love of God. "I cannot find that notion flattering—or sincere. If that's all you had to say, I'll just be going." Comet, ever a sensitive lad, began to pull on the reins. Percival smoothed a hand down the stallion's crest.

"Damn you," she hissed. "I might have been amicable, but you're determined on your

arrogance. You are the Moreland spare, and if you don't want scandal the like of which will disgrace your family and destroy your welcome in polite circles, you'll attend me at my home tomorrow promptly at ten of the clock."

Having made her threat, she whacked the mare stoutly with her whip and cantered off in high dudgeon, while Percival reined in and waited for Tony to catch up.

"So?" Tony asked.

"I am to attend her tomorrow morning at ten of the clock." Late enough that any guest from the previous evening would be gone, early enough that decent folk would not yet be calling on one another.

"I can't like it, Perce. She's a trollop in a way that has nothing to do with trading her favors for coin."

"I loathe it, but I'll go. She's plotting something, probably some form of blackmail. The woman has not aged well."

"Will I go with you?"

"You'll go back to Morelands." Leaving Percival's flank unprotected but guarding the home front.

"Did you breed Comet overmuch this autumn?"

Percival stared at his brother. "I did not. Why?"

"He hardly noticed there was a female present, not in the sense a swain notices a damsel."

"Neither did I." Which, thank a merciful deity, was nothing less than the complete truth.

"Did you enjoy your meal, Esther?"

Esther paused in setting up the white pieces on the chessboard—Percival insisted she have the opening advantage—and regarded her husband. "We're having rather a lot of beef lately. Cook must have misplaced the menus I gave her."

Percival regarded one of her exquisitely carved ivory knights then passed it across to her. "Perhaps Cook is trying to turn the butcher's boy up sweet. The shires can do with one or two fewer cows."

Several fewer cows. Percival had taken to passing her at least half his beefsteak at breakfast with a muttered, "Finish it for me? Mustn't let good food go to waste."

A kiss to her cheek, and he'd be off for his morning hack or to a levee or one of his "never-ending, blighted, bedamned committee meetings."

In moments, they had the pieces arranged on the chessboard between them. Percival sat back and passed her his brandy. "A toast to a well-fought match."

He was up to something—still, yet, again. Esther took a sip and passed the drink back.

"To a well-fought match."

She regarded the board with a relish she hadn't felt since... "Percival, when was the last time we played chess?"

His frown probably matched her own. "Not since... you were carrying Victor? Or was it Gayle?"

They measured their lives in pregnancies and births, which had an intimacy to it. "Gayle. We played a lot of chess when I carried Gayle. You said the child would be professorial as a result, and he is."

"Then perhaps we should get into the habit of laughing, in the event you're carrying again. A merry little girl would liven up Morelands considerably."

How was a woman to concentrate on chess when her husband came out with such observations? Did he want to try for a daughter, or was he saying Morelands lacked cheerful females?

"My love, I am atremble in anticipation of your opening salvo."

Teasing, then. She was inclined to give as good as she got. "You should be atremble to contemplate your sons as grown men. If the mother's behavior in gestation influences the child's disposition, we're likely to see a number of grandchildren at an early age."

Percival's smile was sweet and naughty. "I suppose we are at that."

Esther opened with a feint toward the King's Gambit, but whatever was distracting her husband of late, he was not completely oblivious to the pieces in play. She settled into a thoughtful game, sensing after about two dozen moves that Percival's lack of focus would cost him the game.

"Percival, you are not putting up enough of a fight." And the chessboard was practically the only place Esther could challenge him and enjoy it.

"I do apologize. More brandy?" He held up his drink, which he'd replenished at some point.

"A sip. Maybe you are trying to addle my wits."

"Spirits fortify the blood. It's my wits that are wanting. Shall I concede?"

Three years ago, he would have fought to the last move, teasing and taunting her, vowing retribution behind closed doors for wives presuming to trounce their husbands on the field of battle.

Three years ago, she had fought hard to provoke such nonsense.

"You're going to lose in about eight moves. I won't be offended if you'd rather we retire."

He knocked over the black king with one finger. "I married a woman who can be gracious in victory. It shall be my privilege to escort that woman upstairs."

In fact, he escorted her to the nursery, taking the second rocking chair when she sent Valentine off to sleep with his final snack of the day. The way her husband watched this

bedtime ritual—his expression wistful to the point of tenderness—sent unease curling up from Esther's middle.

When Percival had tucked "his favorite little tyrant" in for night and Esther herself was abed beside her husband, she reached for his hand. "Percival, I would not want to intrude into spheres beyond what is proper, but is something troubling you?"

His sigh in the darkness was answer enough, and when he rolled over and spooned himself around her, Esther's unease spiked higher. "I received another communication from Peter today."

She'd been expecting him to put her off, or worse, explain to her that it was time their marriage took a more dignified turn. The little girl in the park came to mind, the one with the pretty features and the horrid mother.

Though at one time, Percival had apparently thought the mother the very opposite of horrid.

"This letter troubles you?"

"Exceedingly." Percival's hand traced along Esther's arm, a caress that let her know, for all his quiet, her husband was mentally galloping about at a great rate. She did not allow her mind to wander into thickets such as: Did my dear husband touch Mrs. Donnelly like this? Did he lie beside her and tell her his worries when the candles were doused? Does he long to again?

Esther felt a brush of warm lips against her shoulder, and then Percival went on speaking, his mouth against her skin. "I have been telling myself that surely, Peter and Arabella will be blessed with a son. Their affection for each other is beyond doubt."

"Far beyond doubt. One has only to see how Peter watches Arabella from across the room."

"Or how she watches him." Another silence, another kiss, then, "Peter sent a substantial bank draft."

Esther's first reaction was that they were badly in need of a substantial bank draft. Then another reality sank in: "This saddens you." She could hear it in his voice. Hear the grief and the dread.

"He's getting his affairs in order. He said as much in the letter, as if Peter's affairs could ever be anything else. He's preparing documents for the duke that will do likewise, and His Grace will sign those documents if Peter is the one asking him to."

The post came in the morning, and all day, the entire day, Percival had been carrying this burden alone. Esther rolled over and wrapped her arms around her husband. "Peter may yet rally. His Grace still has good days."

Percival submitted to Esther's embrace like the inherently affectionate man he was, also like a man who had too few safe havens. "Peter assured me there was no possibility Arabella could conceive."

Esther stroked a hand from Percival's forehead to his nape. Early in the marriage, she'd realized this particular touch soothed them both. "Peter and Arabella haven't enjoyed marital intimacy for at least two years. Her sense is that he's unable. Whatever ails him, it affects him in that regard as well."

She felt Percival's eyes close with the sweep of his lashes against the slope of her breast. "For two years?"

"I did not want to add to your burdens." Though in hindsight, she wished she hadn't kept this intelligence from her husband. "Bartholomew truly is going to be a duke."

"He'll make a fine duke—you will see to it, if nothing else. It isn't Bart I'm worried about."

Esther continued stroking her husband's hair, taking some comfort from the idea that as reluctant as she was to contemplate becoming a duchess, her husband was equally reluctant to become a duke.

"You already are the duke, you know."

He shifted up and nuzzled her breast. "I am no such thing. I'm only the spare by an unfortunate act of providence."

Just as Esther did not ponder at any length whether her husband was resuming relations with a dashing mistress, Percival apparently did not want to examine too closely the prospect of a strawberry-leaf coronet.

"You are Moreland, Percival. You're tending to matters of state, you're running the estates, and you've secured the succession. For all relevant purposes, you are the duke—and you're making a fine job of it."

The conversation was intimate in a way that felt different from their previous intimacies. This was intimacy of the body, of course, but it was also intimacy of the woes and worries, and it bred desire as well.

If she initiated lovemaking with her weary, unhappy spouse, would he reciprocate, or would he withdraw, leaving Esther physically and emotionally empty?

She settled for taking his hand and resting it over her breast, then kissing his temple. Her last thought as she succumbed to slumber was a question: Would Percival use some of Peter's largesse to set up a mistress? For a duke was entitled to his comforts.

He probably would, and tell himself he was being considerate of his wife when he did.

Four

"He's a good man, your papa. An important man."

Devlin did not meet his mother's gaze as they walked along. She was pleading with him somehow, and he didn't like it. He also didn't like this neighborhood, where the streets were wide and the walkways all swept and he didn't know the way home.

"Devlin, he was in the cavalry."

Devlin forgot about the list of things he didn't like.

"I'm going to be in the cavalry. I'm going to have my own horse, and I'm going to protect everybody for the king."

Now Mama stopped walking, and right there with people hurrying by, crouched before Devlin. "Your papa can make that dream come true, Devlin. I cannot."

Which was why they were going to his papa's house, he supposed. They'd been to visit other men's houses. Mama would wait in the stables and mews, and Devlin liked that just fine. Those places smelled of horses, and the grooms were usually friendly to a small boy who thought horses were God's best creation.

"Will you talk to him in the stables?"

Mama kissed the top of his head—he hated when she did that—and rose, taking his hand again. "If I have to." Her tone was grim, determined. She said Devlin got his determination from her.

She talked to men in the stables lately, sometimes telling Devlin to be good when she went into the saddle rooms or carriage houses with them. She was never gone long, and they could always get some food on the way home when she'd had one of her visits with the men.

Then too, stables were warm, and they smelled good. Home was not warm these days.

You could tell a lot about a man from his stables. Sir Richard Harrowsham was a friendly man who laughed a lot. His horses were content and well fed, his stables clean without being spotless.

Mr. Pelham's horses were nervous, the grooms always rushing about, and the aisles never swept until somebody stepped in something that ought to have been pitched on the muckheap as soon as it hit the ground. Mama had been crying when she'd come back from her little meeting with Mr. Pelham.

Devlin's papa's stables were large. There were riding horses, coach horses, and even a draft team, which was unusual in Town for the nobs, though not for the brewers and such.

Devlin did not think his papa was a brewer. The grooms were friendly, the tack was spotless and tidy, and the horses... Devlin peered down the aisle at the equine heads hanging over half doors.

The horses were magical. They were huge, glossy, and glorious even in their winter coats. Their expressions were alert and confident, somehow regal. If horses could be generals and colonels, then these horses would be.

"You wait here," Mama said, sitting Devlin on a trunk. "Be quiet and don't get in the way."

"Yes, Mama."

She said something else, very quietly, in Gaelic. Mama never spoke the Gaelic in public. "I love you."

Devlin smiled up at her, trying not to show how pleased he was. "Love you too!"

He watched her cross the stable yard and take up a position near somebody's back gate. All the houses here had back gardens; their kitchens didn't simply open onto a smelly alleyway. The grooms went about their business, mucking, scrubbing out water buckets and refilling them, cursing jovially at each other—but never at the horses.

When a groom asked Devlin if he'd like to help brush a horse, Devlin decided his papa must be a good man indeed.

Esther knew who the pretty red-haired woman was and wondered if this remove to Town was intended by the Almighty as some sort of wifely penance.

"Mrs. St. Just, is there a reason why you're lurking at my back gate in the broad light of day?" My husband's back gate, in point of fact.

Upon closer inspection, Percival's former mistress was thin, she wore no gloves, and her hair bore not a hint of powder or styling. She wore it in a simple knot, like a serving woman might. Esther hadn't been able to put any condescension into the question—Percival recalled this lady fondly, drat her.

Drat him.

"All I seek is a word with you, my lady."

Here, where any neighbor, Percival, or the children might happen along? Not likely. "Come with me."

Esther's footman looked uncertain, while Mrs. St. Just looked... frightened. She glanced toward the stables, as if she'd steal a horse and ride away rather than enter the ducal household.

"I must tell my son where I've gone. He's just a boy, a little boy, and he worries."

What Esther needed, desperately, was to hate this woman who'd had intimate knowledge of her husband, to loathe her and all her kind, and yet, Mrs. St. Just worried

for her son and apparently had no one with whom she could leave the child safely.

"Bring him along."

Relief flashed in the woman's eyes. She scurried across the alley and reemerged from the mews, towing a dark-haired boy.

"Devlin, make your bow."

The lad gave Esther a good day and a far more decorous bow than Bart usually managed.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Master St. Just."

He was thin, and his green eyes were too serious for a boy his age. Esther was not at all pleased to make his acquaintance, wondering with more than a little irritation which swaggering young lordling had turned his back on this blameless child.

The next thought that tried to crowd into Esther's mind she sent fleeing like a bat up the chimney.

Esther took her guests—what else was she to call them?—in through the big, warm kitchen. Mrs. St. Just looked uncomfortable, while the boy was wide-eyed with curiosity.

"Perhaps your son would like some chocolate while we visit, Mrs. St. Just?"

If the help recognized the woman's name, they were too well-bred to give any sign. The scullery maid remained bent over her pots, the boot boy didn't look up from his work at the hearth, and the undercook kept up a steady rhythm chop, chop, chopping a pungent onion.

"Devlin?" Mrs. St. Just knelt to her son's eye level. "You be good, mind? Don't spill, and be quiet. I won't be long."

"Yes, Mama."

Esther did not tarry to study the curve of the boy's chin or the swoop of his eyebrows. He was a hungry boy, and any mother knew exactly what to do with a hungry boy. She caught the undercook's eye and made sure the lad would be stuffed like a goose before he left.

The next issue was where to serve tea to her husband's former mistress—for Esther would offer the woman sustenance as well. That was simple Christian charity.

Esther addressed the undercook, who'd gotten out bread and butter and was reaching for a hanging ham. "I'm feeling a bit peckish, so please bring the tray to Mrs. Slade's parlor."

The choice was practical: the housekeeper's parlor would be warm and would spare Mrs. St. Just a tour past the upstairs servants. It would also mean mother and son were not separated by more than a closed door.

When that door had been latched, Esther turned, crossed her arms, and regarded Mrs. St. Just where she stood, red hands extended toward the fire.

For her sons, Esther would cheerfully kill. She'd walk naked through the streets,

denounce her king, sing blasphemous songs in Westminster Abbey, and dance with the devil.

What Kathleen St. Just had done for her child was arguably harder than all of that put together. Esther took a place next to the woman facing the fire, their cloaks touching.

It occurred to her that they were both frightened. This realization neither comforted nor amused. Esther grabbed her courage with both hands, sent up a prayer for wisdom, and made her curtsy before the devil.

"Two questions, Mrs. St. Just. First, does his lordship know that boy is his son, and second, how much do you need?"

Kathleen St. Just's household had shown signs of wear and want. In Cecily O'Donnell's, the floors gleamed with polish, the rugs were beaten clean, and a liveried and bewigged porter still manned the door.

And yet, as Percival followed the woman into a warm, elegant little parlor, his footsteps echoed, suggesting every other room in the place was empty of furniture. Fortunately, this parlor held no memories of intimacy, for Cecily entertained only above stairs on an enormous carved bed sporting a troop of misbehaving Cupids.

"Shall I ring for tea?" she asked as she closed the door behind him.

"You shall state your business. One is expected to attend the morning's levee."

Her lips curved up in merriment. "How it gratifies me to know you'd rather spend this time with me than with our dear sovereign."

She went to the door and rang for tea—of course. When the door was again closed and he was assured of privacy, Percival speared his hostess with a look that had quelled riots among recruits culled from the lowest ginhouses.

"State your business, woman, or you will be drinking your tea in solitude."

To emphasize his point, he moved toward the door. She stopped him with a hand clamped around his wrist. "You will regret your haste, my lord."

There was desperation in her grip... which could work to his favor. Percival aimed his glower at her fingers—her ringless fingers—and she eased away.

His next glower was at the clock on her mantel. "You have five minutes."

A tap on the door interrupted whatever venom she might have spewed next. "Come in."

A maidservant entered, accompanied by a little girl with red hair and a stubborn chin. He'd seen the child before somewhere, but couldn't place her for the unease coursing through him.

The girl was not attired in a short dress as befit one of her tender years, nor was her striking hair tamed into a pair of tidy braids. She was dressed in a miniature chemise

gown of gold with a burgundy underskirt, her pale little shoulders puckered with gooseflesh. Her hair was pinned up on her head in a style appropriate to a woman twenty years her senior, and—Percival's stomach lurched to behold this—the child's lips were rouged.

"Magdalene, make your courtesy to the gentleman."

A perfectly—ghoulishly—graceful curtsy followed, suggesting the girl had been thoroughly grilled on even so minute a display. "Good day, kind sir."

Percival manufactured a smile, because the child's voice had quavered. "Good day, miss."

And Magdalene—a singularly unkind name for a courtesan's daughter.

Cecily grabbed the girl by the chin and pointed toward the sideboard, across the room from the fire's heat. "Be quiet. You"—she waved a hand at the nursemaid—"out."

Was everyone in this household terrified of the woman?

"You have three minutes, Mrs. O'Donnell, and then I shall do all in my power to ensure our paths never cross again." He meant those words, though his gaze was drawn back to the child, who stood stock-still, staring at the carpet in all her terrible finery.

"Three minutes, Percival? I say our paths have become joined for the rest of our days on earth. Whatever else I know to be true about you—and I have kept up, you may be assured of that—I doubt your vanity would allow your only daughter to be put to work in her mother's trade, would it?"

While the child remained motionless and mute, Percival felt his world turn on its axis. A hollow ache opened up in the pit of his stomach, a sense of regret so intense as to crowd any other emotion from his body.

The child could be his.

His dear, tired, dutiful wife would not kill him—that would be too easy a penance for a young man's folly—but she'd likely remove herself from his household, and not a soul would blame her. The rules of marital combat in Polite Society allowed a wife to discreetly distance herself from an errant husband once heirs were in place.

Percival picked up the child, who cuddled onto his shoulder with a sigh. She weighed too little for her height, which looked to exceed Bart's only slightly. Percival brought his burden—his daughter?—to the door and found the nursemaid, as expected, shivering in the corridor. "You will take miss back to the nursery, keep her there for the duration of my interview with your mistress, remove the damned paint from her face, and dress her appropriately to her station—and warmly. Is that understood?"

The maid cast a glance past Percival to Cecily, who nodded.

"Understood, my lord."

Without another word, the child was taken from the room. Percival remained in the doorway, watching as she was towed by the hand toward the stairs. On the bottom step,

the girl turned and met Percival's gaze, surprising the daylights out of him by sending him a slow, careful wink.

Despite the tumult and despair rocketing through him, he winked back, recalling in that moment where he'd seen her before: in the park, peering out of a coach window. She'd struck him as a lonely little princess being dragged about on some adult's errand, an accurate if understated assessment.

With a pointed glance at the clock, Percival turned and faced the woman who had in the last moments become the enemy of all he held dear. "What do you want?"

Her smile was the embodiment of evil, but she at least seemed to know enough not to approach him. "What I want is simple, my lord. I want you. Unless you can live with the fate of any girl born to Magdalene's circumstances and live with the knowledge that all and sundry will become aware of her patrimony, then I suggest you accede to my wishes."

He didn't believe for one minute she meant he'd have to accommodate her in bed. She'd have to be daft to think him capable of such a thing. She wanted his escort, his protection, his wealth. Cecily O'Donnell was nothing if not shrewd.

She would understand shrewdness in another.

"Hear me, woman: You will ensure no harm comes to that child, lest the repercussions redound to your eternal detriment. You will produce baptismal records, a midwife's sworn statement, and an affidavit from the man of the cloth who presided at the child's christening before I even entertain the notion that girl might be my get. And you may be assured, should misfortune befall Miss Magdalene, I am threatening your very life, just as you are threatening my welfare. Make no mistake about that."

She blinked, the only sign of intimidation he was likely to see from her.

"My arrangement with you was exclusive, my lord."

Percival moved toward the door, pausing with his hand on the latch. "Your arrangement with me was brief and long ago. Our encounters were meaningless and few, and between them, I did not trouble myself with what you got up to or with whom. You did not quibble over the compensation made to you at the time, and you know well the risks of your profession. I will see proof the child could be mine and then decide what's to be done about her."

A final glance at the clock—five minutes on the nose—and Percival walked out, feeling like a man given a reprieve from a date with the gallows. And yet, as he retrieved his stallion from the mews and turned the beast for home—there would be no attending any levees today—his mind circled around one question:

What would this cost him?

There would be a cost in coin, of course, and in convenience, because no child of his was going to grow up without her father's protection. Those costs were entirely bearable

and the responsibility of any man who took his pleasures outside of marriage.

The greater cost was going to come in the distance this would create between Percival and his wife. Sooner or later, Esther would become aware Percival was supporting Mrs. O'Donnell again. Polite Society, having all the kindness of a troop of rabid wolverines, would make sure Esther knew of the child as well.

As he turned for home, the true price of his interview with Cecily O'Donnell settled into Percival's awareness next to the grief he felt at his father's senescence and at his brother's decline: the only way Percival could protect his wife from all the sorrows looming as a result of the morning's revelations was by sending her away and keeping her far from the reach of gossip.

"I fear for the bovine population in the Home Counties," Esther muttered as her husband seated her for an evening meal that once again featured beef.

His smooth gallantry faltered, something only a wife of several year's duration would notice. Percival leaned closer to Esther's ear. "I care not what is served when the company at table is my lovely wife, whom I once again have all to myself."

Esther smiled, but Percival's flattery rang hollow. Everything had rung hollow since Esther had found Kathleen St. Just shivering at the gate.

Percival took his seat at Esther's elbow and poured them each a glass of wine. "What did my dear wife find to occupy herself today?"

Esther sampled her wine, needing the time to fashion a fabrication. "I saw Gladys and Tony off, settled a dispute between warring tribes of Hottentots in the nursery, penned a disgustingly cheery epistle to Arabella, reviewed the household accounts with Mrs. Slade, discussed with her several candidates for the upstairs maid's position, and then made a half-dozen morning calls. Devonshire sends his regards and despairs of your politics."

His Grace had sent a few looks Esther's way, too, the rascal.

Percival seized on the one aspect of Esther's day with financial consequences. "We're hiring another maid?"

Esther watched while he served her a portion of soup that savored strongly of—but, of course—beef broth.

"I'm replacing the one who found herself in an interesting condition. Surely you noticed?"

Percival's expression was hard to read, suggesting he truly hadn't noticed the girl's expanding belly. "Do we know who's responsible?"

"I have not inquired. I suspect one of the footmen."

The unreadable expression became one of distaste. "Shall I have a talk with the man?"

Esther had not considered this option, so she spoke slowly. "He's young, Percival, and

probably fears if we know he's been taking liberties, he'll lose his position. Then he won't have even his wages to offer as support for the child."

An image of Kathleen St. Just came to mind, her dark-haired, watchful son at her side. Esther's fingers traced around her wrist. When she'd dressed this morning, she'd fastened on a pearl bracelet her grandmother had given her upon leaving the schoolroom. The jewelry wasn't fancy enough to raise eyebrows on Ludgate Hill, but it would feed the child for quite some time. She hoped it would feed the child.

"Let young Romeo keep his wages," Percival said, "provided he takes a wife. Are you enjoying your soup?"

Esther glanced at her nearly empty bowl. "It appears I am. You'd allow a footman to marry?"

"I will not allow a child to go hungry merely because her parents were young and foolish. The mother will have to find lodging elsewhere, lest Moreland take offense at my interference. Is she a village girl?"

"From Dorset, though she speaks well enough and is clever with a needle. I could send her some mending if she finds lodging nearby."

"Excellent notion." Percival moved the soup dishes to the side and began carving Esther a serving of roasted beef that would have fed Tony for several days of forced march. "How are my little Hottentots, and what could they possibly be waging war over?"

The topic of tribal warfare in the nursery was much safer, though why the exchange regarding a straying chambermaid and her swain should be upsetting, Esther did not know.

Not exactly upsetting, but Percival's reaction to it gave Esther pause.

He deserved to know about the boy, Devlin St. Just. Esther admitted this to herself as she and her husband wandered up to the jungle on the third floor, and tucked sleepy, well-fed, happy little warriors into their cozy beds.

As Esther settled Valentine into his crib, and Percival waited patiently in a rocking chair by the fire, Esther realized the decision was not truly about Percival's deserts, or about Mrs. St. Just's, or even about Esther's.

A boy needed to know who his father was and to have the protection that man could afford him in this precarious and difficult life. One pearl bracelet was no substitute for a father's protection, much less a father's love.

Coming to this conclusion and broaching the matter with her spouse were two separate acts of courage.

In a silence that should have been companionable, Esther accepted her husband's assistance undressing. His hands lingered in seductive locations, on her nape when he unfastened a necklace, at the base of her spine when he unhooked her dress. His lips strayed to the spot beneath her ear that sent shivers over her skin.

Of all nights, why was he seducing her now?

When she was wearing only a chemise, Esther turned, intending to unknot Percival's neckcloth. She was willing to be seduced, willing to accept some marital comfort and to forget for a few moments what—whom—the day had brought to her back gate.

Had Percival not built up the fire while Esther had removed her remaining jewelry, Esther might have missed the little glint of red on his sleeve. She drew his neckcloth from him slowly and turned to toss it over the open door of the wardrobe, when a hint of coppery fire caught her eye.

Two red hairs lay on his coat at the shoulder, two brilliant, gracefully curving commas of evidence that Percival had been close to somebody other than his wife. Mrs. St. Just had hair that shade, but she would hardly have come calling at the home of a man who was paying her for her favors, would she?

Gladys also had red hair, but not nearly this long.

"Esther?" Percival leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. "I would join my wife in our bed, if she'd allow it."

He was asking to bed her, to exercise his marital privileges, while his very clothing bore traces of congress with somebody else.

"Of course, Percival." Esther finished undressing her husband, wondering how it was that she could love a man whose casual behavior also had the power to devastate her.

When she was naked on her back, Percival braced above her and, joining their bodies with excruciating deliberateness, Esther tried to push the ugly, desolate thoughts aside:

Was it guilt—or something more arrogant and possessive—that drove him to make love to his wife while he was also keeping a mistress?

Should she wait out his renewed interest in the behaviors of an unmarried man, or accept that their marriage had served its purpose and separate lives awaited them?

Percival set up a languorous rhythm, tucking himself close and running his nose around her ear. "Where are you, Wife? Do you grow bored with your husband's attentions?"

He punctuated the question with a kiss, a hot joining of mouths that tormented as it aroused: Did he kiss his mistress this way?

As Esther's body undulated in counterpoint to her husband's, her imagination flashed on Cecily O'Donnell's bright red hair and full mouth. Even through the pain of that recollection, Esther felt her husband's passion shift from teasing to focused arousal. She responded—some part of her hated that she did; another part of her wept from the relief of it.

Percival levered up on his arms, regarding her by firelight as their bodies strained together. "I love you, Esther Windham. Only you, always you."

She traced her fingers over his jaw. He meant those words. Here, now, their bodies joined, he meant those words with his whole heart.

"Percival, I love you too."

This was a truth as well, one that might yield to what lay before them. As Esther gave herself over to her husband's pleasuring and felt the first quickening flutters deep in her body, she said a prayer that their love would somehow endure the coming storm.

Lovemaking was different when a man was trying to get his wife pregnant, though Esther might kick him to Cumbria if she suspected that was his aim. Instead, she sighed and trembled and ran her hands over his backside and over his shoulders, in the light, warm caresses he'd learned to crave.

"Percival, I love you too."

The words were wrenched from her, as if against her will. As he plunged into Esther's body, Percival had the sense that her orgasm was also wrenched from her, a surrender she regretted even as the pleasure grew most fierce.

When he was sure her passion had been sated, Percival let himself fly free too.

A child, please, one more child so I might have reason to call on my wife when all other excuses have been exhausted.

The release was exquisitely intense, in part a function of long denial, but also, Percival suspected, a function of desperation. When he'd regained the ability to move, he pitched off his wife and drew her against his side.

"Percival?" Esther's fingers winnowed through his hair. "Did you intend that?"

That. Did he intend to risk conception, when for the past months they'd been avoiding it? The question was free of judgment on her part and reasonable, so he told a reasonable lie in response.

"I did not. My self-restraint grows weak from overuse, perhaps, or the pleasures we share overwhelm it." He kissed her cheek, drawing in the scent of roses and despair—he had sunk to lying to his wife in their very bed.

Something in Esther's silence told him his prevarications lacked conviction, so he troweled a layer of truth onto his falsehood. "You've seemed less tired lately, Esther, or am I mistaken?"

A few beats of quiet went by while Percival traced the curve of her jaw. The depths to which he would miss this woman were unfathomable. How did a man march off to war, leaving his wife and family behind?

How did a man not march off to war, when his wife and family were threatened?

"You are not mistaken. I am feeling somewhat better."

She sounded surprised, as if she were just realizing it. Percival sent up a prayer of thanks and reminded himself to renew his orders to the kitchen. Not a cow would be left standing in the realm if feeding his wife beef was restoring her health.

Except soon he would not be in a position to dictate her menus. Percival closed his eyes and gathered his wife closer.

"Are you up to a trip back to Morelands, Esther?"

Another silence. She rolled out of his embrace to lie on her back. When she didn't reach for his hand, Percival reached for hers.

"You just sent Tony and Gladys to Morelands, and the children have only in the past few days settled in here, Percival."

She did not want to go. He took solace from that. Better she not want to go than that she leave him all too willingly.

"I'll follow soon, my love. The holidays will be upon us, Parliament will recess, and His Majesty will understand that my place is with my family." God willing, Cecily O'Donnell would understand too.

He waited, listening to the soft roar of the fire while Esther's fingers went lax in his. "Esther?"

She had either fallen asleep or was feigning sleep. In either case, she hadn't refused his request for a swift departure to the country—nor had she given her consent.

"How much do you want?" When he longed to wring Cecily O'Donnell's neck, Percival instead affected bored tones.

Cecily rested her fingers on the décolletage of a gown that barely contained her breasts, a gesture intended to call attention to the pink flesh peeking through pale lace just above her nipples.

"This isn't entirely about money, Percy. This is about what's due the daughter of a man well placed in Society. I've heard you might stand for a seat in the Commons, and with your ambition and social stature, there's no telling how high you might rise in the government."

She threatened and flattered with equal guile, though as far as Percival was concerned, her words meant nothing compared to the documents she'd produced. Irrefutable evidence that the girl, Magdalene, could indeed be his daughter.

"Magdalene is a by-blow at best, madam. One you chose to keep from my notice until the moment suited you. Society will remark that and draw conclusions that will not devolve to the girl's benefit."

Cecily's rouged lips compressed, suggesting this line of reasoning had escaped her consideration. "Society will keep its opinions to itself if we're seen in company often enough."

"No."

The word slipped out with too much conviction, such that even Cecily couldn't hide her

reaction.

"You are not in a position to dictate terms to me, Percival Windham. I spread my legs at your request, and you will honor the resulting obligations."

"I will never rise in government, will never even take a seat in the Commons if you're seen hanging on my arm. His Majesty takes a dim view of licentiousness, as does his queen."

Cecily rose from her sofa on a rustle of skirts and marched up to Percival, her heeled slippers making her almost of a height with him. "Then you won't take that seat. I've provided for this child every day of her life, seen her clothed, fed, educated, and disciplined. You will not turn your back on her without losing what reputation you have. I'll bruit about details of our liaison your own brother will blush to hear."

The scent of rice powder and bitterness wafted from her person. This close, Percival could see the fine lines radiating from her eyes, the grooves starting around her smile. He turned away and fixed his gaze on the clock that graced her mantel.

Esther was tired, her stamina and energy stolen by successive births. Cecily O'Donnell had given up her youth and her coin to nights at the theater, high fashion, and a succession of lucrative liaisons. Percival watched the hand of the clock move forward by a single minute and realized he could not leave the child in Cecily O'Donnell's keeping. If a woman was to end up exhausted, worn out, and much in need of cosseting, then it should be because she'd sacrificed much to her children, and not to her own vanity.

And as for a seat in the Commons? Esther had not been enthusiastic about such a prospect. Percival tossed that ambition aside between one tick of the clock and the next.

He shifted his gaze to Cecily's face. "I shall visit with my daughter now."

Triumph flared in Cecily's calculating eyes. He'd admitted paternity, though it meant nothing without witnesses. On instinct, Percival whipped open the parlor door to find a footman crouched by the keyhole.

Bloody damn, he'd been stupid. "You, sir, will take me to the nursery, now."

Cecily sputtered several dire curses then fell into silence, though Percival knew she was merely planning her next series of broadsides.

Leaving the woman to sip her tea and plot his downfall, Percival went on reconnaissance through the upper reaches of the house. What he found disappointed more than it surprised. At the head of the stairs, Cecily's bedroom was still a temple to elegant indulgence. The bed hangings, curtains, and pillows were all done in matching shades of soft green brocade, and a single white rose graced the night table. Beyond the bedroom, the house grew increasingly chilly, and on the third floor, there was not a carpet to be found.

The footman knocked on the nursery door, which was opened by the child herself.

"Hullo."

Percival glowered at the footman. "Leave us."

The man withdrew, looking unabashedly relieved.

"May I come in?"

She drew the door back, revealing a room made sunny—also downright cold—by the lack of curtains across the windows. In the middle of the bare floor sat a worn mess of fabric, yarn, and stuffing that might once have been a doll, along with five wooden soldiers, one of whom was missing part of a leg.

The grate held no fire.

"I was taking tea with the regimental officers. Would you like to join us?"

He'd freeze if he spent much time in this room. Maggie did not seem aware of the cold. Her braids were ratty, her short dress stained at the hem, and her pinafore fastened with a knot rather than bow at the back.

"Tea would be lovely." He loathed the stuff.

Maggie took him by the hand—her little fingers were like ice—and drew him into the room. "I will make the introductions. You may sit there." She settled onto the floor with a fluffing of her pinafore and dress that bore a disquieting resemblance to her mother's pretentious manners. Percival lowered himself across from her, haunted by the memory of visits with his boys in their cozy, carpeted nursery—a room full of books, toys, and comforts.

While Percival felt despair clutching ever more tightly at his heart, little Maggie spun a fantasy of a polite tea with elegant service, crumpets, servants, and a cozy fire in the grate, which the imaginary footman tended about every two minutes.

When he could tolerate her play no more, Percival interrupted his daughter's diatribe on whose wig was the most ridiculous at last night's soiree.

"Maggie, where is your nurse?"

Her gaze narrowed on him, showing displeasure at having to give up her fictional tea party. "I haven't a nurse. Mrs. Anglethorpe is the housekeeper. Burton is our maid of all work, and if Mama wants me, Burton fetches me."

"Then who dresses you, child?"

Downy little brows twitched down. "I dress myself. I'm not a baby."

She was not. He knew exactly how old she was, and she was not an infant. She was a handful of months older than Bartholomew.

"Who cares for you, Maggie?"

She studied him with an expression of consternation. "Burton says Mama loves me, but I can take care of myself."

The despair weighting Percival's heart threatened to choke him. He could not abandon this child to the care of her mother. He simply could not—his honor would not allow it, and in some way, even his standing as Esther's husband would not allow it. For a

moment, he considered confiding in his wife, but even if Esther were inclined to be understanding, there was nothing she could do to still Cecily O'Donnell's vile tongue.

Percival rose and shed his jacket. "I want you to have my coat." He draped it around Maggie's shoulders. It fell nearly to the floor on her, which was good.

She drew it closed at the lapels and gave it a sniff. "It smells like you, and it's warm."

"Exactly the point. When was the last time you ate?"

She glanced at the battered doll and the worn soldiers.

"I mean real food, for God's sake." At the exasperation in his tone, her expression shuttered, and that... went beyond causing him despair. No child of her years should have instincts like this, should have circumstances like this while her mother sat two floors below, swathed in lace and warmed by a blazing fire.

"Come with me, Miss Maggie. We're off to the kitchen."

When he'd seen the child seated before bread, butter, jam, and hot tea, Percival forced himself to rejoin Cecily in her lair. Her eyes went wide at the sight of him without his coat, but she said nothing until the door was firmly closed behind him.

"You've assured yourself the girl is well and hale, and you know she's yours. If I say you'll accompany me to the theater tomorrow night, Percival, then accompany me, you shall."

He hated this woman. Hated her with an intimate, burning passion that was not for himself but for the small child left shivering and alone hour after hour.

He was going to rescue this child, though he must wait until Esther had removed to Morelands to implement that plan. Hatred fueled the most ironically pleasant smile he'd ever manufactured. "I'll pick you up at eight. Try not to dress like the trollop you are."

Five

"She didn't ask how much I wanted, she asked how much I needed." Kathleen St. Just fell silent rather than try to explain to her son why desperate schemes were rioting through her brain.

Devlin glanced up from where he was laying out playing cards on his mother's bedspread, this room being the only one with even a meager fire. "The lady who gave me chocolate was nice. The horses were wonderful."

The deck he was playing with lacked several cards, and try as he might to pair each one with a match, his game was doomed. Being a child, he hadn't figured this out, and Kathleen wasn't about to tell him.

"That lady is your papa's wife. She's kind." And for that kindness, Kathleen wanted to hate her, which was of no moment whatsoever. "Also very rich."

They spoke Gaelic, which was a sign of how tired Kathleen was. Bad enough Devlin was illegitimate, worse yet if he sported a brogue as he got older. "I received another letter from Mr. O'Dea."

Devlin glanced at her when she switched to English. "Mr. O'Dea lives back home."

Back home was a place the boy would have little memory of, or so Kathleen hoped. She'd visited only once during Devlin's short lifetime. "He does. He asked after you."

Devlin made no reply, remaining focused on his cards. Billy O'Dea always asked after "the boy," but his sentiments regarding Devlin were one reason why Kathleen hadn't made any more trips back to Ireland. With the tolerant pragmatism of a man who knew exactly how Kathleen earned her livelihood, Billy—like Kathleen's own family—believed Devlin's best chance for a good start in life lay in throwing the boy on his father's charity, and Billy was not wrong.

He was also not going to offer marriage unless or until Kathleen heeded his advice. On that tired thought, wind rattled the glass and fluttered the curtains, bringing an icy draft into the room.

And winter was only getting started. Kathleen thought of the vile things Gregory Pelham had whispered in her ear as she earned her coin with him like a doxy in his mews, and wanted to retch.

"One day soon, we're going back to visit your papa's wife again."

Devlin turned up a pair of queens and smiled. "Will she give me more chocolate?"

"Yes. She'll give you more chocolate. As much chocolate as you can drink."

Without making a sound, Kathleen started to cry.

"Your papa has asked us to return to Morelands. You'll like that, won't you?" Esther adopted the cheery tones of a parent bent on deceiving small children, though from the look Bart and Gayle exchanged, she'd failed miserably.

Gayle kicked at the dead leaves on the frozen ground. Bart dropped Esther's hand and skipped ahead a few steps. "I like the park. If we go home, we can't play in the park. Papa visits with us more here too. I like when Papa visits."

Gayle echoed the complaint as they wandered along the Serpentine, cold winter sunlight bouncing off the water in the middle of the lake. Near the shore, ice had once again formed. Esther resisted the urge to find a rock and pitch it hard at the ice, lest the boys complain about missing the Serpentine too.

"Papa will be home at Christmas," Esther said, "and that's just a few weeks away." Though Percival hadn't promised to return to Morelands at Christmas.

Bart's face lit up with glee as he pointed at a rider coming down the path on a chestnut stallion. "There's Papa! Maybe he'll let me ride home with him!"

Predictably, Gayle planted his mittened fists on his little hips. "That's not fair! You got to ride with Papa last time, and it's my turn."

Percival Windham was so handsome, he nearly took Esther's breath away. Mounted, he had a sort of rugged elegance that the painted town dandies in their clocked stockings and high heels would never achieve. And yet, that wasn't why she loved him. She loved him because when he spotted them, he swung off his horse and held out his hands to the boys.

"My first and second lieutenants, scouting the wilds of Hyde Park in search of the general's beautiful, lost daughter. I see you've found the poor, wandering damsel."

"That's not a damsel," Gayle said, grabbing his father's hand. "That's Mama."

"Why so it is." Percival made her an elaborate bow, likely for the sake of his sons. Esther bobbed a curtsy for the same reason, when she wanted to tear a strip off her handsome, charming, randy husband for no reason in particular.

"Take me up, Papa!" Bart started. "I want to ride on Comet."

"It's my turn," Gayle bellowed over his brother's pleading.

Percival picked Gayle up and sat him on Comet's empty saddle, then swung Bart up behind his brother. "Hush, the both of you. If you spook my horse, you're likely to land in something objectionable, and your mama will not be pleased. Madam?" He winged his arm at her, and Esther felt a lump lodge in her throat.

"My thanks." She tucked her hand over his arm, while with his free hand, Percival led the horse—now sporting a pair of pirate princes intent on plundering London from the back of their equine ship.

"Are you prepared to leave for Morelands in the morning, Wife?"

No. "Almost. There are a few things that can't be packed up until shortly before we leave, and things the children will want in the coach."

"A storybook or two?"

"Several storybooks, their favorite blankets, their soldiers."

They strolled along, a young family to all appearances indulging the children's high spirits on a chipper day.

Esther spoke at the same time as her husband, their unison perfect.

"I'll miss you."

From Esther's perspective, they were both speaking the truth, but the missing would be very different for each of them. She would miss her husband with a bodily ache and a heavy heart, and more than a dollop of resentment. He would miss her with a passing wistfulness, particularly on the nights when his mistress could not accommodate him.

The thought sent a spike of nausea through Esther's belly.

"Madam, are you well?"

She'd put her hand over her middle. Behind them, Comet clip-clopped along, and the boys plotted terror on the high seas of Mayfair

"I do not want to return to Morelands, Percival. There is no reason for it."

He remained silent until they approached the gate that would see them onto Park Lane. Percival paused, the horse coming to a halt behind them.

"Will you go because I ask it of you, Esther? I will join you at Christmas if I have to walk every step of the journey back to you in my bare feet."

Now was the time to tell him, no, she would not go. She would not so easily let him drift into the liaisons and affairs that eventually attended every titled marriage, save the eccentric few. Now was when she should join battle, except Percival's eyes held such a grave request, she could not form the words.

She nodded, and they turned out of the park and onto the busy streets of Mayfair.

"You're not off to the levee this morning, Husband?"

Esther looked tired to Percival, making him wonder if she'd waited up for him. When he'd dragged himself home after an execrable evening at the theater, Esther had been abed, and he hadn't been able to bring himself to wake her. His hesitance hadn't stemmed from consideration for a woman who'd be trapped in a freezing coach with her children all day but rather from guilt.

All evening long he'd fielded curious glances and raised eyebrows from men who would no doubt tell their wives that Lord Percy Windham had been in the company of an old flame. And those wives would talk to each other, and eventually...

"I'm off to a meeting," Percival said. "His Majesty has some notion Wales ought to be

kept informed of the committee's doings, though Wales is far more interested in chasing skirts than requisitioning uniforms."

"Then I'll bid you farewell. I've final packing to see to."

She did not. Percival knew his wife well enough to know that her own effects had likely been packed before she'd found her bed the previous night. Esther pushed her chair back, and Percival covered her hand with his own. "I've said my good-byes to the boys, but..."

She gazed at him, her expression so solemn that guilt and frustration coalesced into shame. The damned beefsteak he'd been choking down threatened to rebel, and a life of such moments—ashamed, awkward, silent—rolled past in Percival's mind.

"Esther, I love you. I wouldn't be asking you to leave if I did not love you."

If she asked him why her departure was necessary, he would have no answer for her: Because a vicious woman was going to use a small child to wreak vengeance on an entire family; because a randy young officer had made foolish choices.

Because he could not bear to see Esther hurt.

He kissed her cheek. "Will you finish my steak for me? One doesn't want to be late, even if Wales will be more drunk than sober at such an early hour."

Something shifted in Esther's green-eyed gaze, something cooled and reassessed. "I don't care for beef at breakfast, Percival. Perhaps you'll serve yourself smaller portions in future rather than expect me to finish your meal."

Her tone was so perfectly bland, Percival had to wonder if she hadn't already heard with whom he'd been seen the previous evening. "I will try to recall your preferences when next we're dining at the same table."

He rose, held her chair for her, and hated what his life was about to become. Hated it so much in fact, that when he'd managed to take his leave of his lady wife without shouting, breaking things, and rampaging through the house, he did not go to his meeting. Percival instead took himself to that address he most loathed in all of London.

"Good morning, your lordship." The same footman who'd listened at Cecily's keyhole was now minding her front door. "Madam has not yet come down, though if you'll follow me to the parlor, the kitchen will send up a tray."

The words were right and the tone was deferential and brisk, but the fellow's gaze was shifty, more shifty than it had been even when he'd been eavesdropping. Percival handed him his cloak, and noticed another gentleman's coat hanging from a hook in the foyer. The garment was well made, a soft, dark wool with crested buttons that suggested both wealth and good taste.

Also a complete lack of common sense on some poor fellow's part. Percival did not stare at the coat, lest the footman catch him at it, but the presence of that coat spoke volumes.

Percival took himself down the hallway toward the foyer, addressing the footman over

his shoulder. "A tray would be appreciated, with chocolate and none of that damned tea."

Chocolate would take longer to prepare, and for what Percival intended, every moment counted.

"Very good, my lord."

The footman scampered toward the back stairs, while Percival kept right on going past the parlor. The plan he'd formed was daring and precipitous, but an eternity of nights toadying to Cecily O'Donnell was unthinkable. And as for Esther...

He pushed thoughts of his wife aside, knowing that dear lady was already on her way to the countryside. If the gods smiled upon a well-intended husband, then Esther need never know of what was about to transpire.

Cecily's bedroom door was closed, thank God, probably the better to hog the heat from the only fire outside the kitchen. When he gained the nursery, Percival paused.

What he was about to do was in some way selfish, and in some way proper—it was also right.

"Maggie."

His daughter glanced up from the same pile of damaged toys he'd found her with previously.

"Papa." She scrambled to her feet but then checked herself, making a painful contrast to the way Percival's sons had greeted him in the park—to the way they always greeted him.

"Collect up your things, my dear. I'm taking you away from this house."

"We're going on an outing?"

"Something like that. Bring your doll and your soldiers and anything else that matters to you."

She disappeared into a cupboard and emerged with Percival's coat. "Burton said we could sell it for coal, but I didn't want to. I like how it smells, and the buttons have a unicorn on them."

Maggie held still while Percival fastened the frogs of a wool cloak under her chin, and she said nothing when he stuffed her doll and soldiers into his pockets. As they stole back down through the house—making only one brief stop in the parlor—Percival wondered if there was a greater comment on Maggie's situation than that all she really knew of her father was the scent of his cologne.

Six

Esther had wanted to leave for Morelands an hour ago, but the children were being recalcitrant, and the nursery maids—one of whom was enamored of the porter—were abetting them.

And while Esther waited for this favorite pair of boots to be found and an indispensable storybook to be tucked into the coach, she thought of her husband and of the solemn, dark-haired boy who bore her husband's eyebrows.

A man who was going to keep a mistress for all of London to see could afford to quietly support his son at some decent school in the Midlands. Winter was barely under way, and the boy's mother had already been reduced to begging. This was perhaps the inevitable fate of a woman plying the harlot's trade, except...

Except if Esther had been that boy's mother, she'd do much worse than beg if it would see him fed. Thinking not as a wife, but as a mother, Esther could not leave Town without making at least a short call on Kathleen St. Just, whose direction she'd obtained at their last encounter. Knowing that the traveling coach would still take at least an hour to pack, Esther called for the town coach and dressed in her plainest cloak and boots.

Kathleen St. Just opened the door to a perfectly nondescript little house on a perfectly nondescript street. "My lady, I am surprised to see you."

Surprised was a euphemism, likely covering shock and humiliation, as well a quantity of resentment, though Esther did not quibble over it. The freezing house, the stink of tallow rather than beeswax in the foyer, and the fact that Mrs. St. Just had opened her own door announced the situation plainly enough.

Esther swept past her hostess rather than linger on the stoop. "I will not take up much of your time, Mrs. St. Just. Is your son on the premises?"

Fear, or something close to it, flitted through Mrs. St. Just's eyes. "He is."

"Shall we repair to a parlor, then? What I have to say affects the boy."

It would affect Esther's marriage too, though she brushed that thought aside and followed Mrs. St. Just to a parlor that surely had never been used for company. Had it been warmer, the room would have been cozy. An entire flower garden was embroidered and framed on one wall, species by species, in exquisite needlework. A teacup and saucer sat on a low table near a workbasket, the saucer chipped but still serviceable.

"My lady, you will forgive the clutter, but this is the smallest parlor and the easiest to heat."

"You need not build up the fire for me," Esther said, and that was true, because she hadn't surrendered her cloak at the door, and Mrs. St. Just—who was wearing two shawls

herself—hadn't offered to take it. "I will be blunt, Mrs. St. Just. My husband has banished me back to the countryside, the better to disport as a young man is wont to when in the capital. I have not informed him that you're raising his son, but I think some provision should be made for the boy sooner rather than later."

"You're leaving London?"

This did seem to occasion surprise. "My husband has asked it of me, so yes."

A shaft of anger accompanied those words, and yet, Percival had asked it of her, he hadn't ordered her to go.

Mrs. St. Just squared her shoulders, which let Esther realize she and this woman were the same height—and what metaphor did that speak to? "Then you can take Devlin with you."

And this was cause for surprise all around, because Mrs. St. Just seemed as startled by her own pronouncement as Esther was.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You either take him with you, or I'll approach his lordship in public and make the same request. I'll demand money. I'll let all and sundry know Moreland's spare has a son on the wrong side of the blanket."

The woman was daring herself to do these things. Esther heard that in her tone and saw it in the wild uncertainty in her eyes.

"Sit down, Mrs. St. Just." Esther managed to settle onto a sofa with no little dignity, which was at complete variance with the wobbling of her knees. "What are you saying? That you'd expose your son to avoidable scandal? That you'd disgrace yourself and embarrass my husband over a bit of coin?"

The woman got herself to a chair, but half fell onto it, as if blind with drink or great emotion. "I'm saying that, yes. Devlin's father has obligations to him. Nobody would argue that."

No they would not, though despite those obligations, despite the cold hearth and her obvious need, Mrs. St. Just had yet to inform Devlin's father he even had a son.

"When was the last time you ate, Mrs. St. Just?"

She shook her head.

"I gave you a bracelet, and that bracelet should have bought a load of coal and put food in your pantry." Esther let a bit of ire—ire for the boy—infuse her tone.

"That money is for Devlin. Where he sleeps, we keep a fire, and there's food enough for him. I bought him a coat too, because he's growing so quickly..."

She closed her eyes and stopped speaking. Esther watched in horror as a tear trickled down the woman's cheek.

"Here." Esther reached into her reticule and withdrew a shiny red apple, one of the many weapons a mother would arm herself with prior to a coach journey with children.

"Eat this. Eat it right now, and we will talk about your son... about Devlin."

And they talked, mostly about the boy. Esther let Kathleen be the one to fetch him, the one to explain that he'd be staying "for a time" with the chocolate lady and that he was to be a good boy when he met his papa.

"Papa has the horses." To the little fellow, this was a point in Papa's favor.

"He does," Esther said, "and we've a cat too, though I'm not supposed to know she sleeps in the nursery when she's done hunting in the mews."

From his perch on his mother's lap, young Devlin assayed a charming and all-too-familiar smile. "I like cats. Cats like to play."

"They do. Tomcats in particular are fond of their diversions." Esther rose, wanting abruptly to get on with her day and all the drama it was likely to hold. She did not doubt that she had made the right decision, though it would by no means be an easy decision to live with—for any of them. "Shall we be on our way?"

She did not reach for the child. Mrs. Just hugged him, whispered something in his ear, and let him scramble to his feet. He parted from his mother easily, secure the way every child should be secure in the idea that his mama would always be a part of his life.

Mrs. St Just rose slowly. "Fetch your new coat, Devlin, and then come right back here."

He pelted off, his footsteps sounding to Esther exactly like Bart's and Gayle's... like his brothers'.

"Your ladyship is wrong about something."

Esther regarded the other woman, seeing weariness and sadness but also peace in her gaze. "I think you are making the best decision for your son," Esther began. "And I will of course write to you, as promised, though I wish you'd agree to write back to him."

"A clean break is better. I don't want him to miss me. That's not what you're wrong about."

"You will enlighten me?" The defensive note was unbecoming, if understandable.

"Your husband, his lordship... he loves you. He is not disporting with anybody, though I'll grant you the man is an accomplished flirt."

This, from Percival's former mistress?

Esther jerked her mittens out of her pockets. "Mrs. St. Just, a certain sympathy of feeling between us as mothers of small boys is not an invitation for you to presume in any manner—"

A thin, cold hand touched Esther's knuckles. "He loves you. He told me so in the king's English when he came here to ask me about your ailments. He was beside himself with worry, risking all manner of talk just to be seen stabling his horse in the mews. He said you were stubborn, but he said it like he admired you for it, and he did not want to be asking the physicians, because they spread gossip."

Esther abruptly sat back down. "Percival was here?"

"Just the once, and he went no farther than the parlor. He offered help before he left, and I did not... I did not want to take it, but then I realized my pride would not keep Devlin in boots, which was why you found me in your mews."

The child came banging back into the parlor. "I'm ready. We can pet the horses, right?"

"We can pet every one," Esther said, wondering where the ability to speak had come from. "Your papa can tell you their names."

A few beats of silence went by, while Mrs. St. Just hugged her son again. He wiggled free, clearly anxious to make the acquaintance of his papa's horses.

As they walked with him to the front hallway, Esther had to ask one more question. "What did you tell him—tell his lordship, I mean?"

The question apparently required no explanation. "I told him you were worn out from childbed and pregnancy. You needed red meat and rest, also light activity and a time to repair your health before you carried again. I trust you're feeling somewhat better?"

"I am." All the breakfast steaks and misplaced menus made sense, though little else did. "I truly am."

She felt better still when she realized that presenting Percival with his son would likely generate a minor scandal. People would think they'd quarreled over the boy—which they well might—and pay less attention to the women Percival trifled with in Esther's absence.

"You won't be staying at this house," Percival assured his daughter. "We will find you a nice accommodation and somebody to look after you who takes the job to heart. You'll like that."

Though Percival would not like it one bit.

"Why can't I stay with you?" Little Maggie rode before him through the park like she'd been around horses since birth, which had to be blood telling, because her mother would not have allowed it.

"I wish you could." He wished it with his whole heart, else how would he know she was safe from her infernal mother? And yet, if she dwelled under his roof, her mother—her legal custodian—would always know where to find her and be able to snatch her back. "This is a small house, and you would not have your own bedroom."

"I don't need my own bedroom. Burton used to sleep in my room, when I had a fire."

"Maggie, you will never want for a fire again, and your soldiers will all have two legs."

"I like Colonel George. He was very brave about losing his leg."

She chattered on about the colonel perhaps being considered for a knighthood, though he'd rather be a general. Percival turned Comet into the alley that led to the mews, glad in his bones that Esther had already departed for Morelands. With luck, he could have Maggie situated somewhere not too far away by sundown, and then he and Cecily

O'Donnell would come to whatever understandings were necessary to keep the girl safe.

"These are very big horses," Devlin remarked. His tone was casual, but Esther well understood the grip the child kept on her hand as they walked past the team hitched to the traveling coach.

"They are very nice horses," she said. "They particularly like little boys, because your brothers come visit them frequently."

Small fingers seized around Esther's hand painfully tight. "My brothers?"

"You have four, and they are capital fellows, just like you." Except those four had never known want, never known cold, never been expected to part with their mother's love with no possible explanation.

"That's a pretty horse." Devlin did not point—the boy had wonderful manners—but his gaze fixed on a chestnut stallion walking up the alley.

As the clip-clop of shod hooves grew closer, for an instant, the picture before Esther's eyes did not make sense. She recognized Comet, she recognized Comet's handsome rider, but she did not... A small child, a red-haired girl, sat before Percival in the saddle. The child was vaguely familiar, and Esther had seen Percival wrap his forearm around his own sons with the very same vigilant protectiveness.

The horse shuffled to a halt. "Esther. You have not yet departed for Morelands."

His tone was so grave.

The hair on Esther's nape and arms prickled, and beside her, the boy was unmoving. "And you, my lord, have not been to any committee meetings."

A groom came out to take Comet, sparing them conversation while Percival swung down, handed off the reins, and hefted the child out of the saddle. She stood beside Percival, her hand in his, her gaze watchful in the way of children who grew up early.

"You're the Viking lady," she said to Esther.

"She's the chocolate lady," Devlin replied. "She's my papa's wife."

A thousand questions rose in Esther's mind while the chill breeze pushed dead leaves across the cobbles. One of the coach horses stomped its great hoof and tossed its head as if impatient with the two adults staring at each other in silence.

"Percival, who in the world...?"

"Madam, we will speak privately."

Of course they would, because if Percival thought to move his mistress and her offspring into Esther's house, Esther would need a great deal of privacy to disabuse her husband of such a notion.

"Devlin, ask the grooms to show you and this girl the stable cat. There's a kitty with only one eye, and she doesn't yet have a name."

A commotion by the back gate had all adult eyes slewing around as Bart and Gayle came barreling into the alley. "We're ready to board the ship!" Bart bellowed.

Gayle came to a halt beside his older brother. "Who are they?" His green eyes narrowed on the girl. "Who's she?"

Bart smacked his mittened hands together. "They can be the colonials! We can play Damned Upstart Colonials, and we'll have French and colonials both. We can slaughter them and take scalps and everything while Mama and Papa kiss each other good-bye!"

Gayle glanced at his parents as if he knew exactly how long two parents could kiss each other, and grinned. "Come on." He took Devlin by the hand. "There's a tiger in the stables, and we can hunt her down for our supper."

The red-haired girl fell in with the boys. "I want to be a lion who hunts down the hunters."

"You have to be the damned upstart colonial," Bart said. "I'm General Bart, and that's Colonel Gayle."

"Then I shall be a fierce, damned upstart colonial wolf named Maggie."

What did a man say to the wife who'd come upon him riding along the alley with an unexplained by-blow up before him?

While Percival pondered that mystery, one of the children gave a shriek as a cat skittered around a corner of the stables, and small feet pelted off in a herd.

Percival stared at his wife, who stared back at him in visible consternation. He did not know what to say to her, did not know why she'd been in the company of that small dark-haired...

Images of the same child, warily clutching another woman's skirts, barreled into Percival's mind. He felt the impact physically, a spinning sensation that whirled through his body and changed everything in the blink of an eye.

Changed everything again.

There were two of them. Two small children who'd not known their father's love or protection. His knees threatened to buckle, and still he did not know what to say.

"Percival?"

Esther spoke his name in dread, which he could not abide. He held out a hand to her. "Esther, please listen. Please, please listen."

She aimed a puzzled frown at his outstretched hand, as if she did not comprehend what she beheld.

"Esther, you must listen to me." Or he'd shoot Cecily Donnelly before witnesses then shoot himself. "I did not want for you to be hurt. You must believe that."

Bart's voice pierced the cold around them. "We've got her! Blast, you let her go!" The

coach horses shifted in their harnesses and still, Esther merely regarded him.

"I think it possible I am not hurt after all. Who is the little red-haired girl, Percival?"

"My daughter and Cecily O'Donnell's—may God have mercy upon me. I became aware of the child—I met her—only a few days past. Her name is Maggie, and she's very bright."

Perhaps he shouldn't have added that last. Percival let his hand fall to his side, and yet still, he held out hope that Esther might eventually forgive him. He knew from her expression that she was thinking, and that had to be encouraging.

She worried her lower lip while Percival uttered prayers more fervent than any he'd offered up in the Canadian wilderness.

"You know Devlin is your son?"

"I do now. His mother said nothing to me."

"She said a great deal to me, most of which I had to agree with."

From the barn, a girl's voice called out, "She's coming around the saddle room! Run, you lot!"

"Esther, may we continue this discussion where we have a measure of privacy?"

"Yes." She strode across the alley and took his arm. "We had best. Come sit with me in the garden."

His first thought was that a garden in winter was a depressing place, all dead flowers and bare trees. When Esther had him situated on a cold, hard bench, it occurred to Percival that here, while his marriage died a painful, civilized death, helpful servants would not intrude to ask if he wanted a bloody tray of perishing tea.

Esther took his hand. "Tell me about Mrs. O'Donnell, Percival, but be warned, I am not prepared to be reasonable where she is concerned."

Where to start? "First, you must know I loathe the woman. Second, you should also know I went to the theater with her last night."

Esther slipped her fingers free of his. Percival grabbed her hand right back and held it shamelessly tight.

"Husband, I do not understand you. You sport about before all of Polite Society with a woman you loathe, while the wife you profess to love is sent out into the countryside. You are generally very direct, Percival. You will have to explain this apparent contradiction to me."

In her exaggerated civility, Percival realized that Esther was nowhere near as composed as she wanted him to think—a fortifying thought.

"Mrs. O'Donnell threatened the girl, threatened to make a bad situation worse. If I lent the woman my escort, she would spare the child and allow matters to go forth as if we maintained a cordial liaison. If I refused her my attentions, she'd stir the scandal broth at every turn and ensure the child—my own daughter—had no chance at a decent life. I needed time to make provisions for Maggie and placated that woman accordingly."

Esther was silent for long moments, but she at least let Percival keep possession of her hand. "Vile woman. You must teach me some curses so I might better express my sentiments toward her when I am private with you."

His wife contemplated being private with him. The reprieve of that revelation was vast. Even so, Percival did not relax his grip on her hand. "I'll teach you every curse I know. Tell me about the boy."

This question seemed to relieve Percival's wife. She smoothed her skirts with her free hand, relaxing in a way that communicated itself mostly where they held hands. "He has your love of horses, very pretty manners, and he does not know he won't see his mother for some time. I thought you would be wroth with me for not consulting you, but I can see you had your hands full with other matters."

Percival brought her knuckles to his lips, and again did not know what to say. When he'd been busy skirmishing with the enemy and taking a prisoner, his staunchest guard had been protecting his flank.

Never had a man been so grateful to misperceive a situation.

The gate scraped open behind them, and the senior groom shuffled a few steps into the garden, hat in hand.

"Beggin' milord's pardon, but is we to unhitch the traveling coach?"

Esther regarded her husband, waiting on his reply. Percival might well send her packing, might well sweep the children away from Society's notice until the gossip died down—which would happen only after several eternities.

"Unhitch the team," Percival said. "We won't be needing the traveling coach for some time. Is the cat still in one piece?"

The groom's lips twitched. "Grimalkin be in the straw mow, that racket be the children all burrowing after. The mice is laughing fit to kill." He left them alone, closing the gate behind him.

There were four children in that straw mow, and two more in the nursery, and they were all her husband's progeny. The notion was dizzying, so dizzying, Esther was grateful to hold her husband's hand.

"Esther, there is more we should discuss."

She peered over at him, because he'd spoken carefully, with a studied calm that presaged bad news. "Six children is rather a lot, Percival. Are there more?"

She hadn't been joking, but he smiled at her, a smile of such tenderness that Esther's insides stopped hopping about like a collection of March hares, for no man smiling like that could be hiding any further secrets.

"I have only six children that I know of, unless you're carrying. I was hoping to find

decent quarters for Maggie before her mother comes, making a great drama on our doorstep, for I seized Maggie from her mother's house and didn't exactly ask permission first."

He sounded hesitant, not quite sure of his strategy, when it had been the only reasonable course. "You kidnapped her." Esther patted his knuckles with her free hand. "Of course you did, because the child was her mother's greatest source of leverage. I do not see that you had a prudent alternative, it being beyond bad form for a mother to use a child like that."

He studied their joined hands, his expression so serious as to emphasize a resemblance to his father. "I don't see what prudence has to do with our situation, my lady. Had I been prudent, none of this would have occurred."

He leaned back against the garden wall and stretched out his long legs before him. Though Percival didn't turn loose of her hand, in some way his posture suggested he was abandoning his wife so he could wallow in his guilt and misgivings.

They had no time for male histrionics if Mrs. O'Donnell was maneuvering her cannon into place, and there was no point to Percival's dramatics, either. "Listen, Percival Windham, and tell me what you hear."

He closed his eyes. "I hear altogether too many small children making a lot of rumpus over one sorry feline."

"Those children are laughing. They are playing together without a single toy between them, and they are having great good fun. They met each other a few minutes ago, and already they know how to go on as a family. We must take our example from them and make a certain cat sorry she ever thought to go hunting on our turf."

"Nobody prosecutes warrants for prostitution."

Cecily's attempt at disdain was undermined by the quaver in her voice as she stared at the document Percival had tossed onto the table before her. If the woman had any sense, she'd be more terrified than angry, but then, she'd never demonstrated appreciable common sense.

"Madam, I vow to you that I will see this warrant prosecuted, and have affidavits from a dozen witnesses of good birth to ensure the charges result in a conviction. I will also bring suit for slander if you suggest to a soul that a single, casual evening in a public theater box was indicative of any renewed association between us."

Cecily flicked the document aside. "You kidnapped my daughter. I am the child's legal custodian, and you've taken her unlawfully from my loving care. Perhaps you aren't even her father."

"In your loving care, she hasn't a single proper toy. She hasn't been inoculated for

smallpox, her feet are covered with blisters because she outgrew her only boots ages ago. And I am very certain she is my daughter, thanks to the documents you so kindly provided me.”

Something smug in his tone must have given him away, because Cecily rose from her artful pose on the green sofa and stalked over to her escritoire. She rifled the drawers and came up glowering.

Which purely delighted Percival. On his last raid into enemy territory, he’d made one stop before he and Maggie had left the premises, and that detail, that one small detail, justified years spent shivering on reconnaissance in the Canadian wilderness.

“You’ve stolen the documents, my lord. Shall I have you arrested for that?”

Percival settled his elbow a little more comfortably on her mantel and noted one of the green bows on Cecily’s towering wig was coming undone. “By all means. You’ll want your witnesses to lay information, provided you can find any who will malign a duke’s son with their perjury. You procured the documents for me at my specific request, as the signatories on the documents would attest.”

As they would attest now, now that Percival had met with each one and held pointed discussions with them.

Cecily slammed the last drawer closed hard enough to make the inkwell on the blotter jump. “You lying, conniving, sly—”

“Such flattery will surely turn my head, Mrs. O’Donnell.” He pushed away from the mantel, because if she came flying at him, he’d want to be able to step aside without letting her touch him. “You have an alternative, you know. My wife was insistent that you’d see reason eventually.”

“Your wife isn’t fit to—”

Before she could complete her insult, Percival harpooned her with a look that let her see every particle of savagery in him. To protect his wife and children, to protect even his lady’s good name, he would cheerfully murder this woman on the spot. Esther had been very clear he was not to indulge in such an impulse, though Esther was also demonstrating a marvelous ability to deal with the occasional marital disappointment.

Cecily took a seat at her escritoire. “What is this alternative?”

Percival tossed documents before her, like he’d throw slops before a hog. “Sign those papers giving me authority over the child, and that bank draft is yours to do with whatever you please.”

No sow had ever regarded her dinner with such a gleam of avarice in her eye. Cecily traced her fingers over the figures on the draft. “All I have to do is sign the papers?”

“Immediately.”

She didn’t like that. From the scowl on her face, Percival surmised she’d planned on absconding with the money, and at some future date, perhaps absconding with the child.

"Fine then. Take the brat, and I wish you the joy of her." She reached for the inkwell, and Percival went to the door.

"What are you—?"

"Witnesses, Mrs. O'Donnell. A proper legal document, to be binding, requires proper witnesses, doesn't it?"

She made no effort to hide her rage as John, Duke of Quimbey, strode into the room, very much on his dignity. Anthony came after that, followed by a marquis and an earl whom Percival had known since his years at Eton.

Quimbey took the time to make sure Cecily was signing freely and voluntarily and that she understood what she was signing—a nice touch that, but then Quimbey had acquired his title before he'd gone to university, and was a genuinely good friend.

The deed was quickly fait accompli, and with thanks all around in the mews, Percival mounted his charger and prepared to report to his commanding officer that the enemy had been thoroughly, absolutely, and permanently routed.

"Maggie will help me civilize them," Esther said as they closed the nursery door. "She's had to think for herself from a young age, and lot of cosseted boys will not slow her down one bit."

Beside her, Percival studied the closed door. "You consider Devlin to have been cosseted?" He hoped it was so. Distracted by his siblings, Devlin seemed to be fitting in easily, but Percival saw worry in the boy's eyes.

Time to go shopping for some ponies.

Esther slipped her arm through his and walked with him toward the stairs, probably to prevent him from suggesting they read the children just one more story.

"You must not fret, Husband. In some ways, Devlin has been cosseted the most. His mother could not provide lavishly for him, but he had her love all to himself, no siblings to compete with, no father to distract Mama from her darling son. He'll be fine, Percival. We'll all be fine."

Because Esther believed that, Percival could believe it too. Kathleen St. Just had taken ship for Ireland, where a second cousin was willing to marry her. Cecily O'Donnell was reported to be taking a repairing lease at Bath. In some ways, the Yule season that approached would be the happiest of their marriage so far.

Esther leaned a little closer. "What did Tony have to say?"

Tony had said surprisingly little, and all of it encouraging. "Anthony could barely spare me the time of day, so anxious was he to return to his bride." Percival opened the door of their private sitting room. "He did say Peter seems to be doing much better for trying the foxglove tincture."

"Arabella writes to the same effect. Are we returning to Morelands for the holidays?"

For all the upheaval in the past few days, and for all the honesty and closeness it had brought between Percival and his lady, he still could not tell if she was asking to go home or asking not to.

He closed the door behind them and drew his wife into his arms the better to communicate with her. "His Grace's spirits are also reported to be much improved."

They were all in better spirits, and who would have thought such a contretemps might yield that result? Against his shoulder, Esther yawned.

"Surely, that your father's situation might admit of any improvement qualifies as a miracle."

"Peter conceived the notion to provide Papa with a young, buxom nurse. Arabella found some village girl with a kindly disposition toward 'the old dear,' and His Grace is reported to be pinching the maids and threatening to appoint himself Lord of Misrule." Percival rested his chin against Esther's temple. "Will you do the same for me, Esther, when I'm old and crotchety?"

The idea that they'd grow old and crotchety together loomed like the greatest gift a man might aspire to—though Esther hadn't a crotchety bone in her lovely body.

"Of course, Percival. You shall have all the buxom nurses and giggling maids you desire, because I know you'll not begrudge me my handsome footmen and flirting porters, hmm? And my doctors will be the most attentive and doting, too."

She patted his chest, while love for her expanded to every corner of his heart. A month ago, she would not have teased him thus. A month ago, she would have given him a look he could not read, and gone about taking her hair down as they exchanged careful small talk.

"I love you, Esther Windham. I will always love you."

"I love you too, Husband." She yawned again but made no move to leave his embrace; nor was he about to let her go.

A thought popped into Percival's tired, happy mind. A thought that might have terrified him only a few short weeks ago. "You took a nap yesterday, Esther, and again today."

"All by myself, which was a sorry waste of a large bed."

"We shall put that bed to mutual use presently, but tell me: Are you carrying?" She sighed softly, and that was not a no. "Esther?"

"You adore your daughter, Percival. You study her as if she were some treasure unearthed from exotic antiquity, and you delight in the way she manages the boys."

Percival inhaled through his nose, the better to catch Esther's rosy scent, and it hit him: an undernote of nutmeg graced her fragrance. "I love all my children, and I love my wife, and if my wife is carrying yet another child, I will love that child too. And you're right, I am fascinated by little Maggie and her way with her brothers. I am fascinated with

all of them, but mostly, I am in love with my wife.”

He waited for her tell him she was carrying. Instead, she kissed him, and because he was her husband and he did love her to distraction, that was answer enough.

Epilogue

The door to Esther's bedroom cracked open as the baby stirred in her arms.

"Quiet now, you lot," came a whispered admonition. "If the baby's sleeping, we mustn't disturb her, or your mama will be wroth with us."

Percival Windham, His Grace the Duke of Moreland, had rounded up his lieutenants to make a raid on Esther's peace.

"Mama's always wroth with us," Gayle observed.

"She's not wroth with me," Bart countered.

Percival pushed the door open another few inches and peeked around it. "Hush. The next man who speaks will be court-martialed for conduct unbecoming."

"No pudding," little Victor piped. "No pudding."

Victor was very particular about his pudding, much like his father and his late grandfather.

"Come in," Esther said, pushing up against her pillows and cuddling her newest daughter close. "I've been telling Louisa to expect some callers."

Percival held Louisa's older sister Sophie in his arms, and Devlin walked at his side, while Bart charged ahead, Victor clutched a fold of his father's coat, and Gayle kept Valentine by the hand. Maggie, as always, hung back, though she was smiling, as was her father.

Another healthy girl child safely delivered was an excellent reason to smile.

"Can I see the baby?" Victor asked.

As small as he was, he could not see his mother in her great bed, much less the new baby. Percival tucked Sophie in against Esther's side and hoisted the children onto the bed one by one. They arranged themselves across the foot of the bed, never quite holding still, but demonstrating as much decorum as they were capable of.

"There, you shall all have a look," Percival said when he'd positioned his troops. "But no shouting or bouncing around lest you rouse your baby sister Louisa."

"She'll mess her nappies," Gayle observed. "You named her for Uncle Peter, because his real name was Peter Louis Hannibal Windham."

"We did," Esther said, though she shared a smile with Percival over the scatological preoccupations of the young male mind.

Not to be outdone, Bart gave his next-youngest brother a push. "You named Sophie for Grandpapa, and that's why she's Sophie George Windham."

"Sophie Georgina," Gayle said, shoving back.

Percival scooped up wee Sophie and settled with her, his back to the bedpost. "The

next fellow who shoves, pushes, or interrupts his brother will be sent back to the nursery."

"No pudding," Victor said again, grinning at his older brothers.

Percival tousled Victor's dark hair. "Heed the young philosopher, boys, and follow Maggie's example of juvenile dignity." He winked at Maggie, which always made the girl turn up bashful. "Esther, how do you fare?"

This had become a family ritual, this bringing the older siblings to see the new arrival, and what a darling new arrival she was. Louisa had Victor's swooping brows, which on a newborn made for a startlingly dramatic little countenance.

"I am well, Percival. Childbearing is not easy, but it does improve with practice. Would you like to hold your daughter?"

They exchanged babies with the ease and precision of a parental drill team, and Esther beheld the Duke of Moreland give his heart, yet again, to a lady too small to understand the magnitude of such a gift.

Gayle also watched his father gently cradle the newborn in his arms. "If you have another baby, Mama, will you name her Cyclops?"

"Cyclops is stupid name," Bart started in. Percival silenced his firstborn son and heir—Bart was arguably Pembroke now, though no parent in their right mind would tell the boy such a thing yet—with a glower, while Esther waited for Victor to pronounce sentence on the pudding again.

"Cyclops is not a stupid name," Gayle replied with the gravity peculiar to him. "Sophie was named for Grandpa, and he died. Louisa is named for Uncle Peter, and he died right after Grandpa. Nobody has seen Cyclops for days, so she must be dead too, and that means we can name a baby after her."

Percival left off nuzzling the baby long enough to smile at Gayle's reasoning. "I think if you climbed up to the straw mow on a sunny morning and were quiet and still long enough, you'd find that Cyclops has finished her own lying-in and has better things to do than let little boys chase after her and threaten to take her prisoner."

"Girls don't like to be taken prisoner," Maggie said. "May I hold the baby?"

The idea made Esther nervous, though Maggie would never intentionally harm her siblings.

"Come here," Percival said, patting the bed. Maggie crawled across the mattress to sit beside her father. He placed the baby in Maggie's lap and kept an arm around his oldest daughter. "I think she looks a little like you, Maggie, around the mouth. She's very pretty."

Characteristically, Maggie blushed but did not acknowledge the compliment. "Sophie was bald. Louisa has hair."

Little Valentine squirmed closer and traced small fingers over the baby's cheek. "She's

soft."

"She'll mess her nappies," Gayle warned.

Bart apparently knew not to argue with that eternal verity. "Can we go now?" He looked conflicted, as if he might want to hold his baby sister and didn't know how to ask without losing face before his brothers.

In Esther's arms, little Sophie squirmed but did not make a sound. "Take Thomas with you if you're going to the mews, and mind you big boys look after Victor."

Four boys who'd needed help to get up onto the bed went sliding off it, thundering toward the door, while Valentine remained fascinated with the infant.

He stroked his sister's dark mop of hair. "Soft baby."

"She is soft," Percival said. "And you, my lad, are smarter than your brothers for choosing the company of the genteel ladies over some nasty, old, shiftless cat."

"She's heavy," Maggie said, passing the baby back to Percival. "I'm going to watch the boys."

"Take Valentine." Percival used one hand to balance the baby and the other to help Maggie and Valentine off the bed. "He'll make enough noise that Madam Cyclops will be able to hide before her peace is utterly destroyed."

"Come along, Valentine. We've a kitty to rescue." Maggie left at a pace that accommodated Valentine churning along beside her, leaving Esther with her husband and her two baby daughters.

Percival shifted to recline against the pillows with his wife, one arm around Esther and Sophie, the other around Louisa. He leaned near enough to catch a whiff of roses, and to whisper, "Do you hear that, Your Grace?"

"I hear silence, Your Grace."

They addressed each other by their titles as a sort of marital joke, one that helped take the newness and loss off a station they'd gained only months before.

"That is the sound of children growing up enough to leave us in privacy from time to time. Good thing we've more babies to fill our nursery."

He kissed Esther's temple, and Sophie sighed mightily, as if her father's proximity addressed all that might ail her—would that it might always be so.

"I wish Peter and His Grace had lived to see this baby, Percival. They doted so on Sophie."

Percival went quiet for a moment, mesmerized by the sight of yet another healthy, beautiful child to bless their marriage. A man might love his wife to distraction—and Percival did—but love was too paltry a word for what he felt for the mother of his children.

"In some ways, their last year was their best, Esther. That tincture gave Peter quite a reprieve, and His Grace perked up considerably when you presented him with a granddaughter."

His nursemaid had perked him up, though the young lady had been Esther's companion in the late duke's mind, and nobody had disabused him of this idea.

"Percival, it's Thursday."

"It's Louisa Windham's birthday," he replied, kissing Esther's cheek. "Two months from now, if I'm a good boy, I may have some pudding."

Esther turned to kiss his cheek. She was wearing one of his dressing gowns—the daft woman claimed the scent of him comforted her through her travail, and because she came through each lying-in with fine style, Percival didn't argue with her wisdom.

"Today is Thursday, Percival, and your committees meet on Thursday. You never miss those meetings. The government will fall if you neglect your politics. George himself has said nobody else has your talent for brokering compromises."

That the king admired such talent mattered little compared to Esther's regard for it. Percival traded babies with his wife, then gently rubbed noses with Sophie, which made the infant giggle. "Am I or am not the Duke of Moreland, madam?"

Esther loved it when he used those imperious tones on her, and he loved it equally when she turned up duchess on him.

"You are Moreland, and it shall ever be my privilege to be your duchess." His duchess had labored from two hours past midnight until dawn, and could not hide the yawn that stole up on her. Even a duchess was entitled to yawn occasionally.

"And my blessing to call you so. But, Esther, as that fellow standing approximately sixty-seventh in line for the throne, I'd like somebody to explain to me why it is, when all I need are three more votes to carry the bill on children in the foundries, I am incapable of seeing such a thing done."

He should not be bringing his frustrations up to her now, but in the past few years, Esther had become his greatest confidante, and for the first time in months, he did not want to attend his meetings.

"When do you expect the vote to come up?"

Right to the heart of the matter, that was his duchess. "Too soon. I'm sure if I could turn Anselm to my way of thinking, then Dodd would come along, and then several others would see the light, but they won't break ranks."

Esther stroked her fingers over Louisa's dark mop of hair. "Lady Dodd was recently delivered of a son."

Percival had learned by now that Esther did not speak in non sequiturs, not even when tired. She was the soul of logic; it remained only for Percival to divine her reasoning.

"I know. Dodd was drunk for most of a week, boasting of having secured the

succession within a year of marriage. The man hasn't a spare, outside of a third cousin, and he thinks his succession ensured."

Children died in foundries, died and were burned horribly. How could Dodd not know his own offspring were just as fragile?

"How old is Anselm's heir?" Esther asked.

Percival raised and lowered his tiny daughter and cradled her against his chest, because Esther's question was pertinent. He wasn't sure how, but it was very pertinent.

"He has a daughter, and a boy in leading strings. His lady believes in spacing her confinements, which imposition he reports to all and sundry before his third bottle of a night."

"Not every couple is as blessed as we are, Your Grace. Who else would you consider to be susceptible to a change in vote?"

The Duke of Moreland left off flirting with his infant daughter and offered his duchess a slow, wicked smile. "My love, you are scheming. I adore it when you scheme."

He suspected Esther rather enjoyed it too, though she no doubt fretted that somewhere there was a silly rule about duchesses eschewing scheming. What duchess could fail to aid her duke, though, when it made him so happy to have her assistance—and was such fun?

"A lying-in party, I think," Esther said, smoothing a hand over Louisa's hair. "I will have their ladies to tea, ask after the children, and mention your little bill."

"You won't mention it. You'll gently bludgeon them with it. They'll leave here weeping into their handkerchiefs." And God help their husbands when the ladies arrived home.

"We'll follow up with dinner," Esther said, her tone suggesting she was already at work on the seating arrangements. "We'll invite Anselm one night, and Dodd the next, and you can drag them up to the nursery to admire the children before we sit down."

"We have very handsome children." Percival ran a finger down Louisa's tiny nose. "And I have a brilliant wife. It could work, Esther."

"Divide and conquer. Pull Dodd aside one night, tell him your wife is haranguing you about this bill, and she's recently delivered of another child. He'll sympathize with you as a husband and papa like he'd never bow down to you as a duke."

When a man should not be capable of holding any more happiness, Percival felt yet another increment of delight in his duchess. "Because Dodd's naught but a viscount, and they are a troublesome lot. I'll do the same thing with Anselm the next night and imply Dodd would capitulate, except he feared losing face with his fellows. My love, you are a marvel." He turned to kiss her then drew back. "A tired marvel. I see a flaw in your plan, though."

She cradled his cheek against her palm, looking tired—also pleased with her husband. "One anticipates most plans will benefit from your thoughts, Your Grace."

He kissed her—a businesslike kiss that nonetheless nurtured his soul. “You will be lying-in. No political dinners for you for at least a month.”

She’d eschewed the old tradition of a forty-day lying-in several babies ago. Inactivity was not in the Duchess of Moreland’s nature.

“Two weeks ought to be sufficient, Percival. This was not a difficult birthing, and as that lady married to the fellow approximately sixty-seventh in line for the throne, I’ve decided I need practice making royal decrees.”

What she needed was a nap. Percival didn’t dare suggest that.

“Planning is one of your strengths, Esther. Though I do worry about your health. With each child, the worry does not abate, it grows worse. What proclamation are you contemplating?”

She kissed his wrist. “You need not fret, Husband. Every duchess has a carnivorous streak if she knows what’s good for her. I’ll soon be on the mend, or you’ll be slaying hapless bovines to make it so. Now attend me.”

“I am helpless to do otherwise, as well you should know.”

“The government will topple without you, I know that, your king knows it, and I suspect all of Parliament—when sober—understands your value, but I saw you first.”

She was tired, she was pleased with the night’s work—very pleased, and well she should be—but Percival also saw that his wife was working up to something, something important to her that must therefore also be important to him, even on Thursdays.

“Esther, I love you, and I will always love you. You need not issue a proclamation. You need only ask.”

“Then I am asking for my Thursdays back.”

“I wasn’t aware Thursdays had been taken from you, Your Grace.” And yet they had—they’d been taken from him, too, and given to the ungrateful wretches in the Lords.

“Percival, I recall that trip we took up to Town only a few years ago, when Devlin and Maggie came to join our household. I was so worried then, for us and for our children, and one of the ways I knew my worry was not silly was that you’d forgotten our Thursdays. I’m not worried now, but I think we need our Thursdays back.”

Something warm turned over in Percival’s heart. He loved his wife, but it was wonderful to know he was still in love with her too—more than ever.

“Parliament can go hang,” Percival said, stroking a hand over his duchess’s golden hair. “We shall have our Thursdays back, and no one and nothing shall take them from us, or from our children.”

The duchess’s proclamation stood throughout shifts in government, the arrival of more babies, the maturation of those babies into ladies and gentlemen, and even through the arrival of grandbabies and great-grandbabies—though given the nature of large, busy, families, Thursday occasionally fell on Tuesday or sometimes came twice a week.

Whether Thursday fell on some other day or in its traditional position, Esther knew she would always have her husband's Thursdays, and his heart—and he would forever have hers.

If you enjoyed this tale of The Duke and His Duchess, then be sure to read more about Esther and Percival in:

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Acknowledgments

My editor, Deb Werksman, is responsible for inspiring this novella. She read *The Courtship* and liked it, but told me I'd left half of *Their Graces'* early story untold—the more interesting half.

The fact that I had not one clue what that more interesting story might be was of no moment to Madam Editor. She has faith in my abilities, you see. Such high regard provides a powerful boost to the imagination, and the result is the story you've just read.

So please add Deb as an honorary member of the Windham family, for I certainly do, and I'm sure *Their Graces* do too.

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 2010, and *The Soldier* was named a Publishers Weekly Best Spring Romance of 2011. 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, was nominated for a RITA in the Regency category and also made the New York Times list. She is hard at work on a stunning new series beginning with *Darius*, more stories for the Windham sisters, and has started a trilogy of Scottish Victorian romances, the first of which, *The Bridegroom Wore Plaid*, was a Publishers Weekly Best Book of 2012.

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.



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