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New York Times bestselling author of the *Bridgerton* series

The
**Last
Lady B**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**ELOISA
JAMES**

Eloisa James is a *New York Times* bestselling author and professor of English literature, who lives with her family in New York, but can sometimes be found in Paris or Italy. She is the mother of two and, in a particularly delicious irony for a romance writer, is married to a genuine Italian knight. Visit her at www.eloisajames.com.

Praise for Eloisa James:

‘Eloisa James writes with a captivating blend of charm, style, and grace that never fails to leave the reader sighing and smiling and falling in love.
Nothing gets me to a bookstore faster than a new novel by Eloisa James’
Julia Quinn

‘Eloisa James is extraordinary’ Lisa Kleypas

‘The romance galaxy is filled with luminous stars, but few twinkle as brightly as James, who, with the launch of her Regency-set Would-Be Wallflowers series, once again dazzles readers with superbly conceived characters, a sublimely sensual love story, and sparkling wit’ *Booklist*
(starred review)

‘Romance writing does not get better than this’
People

By Eloisa James

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The
Last
Lady B

Eloisa James



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The Last Lady B is dedicated to my son, Luca.

My TikTok and Instagram pages feature his funny, ironic videos.
He's not only a marvelous fantasy writer in his own right, but also a
wonderful videographer, who patiently coaches me.

“Mom, let's just try that again . . .” (and again).

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A Note About Ghosts and Other Literary Flourishes

Acknowledgments

Prologue

London
May 2, 1805

(I'm taking the liberty of beginning with a conversation that happened seven months ago, so consider yourself warned.)

Lord Burnsby? A nasty old goat with three dead wives? He's older than I am. For God's sake, Genevieve, *three dead wives*." My father's cheeks had turned the color of a raspberry.

I sighed.

True, Burnsby was no one's dream husband. He was close to seventy, with the weak jaw displayed by many of my countrymen. Yet since I couldn't imagine feeling passionate about any man, his advanced age and chinless state were irrelevant.

Belying my aristocratic upbringing, I am both cynical and blunt. My sister, Rosie, to the contrary, has her heart set on a blue-eyed husband who will fall deeply in love after their first waltz. Rich and titled goes without saying.

Yet neither of us has a dowry.

Having waltzed (and flirted) with many a blue-eyed bachelor who subsequently married for money, I couldn't bear the idea of my dreamy sister debuting in gowns that weren't elegant enough, in gloves that had been mended, in slippers worn thin.

Without a dowry and—*ipso facto*—without suitors. Real ones, anyway.

"Being dead, Burnsby's wives are irrelevant," I informed my father. I paused and then told him the truth. "His lordship has promised to dower Rosie."

My father's groan evoked an unhappy Hamlet. "How shall I survive the disgrace of another man dowering my daughter!"

"No one has to know the source," I offered. "The dowry will allow her to marry the man of her choice."

"Our bloodline and her beauty should be enough!"

After a moment, my silence reminded my father (Sir William Sutton) that bloodlines and beauty had failed me, since three years on the marriage mart had resulted in Burnsby's proposal.

"You're selling yourself," Father moaned, as if the trade in women wasn't a fact of life. Aristocratic life, anyway. "Giving up on love!"

"I prefer to think of it as bartering." I left the question of love to the side. My years in polite society had disappointed but not surprised me, whereas Rosie would be crushed when no adoring husband materialized.

"*You* shouldn't have to worry about Rosie," Father said, humiliation writ large on his face. He wasn't a gambler or a drunkard, by the way. He simply didn't have any money.

For the last few days, I'd lain awake in my bed, agonizing—until I snapped and sent a message to Burnsby. He may be old, but he seemed gentle and supportive. Plus, he didn't require me to entertain him. With no more encouragement than a nod and a smile, he would happily monologue on the state of the world.

I was sick of charming younger men in the hope they would look past my shabby gloves and sweep me away to a new life. Burnsby had promised not just Rosie's dowry, but an entirely new wardrobe fit for his wife.

(Did I negotiate these unromantic details? Yes, I did. Observation has taught me that men require advance warning of their responsibilities, preferably in writing.)

"You're making a mistake, Genevieve," my father warned, wagging his finger. "Burnsby is too old to father children."

"Luckily, he is content with the heir he already has." My father frowned, so I went for the killing stroke. "Frankly, imagining a wedding night makes me want to vomit."

(Remember I said I was blunt? *I am blunt.*)

My father's mouth fell open. "No lady enjoys bedding her husband. Damme, I shouldn't have to explain that. Don't think about it!"

"Lord Burnsby has purchased a special license," I informed my father. "We plan to marry this morning, after which we'll travel to his Scottish estate." Then I added, "Before leaving the city, we will stop by his solicitor to finalize my sister's dowry, my jointure, and my pin money."

My father was wringing his hands, a curiously vulnerable gesture. Being English nobility, we weren't given to displays of affection, but I came closer and kissed his cheek. "It's not your fault."

“Your mother would be so unhappy,” he said, sighing like a teapot on the boil.

“She would be pleased for Rosie,” I pointed out. “Next year, when we return to London for the Season, I shall introduce Rosie to society from Burnsby House.”

“Don’t marry him, Genevieve! Any man might lose a wife or even two—just look at your mother, dying in childbirth—but *three*? That’s not chance or carelessness. It’s unnatural.”

I patted him on the shoulder, which didn’t help.

“People say all three of his wives were *murdered*,” he bleated.

“I’ve given that gossip serious consideration.”

“And?”

“Burnsby would consider homicide unbecoming his rank and presume the world would rearrange itself to his wishes. If he wanted to rid himself of a spouse, he would expect a slippery staircase to do the job for him.”

My father gulped down the rest of his whiskey.

(Well, now you’re all caught up. That’s how I dowered my sister, married a baron, and moved to Scotland.)

December 6, 1805
(After seven months of “wedded bliss”)

A letter from Genevieve, Lady Burnsby, to her sister, Rosie

Dear Rosie,

I’m writing from the village of Sifton, on the way to Lord Burnsby’s hunting lodge in the Highlands to celebrate his seventieth birthday and meet his heir. I wish I could be home for Christmas, as I miss you horribly. I do hope you’re well.

On a more cheerful note, I discovered a new magazine with exquisite fashion illustrations, La Belle Assemblée. When I return to London, we’ll order such a magnificent wardrobe that gentlemen will throng to leave you posies. Father promised me that he would continue paying for your dancing lessons, so do work on those tricky bits of the polonaise.

I’m spending our journey reading novels in which heroines are beset by chilling, unearthly danger, preparing for any and all ghosts because I’ve been reliably informed by Burnsby’s housekeeper that all three of his former wives haunt the lodge! I’m intrigued by the possibility of sharing notes with my spectral predecessors, but I will keep my eyes open for other phenomena. The lodge used to be an abbey; perhaps a doleful, transparent monk paces the corridors, his head tucked beneath his arm.

Tomorrow, we begin the final climb into the Highlands. After that, I won’t be able to send a letter until we return from the Grampian Mountains.

I’ve been thinking about the “if you ever” game we used to play. Remember? If you ever have the opportunity to kiss a duke, run away.

I made up that game to teach you the rules of polite society. After Mother died, I speculated that only perfection would coax the ton to ignore our lack of dowries. I was a panicked eleven-year-old, and, in retrospect, the answer to every etiquette question was no.

No, don’t kiss a duke.

No, don’t admit to boredom.

No, don’t laugh at jokes, at life, at men—particularly not at men.

I barely understood at the time how important it was that I master those rules, especially the last. Hopefully you won’t experience my impulse to chortle at husbandly pontificating, but not to worry: Burnsby could never

guess my feelings. I have mastered the simpering paper-doll expression required of married ladies.

These days I'm trying a new game, gathering advice based on experience, which we can laugh about when I see you after Christmas.

Here's my first:

If you ever have the opportunity to meet your husband's (dead) former wives, consider . . . Consider what? Reconsider? Just say no? Be open to possibilities? Wave?

*With much love,
Your sister, Genevieve*

One

The village of Sifton
December 6

I often find myself comparing my past and present life, perhaps because I haven't yet been married for a year.

At this hour in the morning, unmarried Lady Genevieve would likely have been strolling in Hyde Park, whereas Lady Burnsby was making her way down Sifton's only street—wading through a sea of piglets. I was midway across the cobblestones when a stream of small pink bodies flowed around the corner, reached me, and abruptly began folding their legs and lying down.

From the nobility to the piggery.

It had a certain *je ne sais quoi*, like flaunting French in a Scottish village.

Baby pigs, by the way, are not hideous. One of the few still on his feet was snuffling around my shoe (blue, heeled, embroidered with pansies). I tried to nudge him away, but he sat down and leaned against my ankle, eyes closed.

The swineherd planted his crook and gave me a toothy grin. "They'll be awake in a minute. The last five-week-old suckling pigs of the season will fetch a pretty price at market."

Market?

The little chap slid down my ankle and sprawled across my slipper, fast asleep. In case you don't know, hogs and ladies do not inhabit the same universe. Pigs are like excrement or the bubonic plague: regrettable, never mentioned.

The piglet had surprisingly long, curling eyelashes and a sweet turned-up nose.

Market?

"I'll take this one." I bent down and scooped it into the crook of my arm, just like a baby. He snorted, but his eyes didn't open. One ear fell against my arm like a scrap of pink velvet.

My husband emerged from the apothecary but wisely remained in the doorway. I wish I could say that he was habitually wise, but that would be a

lie.

“Lady Burnsby!” he squealed, quite shocked.

The swineherd peered at me. “That’s a wee sow, yer ladyship. A female.”

“I shall name her Peony,” I said. The piglet was still sleeping peacefully, her front legs curled. “She will be a pet. My pet.”

“People may find your choice peculiar,” Burnsby remarked, having gingerly picked his way across the street, avoiding porcine nappers.

“Peculiar” is anathema to my husband, along with all the other actions and reactions that might brand a woman unladylike.

I shrugged. Shrugging is vulgar (anathema!), but I find it an enjoyable sensation.

“Come along, then,” Burnsby said, giving up and waving at our coachman. Once the piglet was consigned to a groom and we were back on the road, he began crooning “Joy to the World.” After their only child was born on December 25, his elderly parents labeled him their Miracle, which may explain why he sings Christmas hymns year-round.

He has never claimed aloud to be the second Christ child, but his belief in his own judgment is never shaken.

As inviolable as if heaven-sent.

Ignoring the musical accompaniment, I began reading a new novel, aptly set in a haunted abbey. As every avid reader knows, abbeys inevitably offer ghostly accoutrement, along with an ancient housekeeper with a malign countenance, subterranean passages, a will in a secret drawer, a madwoman (or two), a scowling villain, perhaps even a crafty devil.

So much to look forward to.

Except the golden-locked hero. I find men lackluster, if not deplorable, qualities unaffected by their coloring.

“Well, here we are,” Burnsby said before he launched into the fourth verse of “Joy to the World.” We hadn’t arrived; that’s one of the nonsense phrases he drops into any silence.

It’s possible that his first wife, rumored to have taken her life (if she wasn’t murdered), may have chanced the great hereafter rather than endure his daily renditions of Yuletide hymns.

I am surprised that none of his spouses resorted to homicide.

To be fair, it’s possible that one or more lost her life in an attempt to stifle a jolly rendition of his favorite hymn, “A Virgin Unspotted.”

After another week, during which the sound of carriage wheels competed with my husband's baritone, our coach finally rumbled through colossal stone walls that seemed to anticipate a siege, but who would besiege a Benedictine abbey in a Scottish mountain range?

Craning my neck out the window, I saw that the abbey roof resembled a stone staircase, stepping to its ramparts. Wouldn't that have encouraged invading hordes to scramble up, daggers clamped in their jaws?

Had Burnsby been a scholarly man, I might have inquired about the fortifications, stepped roof, and attacking warriors, but his invariable response to such questions is a blank stare.

In darker moments since my marriage to England's most boring peer, I've come to the painful realization that if I wanted to chat with a vegetable, I should have propped up a gourd on my dressing table. I ward off gloom by reminding myself of Rosie's dowry and all the exquisite garments we'll order for her debut.

(I said I was blunt, but perhaps I should add shallow. I find that Parisian shoes, for example, make up for any number of hymns.)

As I stepped down from the carriage into the courtyard, Gothic windows gazed down on us like scornful eyes with peaked eyebrows.

Despite my jaunty letter to my sister, I found myself a little unnerved.

All three of Burnsby's previous wives died in this abbey, after all.

Just as the second carriage—carrying our personal servants, crates of tea, marmalade, marzipan, and my piglet—rattled through the gates, the building's wooden doors creaked open and household staff poured out, the women garbed in black dresses with snowy aprons, the men in rose livery.

After the abbey's servants lined up, a few visibly shivering in the chilly air, my husband took my arm. "Good afternoon," he shouted, sounding more energetic than usual. "I present to you my wife, Lady Burnsby."

I inspected his blank expression, wondering if he felt *déjà vu* at announcing a fourth Lady Burnsby, before I fixed a smile on my face and nodded at the crowd. "I am grateful for your well wishes, and I shall enjoy meeting all of you."

As they dashed back into the lodge, the butler stepped forward and bowed. "Good afternoon, your lordship, your ladyship."

"This is Crumpsall," my husband said, stripping off his furred gloves. "Father of my valet, as it happens."

The man's neck was so lean and long that his throat emerged triumphant from his cravat, topped by a chin as blunt as a hammer's head.

"Good afternoon, Crumpsall," I said, wondering if his hammerlike head indicated I was meeting the requisite villainous domestic servant, albeit not a housekeeper.

"I trust your journey was uneventful?"

"Indeed, it was, Crumpsall," Burnsby said, handing over his gloves. "The snow held off, as did the highwaymen. Blasted nuisance, these outlaws. I planned to toss my wife's piglet at their greedy heads if they showed themselves."

Unfortunately, Burnsby had not taken to Peony. Who wouldn't love a piggy who learned her name in two days and wags her tail for pure joy when offered a biscuit or a cuddle? I hold out hope that he may still succumb to her charms.

My maid, Tess, came forward, handing me Peony's leash, which matched my pelisse. My piglet, after greeting me with a cheerful grunt, sat down and gazed around with interest. At only six weeks old, she is very intelligent.

Crumpsall wrinkled his nose, suggesting that he did not like pigs. I put him firmly in the villain category.

"May I present the lodge's housekeeper, Miss Wellington?" he asked, ushering forward a lady some thirty years younger. Her hair was fire-red and her skin unlined: definitely not the terrifying housekeeper of fictional fame.

Miss Wellington curtsied. "Good morning, my lady. Should a groom create a pigpen in the stables, or will your pet reside in your chamber?"

"Peony would be happy with a box on the kitchen hearth," I said. "She has a buttermilk bath every morning, if you please. This is my personal maid, Tess Hughes."

"Good afternoon, Hughes," the housekeeper replied, her dimples deepening. "Might I offer a refreshing cup of tea?"

As the two of them set off, accompanied by Burnsby's valet, an elderly woman rushed out the abbey door and across the courtyard.

"Aren't you adorable!" she cried, dropping a curtsy before me. She had faded blue eyes, a corona of white curls, and a red-and-white-striped gown with a rear bustle, a style outdated by some twenty years.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I responded, curtsying in turn.

“Everyone addresses me as Aunt Mima, and I shall call you Genevieve, as you are now part of the family.” She grinned toothily at my husband. “Clifford.”

My husband’s name is Clifford Burnsby.

Clifford Clifton Burnsby, to be precise.

Burnsby leaned toward me and muttered, “Addled and born on the wrong side of the blanket.” He barely inclined his chin. “Good morning.”

Her birth explained why my husband hadn’t properly introduced me. Polite society insists that ladies should ignore the existence of bastards along with balls (the male kind).

I let my smile widen. “Thank you, Aunt Mima.”

“I do believe you are the most beautiful of Clifford’s wives.”

I wasn’t certain how to respond to that artless statement.

“Don’t you agree, Clifford?” Mima demanded.

“A *most* inappropriate observation,” he snapped.

Mima ignored that retort. “Who is this?” she asked, glancing down.

“Peony. She is six weeks old today.”

“Good afternoon, Peony,” the lady cooed, bending over for a closer look. “What a fetching leash. Are you fattening her for Christmas dinner?”

“No, she will never be anyone’s dinner,” I told her. “She is my pet.”

“A vulgar choice,” my husband remarked.

Vulgar is a potent word in polite society, a slur that can destroy a lady’s reputation. This rule comes to mind:

To carry children or dogs on a visit of ceremony is altogether vulgar. In the case of dogs, it is a thousand times better not to have them at all.

My response to his opinion? Another shrug.

Marriage has changed me. Or perhaps time has changed me, now I have reached the august age of twenty-five. Once the rules governing vulgarity are discarded, an astonishing number of choices present themselves.

To wit: If one may have a dog, why not a pig?

Perhaps there comes a time in every woman’s life when she discovers that propriety is poppycock. To put it vulgarly, propriety is *bollocks*.

Or perhaps that only happens to a woman foolish enough to marry a man older than her father.

A tall, scowling man emerged from the door to the abbey. Even from this distance, I could see that his coat and snowy cravat were exquisitely tailored. Perhaps that was Burnsby's heir, Lancelot, scowling over his father's marriage to a fortune hunter (a verdict I've come to anticipate from all and sundry).

My husband had neither this man's jaw, his height, nor his air of command. The heir was not only more elegant but far more handsome than his father.

Mima waved. "Do come meet the new wife," she shouted.

Not the most flattering of labels.

"There can be only one wife at a time," she informed me, as if offering a novel piece of information.

"I am gratified to see that Sir Godric traveled from England to celebrate my birthday," Burnsby said. So that wasn't Lancelot, his heir.

"Godric didn't come for your birthday, but to greet Lancelot's new wife," Mima countered. "Have you met her yet?"

"Of course I haven't, since my only son chose to marry in Paris," Burnsby said irritably. "Crumpsall, I trust that you will introduce my lady wife to the household."

Without another word, my husband walked over to intercept his guest. After exchanging bows, Burnsby disappeared into the abbey without a backward look.

That was a surprise. Deserting one's wife in a new location is extraordinarily impolite, and Burnsby prided himself on his gentlemanly manners. I suppressed a flash of annoyance, but his rudeness likely reflected his fastidiousness as regards illegitimate persons, even his own sister.

That didn't reflect well on his character, but it was understandable.

Luckily, I was certain that my emotions didn't show on my face. I am an expert at disguising unladylike emotions.

"This is my son, Godric," Mima said, waving madly at the visitor. "Godric, this is the new Lady Burnsby."

He bowed. "A pleasure to meet you, Lady Burnsby. My name is Sir Godric Everley. Aunt Mima, I'm not your son."

Taken aback, I glanced between the two of them.

“Oopsie!” Mima said, slapping her cheeks with both hands. “You’re Lancelot’s school friend. I’d forget my head if it wasn’t hammered on.” She turned to me. “Back when the boys were at Eton, Godric used to spend holidays here. Now they’re not at school, he doesn’t visit.” She squinted at him, confused. “You’re not at Eton, are you, Godric?”

“No, I live in London. I am joining you this Christmas to meet Lance’s bride,” Godric said obligingly.

“I knew that! I mix the boys up, because they’re both so tall, manly, so—so . . . Fiddlesticks!” Mima flapped her hand around like a disgruntled bird. “*Manly.*”

Shoulders, chest, thick thighs shown to advantage in his breeches. A bold nose and jaw. Black, thick brows set in a straight line above black eyes. She was right: It all screamed manly.

“At any rate, Godric, isn’t Genevieve surprisingly wonderful?”

He eyed me up and down. Since his gaze conveyed undisguised contempt, my polite smile fell away.

“Surprising indeed,” Sir Godric echoed, looking as if he swallowed a gnat.

His disdain was nothing new. Neighbors of Burnsby’s country estate enjoyed making loud comments about my scheming, fortune-hunting ways. Since I had indeed married for money, I never bothered to point out that most women are forced to seek stability through marriage.

I gave Sir Godric a measured smile. “What a pleasure to meet you.”

Not.

He had a hard chin, hard eyes, hard cheekbones.

Then it occurred to me: The housekeeper had a dimple, and the anticipated ghosts had yet to appear, but the villain of the novel had duly presented himself!

Sir Godric had a wide, villainous brow, tumbling black hair, dark eyes, and that forbidding demeanor. Broad shoulders, the better to dig a grave. Hessian boots and a black coat, clearly tailored by Weston. Actually, that is a surprise. Weston is expensive, and villains are usually looking for money to pay the wages of sin. (Ha!)

Loathing him—compulsory for a villain—would be easy.

I made up my mind to drop “sir” when thinking of him. When a person has written you off as an exploitative sponge, it’s important to score small, albeit private, reprisals.

Crumpsall approached with an offer of tea, and we all set out for the door, Peony trotting at my heels. Halfway across the courtyard, Mima remarked out of the blue, “Godric was orphaned when his father choked to death eating stewed prunes, which, as you may know, is an infallible cure for syphilis.”

I missed a step. (Syphilis is a disease more offensive than balls and bastards, never mentioned in a lady’s presence.)

“It was Lord Burnsby’s father who choked on a pit,” Sir Godric said, not unkindly. “My father died in a carriage accident.”

Interesting. Burnsby had told me his father’s weak heart had failed.

“Such a dull way to go, Godric, if you’ll forgive my plain speaking.” Mima caught my elbow, bringing me to a halt as she peered at me blurrily. “How did your father die, dear? Who was he?”

“My father, Sir William Sutton, is alive and well,” I replied.

“Yet he allowed you to marry Burnsby?” Sir Godric asked incredulously.

I gave him a chilly stare. “I am not a minor. It was my decision.”

I would choose to marry Burnsby again. Probably. My life is not terrible. My husband and I are friends—or more precisely, friendly. *I* had made the choice to help my sister. *My* choice.

Rosie’s dowry and my new wardrobe have given me the fortitude to withstand bystanders’ ridicule and Burnsby’s disconcerting lack of interest in my opinion.

Still, I was feeling battered, so I bent down and scooped up Peony. As her warm body snuggled into the crook of my arm, she coquettishly fluttered her eyelashes at Godric.

“Are hogs fashionable these days?” he asked as we began walking toward the door again. His lip didn’t curl villainously, but the feeling hung in the air. A twirling-the-mustache type of condemnation.

“Absolutely,” I responded. “Every young lady—at least those in the ton—has a pig of her own. I gather you don’t move in the best circles.”

Mima jumped in. “Godric is *treasured* by royalty. Prince George himself bestowed his baronetage for services to the Crown.”

“No, Aunt Mima, I inherited the title from my father,” Sir Godric clarified.

I was starting to suspect that her memory loss was more serious than garden-variety forgetfulness.

Mima smiled toothily at me. “Godric is a shockingly bad-tempered barrister. I was horrified when I watched my son argue a case for the Crown a year ago.”

Unsurprising. Godric’s face resembled one of those stern marble angels adorning the front of cathedrals, the ones wielding swords. Not friendly. Judgmental.

“I’m not your son, Aunt Mima, and that was over a decade ago,” Godric said, accepting her assessment of his temper.

“He undoubtedly has a choleric liver but refuses to give up port,” Mima complained.

I paused at the door to the abbey. “You surprise me, Sir Godric. Even taking into account the evident benefit to mankind, you refuse to switch to brandy?”

“Unconscionable,” he said. I couldn’t spot even the faintest amusement in his eyes. Considering Burnsby’s lack of humor, I’ve grown to associate appreciation for irony with intelligence.

“Disappointing,” I remarked.

Did I say Sir Godric’s eyes were hard?

They hardened. No, I am not as sweet as my blush-colored cloak suggests.

Oh dear, a crushing look.

Or, in reality, *another* crushing look. He seemed to specialize in them.

(Consider me crushed.)

Two

*If you ever find yourself in a melodrama involving ghosts and villains, try to enjoy yourself.
Compared to fiction, ordinary life is so boring.*

Crumpsall ushered us through the abbey's ponderous studded exterior doors—that siege came to mind again—into a chilly, echoing sanctuary graced by one small, unlit hearth and no furniture, save a stone altar.

Not to be blasphemous, but the altar gave off a pagan air, as if maidens were regularly thrown on top and exsanguinated.

The butler and Mima set out at a brisk walk toward a door at the far end, but I paused to stare up at the stone ribs that made up the ceiling, undoubtedly hung with cobwebs, albeit invisible in the gloom.

It was all *very* satisfactory. This abbey had to be ghost-ridden, if that's a term. Haunted by monks, pale maidens . . . or deceased wives. I felt as if I had walked into a novel, a welcome change from the tedium of my daily life.

Godric came up beside me. "Not exactly cozy, is it?" His breath hung in the air like a wisp of smoke.

"Absolutely not," I agreed. The high windows were obscured by elaborate stone tracing and didn't admit much light. The edges of the room were shrouded in shadow, and the air smelled sour and wet. "I assume this is the chapel?"

He nodded. "The abbey was built on a classic monasterial design. This part of the building is made up of the sanctuary and a small vestry in the rear. The chamber remains bitterly cold even in the summer—"

(Because of *ghosts*, obviously! But I didn't say it aloud.)

"—so Crumpsall uses it to bury blocks of ice in hay. Some years they last into July."

His voice was annoyingly rich and deep. I'd love to hear him speaking French, my favorite language—which I can read but not speak, due to my father's inability to pay a governess.

"The monks must have worn multiple layers of clothing." I shivered, imagining rows of rickety wooden chairs, thin robes, and boring sermons.

“The other rooms have larger fireplaces. You’ll be warm enough,” Godric said unsympathetically.

“But monks attended eight services a day, praying and chanting. They must have suffered from frostbite.”

“Eight services? I highly doubt it.”

No wonder Godric spewed bad temper in the courtroom; people likely took offense at such a condescending display of ignorance.

“Benedictine monks attend eight mandatory services,” I informed him. “Matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, compline.”

“Surely you weren’t raised Catholic?” A thin white scar bisected his right eyebrow, which didn’t stop him from raising it.

(A scarred villain! Better and better.)

I shook my head. “My father doesn’t respect popes any more than bishops. I read about the services in a novel set in Sénanque Abbey, in Provence.”

Actually, I have learned *everything* from books, beginning with etiquette manuals after my mother’s death. Governesses never stayed long, due to my father’s aforementioned impecuniness.

“*You* read a Catholic novel in the French language?” Godric asked.

Was he incredulous about my ability to read a foreign language? Or was Catholicism the issue? I was feeling nettled by Burnsby abandoning me in a strange location, and Godric was making things worse.

“The novel is set in a haunted abbey. To be frank, I’m hoping to meet a spectral monk or two.”

I surprised him; his mouth almost eased into a smile. “Lance and I spent our breaks from school chasing around the abbey hoping to surprise a phantom.”

“The ramparts at night?” I asked hopefully.

“Kept strictly locked. That possibility remains unexplored.”

One key question: “Are monks’ relics buried under these flagstones?”

He shook his head. “The cemetery consists of aboveground sepulchers, since the ground is frozen much of the year.”

“Deaths from pneumonia due to long sermons,” said I, nodding.

“Rumor has it that a half a century ago a footman froze to death when he was accidentally locked in the chapel,” Godric offered.

“A phantom footman joins the ranks of translucent clergy!”

He didn't smile, but his eyes almost did. "In warmer months, we spent hours searching the chapel for a secret passage that supposedly begins here."

I couldn't help grinning. "A secret passage! How marvelous."

"We never found a passage or a ghost, though the latter might be due to the monks' bones having been disinterred and sent to a different cemetery by Lance's grandfather."

My eyes widened. Their bodies were moved? *Surely* an indignant monk walked the corridors, perhaps without his head, if it had been lost in transit.

"Lance and I were certain that his grandfather's callousness would awake the dead," Godric said, one side of his mouth quirking up. "I believe the bones were dispatched to Edinburgh. Perhaps their owners couldn't find their way north."

He did have a sense of humor! I laughed.

His only response was to blink as if surprised. "You didn't marry Burnsby for money, did you?"

"Yes, I did," I said bluntly. "Like many women in my situation, I do not have the moral high ground."

His brow furrowed, as they say in novels, but as I wasn't eager to bare my heart to a total stranger, I began walking again. At the end of the chapel, Godric proceeded through a small vestry and shoved open a thick wooden door that led into a cloister, an open quadrangle bounded by a colonnade.

Mima was waiting for us under an arch that framed a substantial door. "This wing of the abbey was decrepit when Clifford's father bought it," she explained. "He rebuilt it to include a drawing room, a small parlor, a music room, and so on. You'll find it far more comfortable than the chapel. For one thing, rats nest in the older parts of the abbey."

I shuddered. I fake most ladylike feelings, but quivering whiskers and squinty eyes disgust me, and I'd never shared a dwelling with rodents.

"They avoid humans," Godric said, which was some comfort, I suppose.

Crumpsall ushered us into a beautifully appointed room, its carpet and Belgian tapestries depicting flowering meadows. I might have entered a London drawing room, but for the lingering odor of damp stone.

Mima led the way toward two sofas, while the butler removed a kettle of boiling water from the fire and poured it into a large teapot. I seated myself opposite a grandiose portrait of a buxom lady posed before a Roman ruin, forked lightning competing with the purple ostrich plumes jutting from her

wig. Presumably it depicted Burnsby's mother or one of his previous wives (I refused to lower myself to inquire).

To be frank, it was hideous. Only deep sentiment could explain its display, as that style of portraiture fell from favor at least forty years ago. Burnsby refers to his wives by number, not name; I suspected it portrayed his mother.

Leaving the tea steeping, Crumpsall deigned to escort Peony to the kitchen after I made him promise that the household—most particularly the cook—would be informed my piglet was not to be considered pork. Tess could bring her back to my room later in the day, after Peony's midmorning meal. (She was a growing baby, after all.)

Godric cleared his throat and turned to Mima. "You planned to share some information with Lady Burnsby?"

She peered at me. "Clifford didn't warn you, did he?"

"Warn me about what?" I began to pour out tea. It would improve with another five minutes, but breakfast tea had been hours ago. My sister judges me addicted, and she's right.

"About the occupants of the abbey."

I smiled as I handed her a teacup. "No, my husband didn't mention you, Aunt Mima, but I am most happy to make your acquaintance."

"Did Clifford mention his daughter?"

The daughter was news to me. *Debrett's Illustrated Peerage of the United Kingdom* hadn't mentioned offspring other than Lancelot. I set Godric's teacup down without filling it. "Daughter?" I echoed.

"His second wife, Hecuba, never regained her strength after giving birth to Ophelia," Mima explained. "The poor woman died that same day."

"Actually, it was three or four months later," Godric clarified.

Mima patted him on the arm. "You know my wretched memory, dear. At any rate, Ophelia was born early and remained so sickly that Clifford never bothered to register her or send her away to school. Consequently, Ophelia is a wee bit eccentric."

"Does she wish to be presented to the queen?" I asked, thinking that she must be nearly old enough to debut. Perhaps she and Rosie could attend court together.

"If so, she would debut from her half-brother's household, or mine. You will never be asked to polish her pig-herding skills," Godric said.

That was an insult that almost sounded like a joke.

“Did your wife travel with you?” I asked him, pouring his tea.

Mima piped up. “He hasn’t yet found one. Godric, you ought to ask Burnsby for advice. Just think of the way he has wooed one marvelous lady after another.”

“Yes, just think of that,” he said.

I cleared my throat. “I could review my unmarried acquaintances.” I let my expression convey my doubt that I knew any woman who could put up with his remarkable charm (yes, that was sarcastic).

“I shall persevere without your assistance. I’d prefer my wife didn’t have a pig as her companion.”

“You might try advertising in the *Times* for a fluffy kitten and hope a woman comes with it,” I retorted, handing over the teacup.

I was enjoying the exchange, but Mima intervened. “Genevieve, dear, I’m sorry to say that I must sully your ears with more unwelcome news.”

Her gaze went to the portrait and back to my face. “I do hope that you will take it better than the others. Weeping strains one’s throat, and fainting runs the risk of denting your skull. Godric, do you carry a flask?”

“I do not.”

Clearly, he wouldn’t catch me if I plummeted from my chair to the ground.

“The woman in that portrait is Burnsby’s mistress,” Mima said, “painted by the famous Roman portraitist, Pompeo Batoni.”

I questioned my own ears. I don’t faint and rarely weep, but . . . a painting of my husband’s mistress—in a building where I was residing? This was extraordinarily improper.

I was genuinely shocked. My husband is ruthlessly unkind in referring to fallen women, yet he commissioned a portrait of such a woman from a “famous” painter?

His other wives must have respected Batoni’s work enough to condone the artwork, but I would not. Even if Leonardo da Vinci himself wielded the paintbrush, that painting was moving to a cowshed.

Godric raised a hand, stopping me as I was about to rise from my chair. “She lives here, in the abbey.”

Three

If you ever need to disguise your emotions, follow our mother's advice: Don't move your eyebrows and don't fidget.

What?

She lives here? In the abbey? As the words slowly filtered into my mind, I began feeling sick.

No advice manual for ladies addressed this possibility. A mistress is a siren of vice, an irredeemable harlot, whereas a lady's purity is integral to her status. Consequently, that lady publicly ignores the existence of "fallen" women—and privately talks of little else. The notion that a lady could be expected to share her home with her husband's paramour was not just untenable but downright unthinkable.

Yet if there's one thing a gentlewoman learns at her mother's knee, it's how to hide her emotions.

Godric's gaze was fixed on my face.

I nodded. "I see."

His brow was puzzled rather than contemptuous. "The woman is an opera singer. A courtesan," he added, his voice softening.

Time to be blunt (my forte).

I met his eyes with a flat stare of my own. "I infer you consider my vocabulary deficient. A gentleman tucks his mistress in a house in Covent Garden, at best showering her in jewels, at worst bestowing a paltry allowance in exchange for private favors. A courtesan, on the other hand, may entertain as many gentlemen as she pleases in exchange for ready coin."

Seemingly stunned, he nodded silently.

"It seems that my husband's mistress has been tucked away in the Highlands. Since you mentioned weeping predecessors, Aunt Mima, might I conclude she has held her position for some years?"

"That portrait dates back to '76—"

The woman had been Burnsby's mistress for *thirty years*?

"—and she predates Hecuba. She's lived here through the tenure of two wives," Mima confirmed. "Three wives, now."

That was a facer, as they say in boxing. I choked back a curse, along with a strong impulse to box one of my husband's ears with a cobblestone. What a bastard he was. I'd heard plenty of gossip about Burnsby's supposedly murdered wives, but not a whisper about his longtime mistress.

I swallowed hard. "Have you always been tasked with explanations?"

"Oh, you know Clifford," Mima sighed. "He refuses to discuss unpleasant facts. I have taken it upon myself, ever since Sophonisba threw herself into Clifford's arms in front of his second wife. Hecuba was quite dismayed, as they were newlyweds."

"Sophonisba" must be the fallen woman.

"Why are you party to these unpleasant revelations?" I asked, turning to Godric.

"I was concerned that Mima might forget, leaving you as blindsided by meeting Sophonisba as was Hecuba," he replied. "Lance and I were boys, here on Christmas break from Eton. I would describe Hecuba as devastated, not dismayed."

"Your parents allowed you, a young gentleman, to visit the abbey while this woman was in residence?" (Yes, my voice was incredulous.)

His mouth twisted. "My parents had passed away, leaving Burnsby my guardian. I have never publicized his ungentlemanly behavior, because it would affect Ophelia's marital prospects."

True.

"I see," I managed.

"I thought a cup of tea might be calming before you meet her," Mima said.

Meet her?

In other words, she not only lived here, but we'd be in daily contact, as in sharing cups of tea? I was stunned into silence. I'd never heard of a lady living in proximity to her husband's mistress.

Mima clapped her hands. "How relieving that we needn't make further explanations! When I was young, mistresses were as alien to me as piglets."

My stomach curdled with a mixture of humiliation and rage. What could I do? Banish the mistress to the cowshed along with the portrait?

Presumably Burnsby wouldn't cooperate with that last option.

Banish *him* to the cowshed?

"Inasmuch as the lady shares both my husband's bedchamber and his musical talent, is she responsible for introducing him to 'A Virgin

Unspotted’?” I babbled. “If so, I shall have words with her.”

I was trying to sound sophisticated, but to be honest, I felt as if a boulder had settled on my chest. When Burnsby was courting me, he expressed a wish for a companion, which I translated (cynically) into the desire to show off a beautiful, young wife. I had assumed Burnsby was too old for marital intimacies. Apparently not.

Luckily, I had clarified before our wedding that I would never entertain him in private.

To wit: I was the only unspotted virgin in sight.

“Burnsby has adored Christmas hymns since boyhood,” Mima said, seeming taken aback. “They do enjoy crooning together in the music room.”

Godric winced, but she didn’t appear to be using “crooning” euphemistically. Still, the music room was obviously a location to be avoided.

“You take such an open-minded view of the matter,” she added with an approving nod. “You are far more liberal than Clifford’s previous wives.”

“Liberality is easy when one’s emotions are not involved,” Godric remarked.

Burnsby hadn’t twigged to my apathy in seven months of marriage, but this stranger was more perceptive. Apathetic or not, I had considered Burnsby my friend. I had been delusional. It didn’t help that it seemed I was the third woman to fall for the illusion.

“When I summon him, Burnsby will escort Sophonisba here to meet you,” Mima said, in yet another deeply unwelcome announcement.

Retreating to my bedchamber would be spineless. “I’ve never met a fallen woman. I’m . . . agog,” I said.

I caught Godric’s eyes; condescension had been replaced by pity. Who would have imagined pity was harder to stomach?

I had understood my life. Yes, I had married an old man for his fortune. Yes, I was scorned by bystanders. But I knew, inside, that my reasons for marriage were good ones. And again, I had believed—firmly believed—that my husband respected me.

Sharing a dining room table with my husband’s courtesan, something that would make any lady faint? A woman whom my husband had unaccountably failed to warn me about during seven months of marriage? This was the opposite of respect.

I drew a searing breath into my lungs, raised my chin, and straightened my back. “Aunt Mima, please fetch Lord Burnsby.”

After she left, I offered Godric more tea, trying to pretend I was unmoved. “Have you searched for that lost passage as an adult?” I kept my eyes on the teapot because my hands were shaking. “Perhaps I shall investigate.” I’m proud to say that my voice sounded almost normal.

“You could search the chapel, though not through the front doors. It took four grooms to push them open this morning. Burnsby always wants a fuss for his latest wife.” Godric’s tone was matter-of-fact.

I returned his cup. “Were you in residence for his third wife’s arrival as well?”

He nodded. “Since Burnsby was my guardian, I spent my Christmas holidays here. I was twelve when Hecuba visited the abbey, and sixteen when Alice, his third wife, arrived.”

“I cannot believe that Lord Burnsby’s daughter has been raised in this household, in light of its occupancy, not to mention the widespread belief that her mother was murdered.”

Godric’s lips quirked. “I’ve heard that gossip, but you needn’t fear for your safety. The only person who would care enough to murder one of Burnsby’s wives would be Sophonisba, and no one has battled her for supremacy.”

I couldn’t imagine fighting for my despicable husband.

But for my dignity? Perhaps.

“I knew Hecuba well,” Godric said. “She hadn’t the constitution for a battle.”

“Did she faint?”

(I might faint. I was certain etiquette required a faint.)

“No.” He put down his cup. “She was heartbroken. She wept.”

My so-called husband had a lot to answer for.

Godric abruptly reached out and wrapped a large hand around mine. I stared blankly down at blunt fingers that bore no resemblance to my husband’s slender digits.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sounding as if he meant it. “If Lancelot didn’t live in Paris, he would have warned you before the wedding. Hell, *I* would have told you, but the announcement in the *Times* caught both of us off guard.”

“Our decision to marry was sudden.” My fingers trembled inside his grasp, and my eyes stung with tears—not because of the shock or

humiliation, but because he was being kind. Decent.

The sympathy of a stranger didn't solve anything.

I rose to my feet when the door opened. The subject of the portrait walked in, albeit thirty years older. Irrelevant thoughts ran through my head: Did she always wear plumes? Was that smile triumphant? How could my husband regard me with placid arrogance, at the very moment he broke every rule of polite society?

"May I introduce Miss Sophonisba Ainsworth?" Burnsby asked, without even a shard of embarrassment. "She is a longtime friend and an opera singer famous throughout the Continent."

I clasped my hands before me. "Good afternoon," I said, nodding (not coldly: that would be too revealing, but not curtsying either).

Nor fainting.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Sophonisba said in a throaty rumble, her curtsy making the feathers attached to her bonnet wave back and forth.

I gestured toward the tea tray and asked, "May I offer you refreshment?"

She blinked. I held her gaze. *I* was the lady of the household, despite the garish portrait behind me.

In one of the world's most awkward gatherings, Sophonisba and Burnsby seated themselves on one sofa, facing me and Godric on the other. Mima had disappeared now that her role in this farce was concluded. Or perhaps she'd forgotten to return.

As I poured stewed tea for my husband and his paramour, I had the unnerving sense that the world was trembling beneath my feet. Still, I am an Englishwoman. In the event of an earthquake, I would offer tea.

I put sugar in Burnsby's tea—which he loathed—and handed it to him.

Revenge tea.

Unfortunately, it was hard to overlook the fact that my husband's gaze was fastened to the mountain range of bosom bared by his lover's scanty bodice.

It wasn't her fault, I reminded myself. It was Burnsby's. That conclusion didn't assuage my anger.

"Miss Ainsworth has performed at the finest of Europe's opera houses," he announced. "Vienna, Florence, Paris . . . She can sing in every language."

"*L'amour* is the same, no matter the tongue," Sophonisba said. And then, more expansively: "As we are in life, while singing I was always grieving,

loving, or . . . *longing*.” She cast Burnsby a languishing glance.

Godric’s revolted response to Sophonisba’s summary of life’s signal emotions suggested he planned to avoid all three.

I felt a faint germ of cheer. “You appear perturbed, Sir Godric. I hope your sour expression doesn’t reflect a broken heart? Perhaps anguish due to a lost love?”

Sophonisba snorted. “Godric is not a man any woman could love.”

Bloody hell, that was rude.

No woman could love him?

In comparison to Burnsby, Godric had been a perfect gentleman, showing sympathy for my distress even as my own husband was acting as if his wife’s life had not taken a right turn into horror.

What’s more, Godric’s chest and shoulders (and hands), if nothing else, might dazzle a lady into thinking him a hero, not a villain.

I cleared my throat, uncertain how to respond. Burnsby—a man who readily spits out unforgiving critiques of vulgarity—was gazing at Sophonisba without reproach, smiling as if her insult was humorous.

“Godric hates women,” she continued. “Even as a boy, he was a snapping turtle. Snap! Snap! Snap! I was always grateful when he and Lancelot returned to Eton. Or was it Harrow? One of those places that warehouses boys.”

“I repent my boyhood sins, Miss Ainsworth,” Godric drawled.

As his hostess, I had a duty to defend my guest, no matter how unbothered he appeared to be. “Any lady would be delighted to be courted by Sir Godric. I have heard of his remarkable triumphs in the courtroom, and he is beloved by the king.”

Godric quirked an eyebrow, perfectly aware that an hour ago I didn’t know him from Adam.

“Since he grew up in my household, I do take credit when His Majesty praises Sir Godric’s barristerial skills,” Burnsby said.

Sophonisba rolled her eyes and burped out a piece of advice for me. “Frankly, I suggest you keep your distance. Snap! Snap! Snap!”

“Lancelot should have joined us for tea,” my husband said fretfully.

I was shocked to the bone by Burnsby’s nonchalance. Did he think he could house the two of us under one roof without an explosion? Or even an explanation?

Sophonisba slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. “Tish and pish to that frown! Lance only arrived a short time ago. He is surely making his toilette before the evening meal, since he takes after his papa in that respect.” She reached up and tapped his chin. “Though he’ll never be as elegant as you, sugar lips.”

Sugar lips? True, my husband favored a slick of lip color, but as I registered Burnsby’s smile, I was only a breath away from screaming, “Hogwash!”

Godric leaned over and murmured, “Don’t take it personally.”

My husband was whispering endearments into Sophonisba’s ear, suggesting he appreciated her patent vulgarity.

“Why on earth wouldn’t I?” I hissed. “*Sugar lips?*”

“She predates his last two wives,” he reminded me.

Godric’s eyes were a dark gray green, not villainous black. Not that it mattered.

“The Tower of London predates Kensington Palace, but that doesn’t mean the king wants to live there,” I told him.

This felt like a nightmare. To this point, my decision to marry a septuagenarian had been rewarded by Burnsby’s pride in having a beautiful wife. I saw no sign of that now.

I had to grow a thicker skin.

Or get a divorce. Unfortunately, the mere existence of a mistress would never convince the House of Lords to grant a divorce; their wives might get ideas.

Sophonisba caught my eye. “The sun is over the yardarm,” she squealed. “Time for a drinky-poo!” She waved at Crumpsall, as if she were in charge.

Her gesture was baldly challenging, like the dropped kerchief that opens a jousting tournament—except I didn’t care to enter any tournament that offered Burnsby as the prize.

A “drinky-poo” turned out to be a hearty slug of port, a wine I dislike and which, moreover, is offered only at the conclusion of a meal. I took a sip and began coughing. The port was too sweet, with a rancid aftertaste.

“An excellent vintage,” Sophonisba said shrilly. “My favorite.”

Godric put down his glass.

In preparation for the birthday celebration, I had shipped cases of brandy, wine, and cacao nibs for drinking chocolate straight from France. I glanced at the butler, who seemed to be pretending he was on a different continent.

“Crumpsall, please decant one of the bottles of port I sent ahead. We shall enjoy it after the evening meal.”

A silence fell on our little tea party, until Burnsby began prattling about the prime minister. He never offers an opinion that hasn’t been uttered in his presence at least forty times, and his twittering required no more fuel than the odd coo from Sophonisba.

He monologued for fifteen minutes before announcing that he planned to change into a kilt for the evening meal. That caught my attention.

A kilt?

I managed not to gape. Burnsby may have inherited two Scottish estates, but he is an Englishman through and through. I have no desire to see his knees unclothed, and I can say with confidence that my opinion is shared by the populace. My father, for one, described Burnsby as having chicken limbs but no beak. Unkind but not untrue, given my husband’s favorite yellow pantaloons and lack of chin.

“I would be grateful if you would escort me to my chamber, Lord Burnsby,” I exclaimed, jumping up before Sophonisba could prance off arm in arm with my husband.

For one thing, I wanted to ensure that our chambers were separated by more than a door. One thick wall would do, but several would be better; I have no wish to overhear reunion celebrations.

And for another . . . my spouse and I needed to talk in private.

Obviously.

Four

If you ever have the opportunity to attend a house party with your spouse and his mistress, consid
— Scratch this one. The guidance is irrelevant. Your husband will have eyes only for you.

Godric had excellent manners. He rose the moment I did, whereas Burnsby had to wrestle free the hand he'd concealed under Sophonisba's bottom.

Back out in the cloister, Burnsby led me around the colonnade to the left. He identified doors leading to the buttery and the breakfast parlor before I lost patience.

"Why the *devil* didn't you tell me about your . . . about Sophonisba Ainsworth's place in your life?"

He gave me an affronted stare. "How extraordinarily rude of you to curse, Lady Burnsby. Why would I? Such matters are beneath your notice."

"The fact I just encountered the woman in question—and am spending Christmas in her company—makes her difficult to overlook!"

"You are a maiden. I didn't raise the subject out of concern for your innocence," he said piously. "Years ago, I solemnly promised to visit Sophie for at least a month every year of my life, a vow that I consider as honorable an obligation as any other."

Sophie?

"You adore her," I said slowly.

Burnsby stiffened. "*Adoration* is not an emotion experienced by gentlemen, certainly not for a woman of that type."

"The type being fallen or vulgar?"

"I did once contemplate marrying Sophie, until luckily my father brought me to my senses. Vulgarly can be transmitted in the blood, you know. I owed more to my name."

I had never considered my husband cruel, but seeing his chilly expression, the way his jaw wrinkled around his pursed lips?

I had been wrong.

He moved his cane to his right hand so he could pat my shoulder. "A gentleman's private affairs have no relevance to his wife. Such a woman

has uses that you could not understand. *You* deserve and receive all my respect.”

I shied from his touch and decided to change the subject. “I was startled to hear that you own a kilt.”

“My mother designed the tartan,” Burnsby said, trading his cane again. I had noticed that his left side was weaker than the right.

“Will you carry a claymore?” I inquired.

Burnsby frowned at my less-than-respectful tone. “I shall wear a dagger tucked into my hose. In public I occasionally wear a dirk, a longer blade. I assure you that I cut a fine figure in skirts.”

He threw me a vexed glance when I missed the cue to affirm his appeal. Yesterday I would have complied. Today I narrowed my eyes.

“The tartan will complement your green evening gown,” Burnsby said before launching into “Joy to the World.”

Halfway around the second side of the cloister, he pushed open the door to a cozy chamber. Its walls were draped in thick woolen tapestries depicting pastoral scenes. Opposite the bed was a wall cupboard large enough for a queen’s wardrobe. A tin tub and a petite dressing table stood to one side of the fireplace and two comfortable chairs to the other.

“Here we are. Your chamber is not of a size with those in our other establishments, but the fireplace keeps it warm, even in the depths of winter. The lodge can be chilly.”

I nodded.

“The bell to the left rings in the servants’ hall, the former rectory, and will summon a footman. The bell to the right will summon your maid during the night.”

I assumed Burnsby would leave directly, since I had taken some pains to train him not to linger in my private chamber. Instead, he posed himself in the middle of the room, both hands on his cane, his face grave.

“While I was startled by your unladylike profanity, Lady Burnsby, I forgive you, since your affection for me runs so deep. Your heart is bruised.”

I sank down on the bed and repressed any number of unhelpful comments.

“When I am here, I am particularly attentive to Sophie, to make up for my absence eleven months of the year. After the holiday, my devotion will be entirely yours once again.”

Without waiting for my response, he said, “I wish to mention one other extraordinary circumstance.”

“Your daughter?”

He blinked, and said, “Ophelia? You needn’t bother with her. I’m afraid that my daughter has grown up so obstinate and peculiar that governesses have been reluctant to remain in my employ.”

Burnsby’s face took on an expression of pained resignation. “My daughter is a blemished offshoot of the family tree. I would never sully another gentleman’s lineage by dowering her.”

Then and there I decided that Burnsby would give his daughter the same generous dowry that he had bestowed on Rosie.

“No, the issue I wish to discuss,” my husband continued, having blithely consigned his only daughter to the life of a nun, “relates to phantasmic apparitions. I’m sure you have heard reports about my previous wives haunting Burnsby Lodge.”

I nodded, still wrestling with the question of whether Ophelia and Rosie might debut together. Perhaps her half-brother would assist, if Burnsby proved reluctant to allow Ophelia to move to London.

“Alas, it is true,” he said heavily. “As you know, all three of my wives died here, and astral bodies do wander the abbey. I myself have witnessed my second wife traversing the library, most often as a flutter of skirts from the corner of my eye, but once in full garb, her hair tossed by an invisible breeze.”

I straightened up. “You have seen Hecuba? In the library, not on the ramparts?”

“She was very fond of reading.”

“You— You recognized her?”

My mind boggled. I enjoy a ghost story as much as the next reader, but in my heart of hearts, I don’t believe in them. Yet I would have sworn that my husband had no imagination at all. If he saw a phantom, she must have been there.

“Unmistakably,” Burnsby confirmed. “I entreated her to speak, asked if any good thing might be done to ease her passage to the next world, but she melted into the shadows like the last ray of light as dusk falls. My second wife is now an uneasy spirit, forced to walk the night.”

Perhaps I’d underestimated his imagination. No, he must have stolen that description from a novel. Except he had never read a book, to the best of

my knowledge. He didn't even read the newspaper.

Could he truly have met a ghost?

"I am proud to have kept my countenance," he added. "It isn't every day that one communes with a spirit, but my Etonian training proved useful."

"Eton trained you to address ghosts?" I couldn't keep the skepticism from my voice.

"Etonians are taught to keep their countenance no matter the riffraff they encounter, whether beggars or highwaymen."

(Burnsby was associating his dead wife with "riffraff," but I sensed he wouldn't be pleased if I pointed that out.)

"In light of your ladylike response to meeting Sophie, I have little fear that you will succumb to hysterics." He gave me an approving smile.

"Have other people encountered Hecuba?" I asked.

"My third wife also met our resident ghost. Reportedly, she, too, haunts the library. Since my encounter with Hecuba, I never enter the room."

I resolved to find the library at the earliest opportunity.

"Where is your bedchamber?" I asked.

"I reside on the far side of the second garden, in a chamber known as Abbot's Hall."

That sounded reassuringly far away.

After he left, I kicked off my shoes and walked to the window. A wintry sky cast silvery light over a large garden bedded down with straw. Past the garden lay the cemetery Godric had mentioned: eight mausoleums lined up against the thick outer wall.

A fearful idea occurred to me: Did Burnsby's three former wives lie together in one of those tombs? Or was each wife interred in her own sepulcher? My hand clenched on the thick curtains before I abruptly yanked them closed, blocking the sight.

This was ridiculous. I was at risk of confusing life and literature, as absurd as comparing Burnsby's neglected daughter with Hamlet's jilted beloved simply because they shared the name Ophelia.

I padded over to the bed and lay down, staring up at its canopy. My heart was thudding a sickening rhythm in my chest. I tried to comfort myself with thoughts of Rosie's dowry, but this time it didn't help.

I had assumed that Burnsby was kind, respectful, gentle. As a young girl, I had memorized the rules that governed life before and (supposedly) after marriage, the ones promising that a gentleman's wife is respected above all

others. That a gentleman devotes his life to sheltering her delicate soul from encounters with bastards and courtesans.

Those books lied.

Burnsby lied.

He had blithely introduced three wives to his mistress and an illegitimate relative. He had discarded his daughter like a spoiled apple. His surface propriety slicked over utter disrespect for the women in his life.

Had I been too foolish to understand that the “polite” world didn’t exist? Why had I believed the twaddle about propriety and respect? The “rules” were no more valid than marriage vows. I drew in a shaky breath. Now I knew what Burnsby was like. I knew who he *really* was. He wasn’t my partner nor my friend.

What an idiot I’d been. Godric’s compassionate gaze came into my head. He’d grasped how blind I’d been. I felt like screaming from rage and, frankly, from loneliness. I had never felt more isolated in my life.

My only friends were my maid, my sister, and a possible ghost.

It felt like hyperbole to include the ghost, but considering how much we had in common? I claimed her.

Oh, and a pig.

Five

If you ever wish for carefree affection, consider adopting a piglet. Peony is curious, intelligent, and caring. She is far more intelligent than any dog I've encountered and twice as loving as any cat.

A burst of searing humiliation brought on the tears I'd held at bay; I cried myself into a nap and woke to find Peony rooting around my bed. Thankfully, cuddling with her was excellent medicine.

Tess waited until I had bathed, and my hair had been arranged in a style more suited to a London ballroom than a hunting lodge, before she cleared her throat, regarding me with the pained expression of a personal maid in possession of disagreeable information.

I headed her off. "I have met Sophonisba Ainsworth and been informed of her position in the household."

"You *met* her?" She gaped at me. "You're so calm! You haven't said a word!"

"I haven't decided what to do," I confessed.

"If we're leaving," Tess said briskly, "it must be at dawn. Normally the abbey is snowed in by this date."

The idea of being unable to leave was awful—but would it be cowardice to run away? Burnsby would still be my husband, whether I hid in my room or ran back to England.

I was wrestling with that thought when Tess asked, "Did Lord Burnsby tell you that Miss Mima was born out of wedlock?"

I nodded. "She seems to have memory problems."

"She greeted me as her sister!" my maid exclaimed. "Miss Wellington says the lady can't remember a thing from one day to the next. They baked her an apple tart every day in September, and the next morning she would claim not to have eaten one in months. And just imagine: Miss Wellington says that the lady doesn't even *like* apple tarts!"

"There are no yesterdays in Mima's life," I said.

"And no tomorrows, either," Tess said.

We were silent as she laced my corset.

“Mima called Sir Godric her son and asked if he was at school, then mentioned watching him argue a legal case a decade ago,” I said, thinking of his broad shoulders. He had that air some men have, as if they could solve any problem, from a thrown carriage wheel to a marauding ghost.

If only he could solve my problems by rolling back time. The calculation I’d made on marrying Burnsby seemed woefully foolish now. Rosie would be horrified.

“This is a wicked house, Genevieve, and no mistake,” Tess said. “Did you know that the master’s valet is Crumpsall’s son? He should have warned us!”

“Burnsby likely commanded him to keep silent.”

“That’s no excuse,” Tess retorted, with some justification. “Not a soul said a word to me. Not a word!”

Burnsby’s valet knew. All the grooms, the footmen, the housekeeper knew. Those villagers tittering at me? Their mockery wasn’t merely because they scorned me for marrying an old man. They understood I was about to come face-to-face with my husband’s mistress. They likely thought I got what I deserved, having married an old man for money.

I wrenched my mind away from an embittering—unhelpful—sense of betrayal. No, I wouldn’t fire all of them, because that would be unkind. Satisfying, but unkind.

“I only pressed one evening dress in case you wish to leave.” Tess held up a gown sewn from layers and layers of lilac gauze, a spill of silk lilies trailing down the front.

I groaned. “That’s fit for a reception at Kensington Palace, not a cobwebbed abbey.”

“I took a cup of tea with the Parisian bride’s maid, Fleur. Her mistress has a trunk merely for fans and gloves.”

In other words, I would dress to royal standards or shame my maid.

Earlier in the day, I’d been curious about Burnsby’s heir and his French wife. I had thought of them as family, new family. Now I realized that they weren’t. Like everyone connected to my husband, they were enemies.

Had they laughed about my coming humiliation, knowing that *she* lived here and that I’d be meeting her? My breath grew tight, and my stomach cramped.

No.

Godric said that Lancelot would have warned me, so my son-in-law hadn't laughed on hearing of his father's new marriage. I took a deep breath. I had debuted without a dowry, curtsied before the queen in a gown first worn by my grandmother. I had backbone—and if the evening was utterly humiliating, I *would* get in a carriage at dawn.

Burnsby couldn't keep me here.

Tess gathered up the fabric to throw it over my head without disarranging my hair. "I can accept Miss Mima, even if she was born on the wrong side of the blanket," she said broodingly. "After all, we *are* in the back of beyond, without a village for miles. I'd be sad to think of the poor confused soul confined to an asylum. But Ainsworth is another cup of tea."

I emerged from a cloud of translucent gauze. The gown bared my shoulders, arms, and most of my bosom. It was designed to be worn with a simple chemise and short stays, giving the illusion that I was almost naked.

Which I was.

I would never have worn something so suggestive before I married, but my husband insisted on choosing the design of my gowns. He likes to foreground my "charms," as he calls them. I found low bodices embarrassing, but I accepted them as part of our bargain: Rosie's dowry in exchange for a young, desirable wife.

(In case you're wondering, my chest doesn't measure up to Sophonisba's.)

I picked up a length of lace and tied it around my neck so that it flowed down my front, blending with the lilies as if designed to be worn together.

Tess pursed her lips. "I don't suppose you're worried about a chill."

"I am never ill, but I intend to ward off comparisons."

"I had an eyeful of Ainsworth when she came down to consult with Miss Wellington about the dinner menu." Tess held my eyes long enough to make clear her opinion of Sophonisba's temerity in taking over duties belonging to the mistress of the household.

"She has a fine pair of kettledrums, as my granddad would say, but on display during the day? *Vulgar*," she said with a disdainful curl of her lip. "They said downstairs that Lord Burnsby's father had to drag him down the aisle the second time, all due to that woman. He wanted to marry her, if you can credit it. What a scandal that would have been."

"Burnsby has made up for lost time, taking another three wives in thirty years," I pointed out.

I liked the unusual effect of the lace tied around my neck, since my arms and shoulders were bare. I began fiddling with my jewelry, wondering if Sophonisba would consider diamonds a challenge. I did not want to take a header from a parapet due to jealousy over accessories.

Tess solved the question by taking a diamond cluster from my hand and pinning it into my chignon, along with another for good measure. "There," she said with satisfaction. "You'll sparkle as brightly as any Frenchwoman." She had piled my hair high, with silk lilies tucked here and there, and the diamonds caught sparks of light.

I resembled a paper doll, my face composed, hiding my violently beating heart.

"I believe Peony would enjoy a short walk," I said. I didn't have the courage to join the others in the drawing room yet. What if I walked in to find Sophonisba lurking? Would she have advice other than that stemming from her dislike of Godric? Tips and quips about how to make "sugar lips" happy on his birthday?

Hearing her name, my piggy emerged from under the bed, her nose covered in dust. Tess picked up a cloth and gave her a quick buff. "Be sure to stay in the cloister, as Mr. Crumpsall says the woods are full of wolves. The beasts hide beneath wagons entering the gates and slink into the outer courtyard."

I would have imagined no less. The forest looming outside the abbey walls was gloomy and dark, just as described by every respectable novelist. If fiction depicted life, we would hear eerie howling at night as ravenous animals ringed the abbey. Something to look forward to . . . because so far?

This party was not fun. A madwoman in the attic would have been more enjoyable than a mistress in the parlor.

Tess fetched my thickest mantle, adorned with squirrel fur around the sleeves and hood. "Can you imagine? The household runs around the cloister day and night, out in the freezing air in no more than a frock and apron!"

"Why don't they wear outer garments?" I asked.

She made a face. "His lordship says cloaks detract from the footmen's livery. 'It's only a matter of a few minutes in the cold,' he says."

My husband had never exhibited sympathy for those of lower station, but that was absurd.

“You will wear outer garments whenever you venture outside,” I ordered. “I’ll speak to Miss Wellington tomorrow morning about the household at large. We can hang woolen cloaks next to every door.”

She smiled, buttoning the mantle to my chin. “You’ll be the toast of the servants’ hall.”

“What do they think of the situation?”

“They despise it,” Tess said promptly. “If Ainsworth thinks a servant gave her the side-eye, she sacks them, and the butler backs her up without question. The other day she dismissed a footman because he had a rash on his chin. Miss Wellington said they don’t bother appealing to Crumpsall. He’s been here longer than anyone, and the master never doubts him.”

(Villainous domestic servant: *Check!*)

I sighed and made a mental note to rehire the poor footman. “Has anyone shown you the location of the library?”

“Follow the cloister to the right; the library doors are carved with vines. In case you haven’t heard, all three wives supposedly flit among the books,” Tess said, rolling her eyes. “Miss Wellington dusts the room herself, because the maids cross themselves walking by the door and refuse to enter.”

“Were I a ghost, I would congregate with my fellows,” I said.

Tess snorted. “Nonsense! Fleur and I promised Miss Wellington that we’d give the books a proper dusting, if only to prove that the English and French are braver than the Scots.”

Yet I was a coward, quailing at the idea of walking into the drawing room.

Tess saw through me. She caught up my hand and squeezed it. “The two ladies I served before you would have been in hysterics, but you look as serene as ever. No one will be able to guess your feelings.”

I managed a weak smile in response.

Six

If you ever encounter a pale-faced child haunting a library, don't assume she's childlike. Or a ghost.

The library was a generously sized room, its Gothic windows obscured by stone tracery. Yet oil lamps fixed to the walls made it reasonably bright, and two fireplaces kept it warm.

The closest bookshelf to the door held Latin tomes. I wandered to a double-sided podium displaying a leather-bound family Bible on one side. The volume was heavy, its cover and spine adorned with gilt, with the Burnsby coat of arms embossed on the cover.

I turned from the Bible to a Book of Hours lying open on the other side of the podium, its pages illustrated with sly dragons and crimson poppies. I dropped Peony's leash and began turning the pages.

When I glanced up, the piglet had disappeared into the rows of bookcases that jutted from the opposite wall. "Peony!" I called.

Being an obedient piggy, she oinked from the shadows. I followed the sound and found Peony gazing up at a young person curled in an armchair. Surely this was Burnsby's daughter. She appeared to be thirteen or fourteen years old, very thin, wearing an unflattering, girlish gown of bleached wool. Black hair tumbled around her shoulders in disarray, and she frowned at me from under bushy eyebrows.

She had been leaning forward, trying to coax Peony to approach, but she stood when I appeared and gave me a perfunctory curtsy. "You must be the new wife."

"What an unenthusiastic greeting," I observed. "You must be Ophelia."

"Do you wish me to address you as Lady Burnsby? I have this awful sense of déjà vu."

Her French accent sounded impeccable to my untutored ear. I hesitate to say anything aloud in that language, having taught myself to read it without hearing it spoken.

"Genevieve will do," I replied.

"Didn't Lord Burnsby inform you that I'm a debased branch on the family tree?" She picked up Peony and sat back down, my piglet in her lap.

“Alice, the wife before you, averted her eyes whenever I walked by.”

“How ill-bred,” I said flatly.

“She did the same thing to Aunt Mima, even though my poor aunt believed Alice was her sister. Half the time Mima thinks *I’m* her sister.” With a belligerent air, she added, “My aunt has to create an imaginary sister, since bloody Burnsby is her only sibling.”

I sat down opposite and gave her a look.

She fidgeted.

I kept my silence.

“Oh, all right,” she burst out. “I apologize! I shouldn’t discuss your husband in pejorative terms.”

“More to the point, he’s your father. But excellent use of *pejorative*. Mima truly thinks you’re her sister, not her daughter?”

Ophelia nodded. “I’m fourteen, so it would make more sense if I were her daughter, but she’s often confused. Just so you know, she is more likely to respond correctly to a limited question with an answer of yes or no.” Seeing *I* was confused, she added, “If I ask, ‘Do you have a sister?’, Aunt Mima will say yes and beam at me. But if I ask, ‘Am I your sister?’, Aunt Mima most likely would say, ‘No, dear. You’re Hecuba’s daughter.’”

“That’s unusual.” But what did I know of addled brains? Nothing.

“She can’t remember most things day to day.” Ophelia started scratching Peony under the chin. “Is this a boy pig or a girl pig?”

“She’s a sow, the runt of the litter.”

“Of course! She’s missing those ridiculous bits that hang off male bodies.” Ophelia caught my eye again. “What? Am I supposed to ignore the undercarriage of a horse?”

The proper answer would be yes (balls and bubonic plague, remember?). “Most young girls are not so observant,” I ventured.

“I grew up *here*,” Ophelia said, her emphasis presumably referring to Sophonisba. “I have also read a great many tragedies, which have aged me.”

I smiled at her incredibly youthful face. “How did they age you?”

“Have you read Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*?”

I shook my head.

“Rape, murder, revenge. Tamora eats a pie made from her children.”

“I spent my girlhood reading guides to civilized behavior,” I confessed.

Ophelia rolled her eyes. "I needn't bother with those, since I live in the abbey."

"Don't you ever leave?"

"No."

I was stunned. It was immoral to keep a girl penned up in the mountains. "Now that I'm here, you needn't stay. You can leave with me."

She gave me a pitying look. "Burnsby won't allow that. Have you been married very long?"

"Seven months," I said, thinking that it felt like a decade.

"No one tells him what to do."

"Then I shall be the first."

She giggled at my dry tone. "I can't imagine that Father appreciates your sense of humor."

True. We had discovered that on our second day of married life.

"What are you reading?"

"*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*," she said, eyeing me, as well she might, since the novel celebrates adultery. Lending libraries frequented by ladies never offer translations.

"Do you speak French as well as read it?" I asked, wondering if she, too, had taught herself.

"My aunt tutored me before she became too forgetful." Ophelia stuck out her chin. "I'm reading it for the third time. I *adore* the Viscount of Valmont."

"I prefer the Marquise of Merteuil, especially the moment when she claims that she was born to avenge women and master men."

"Alice would have fainted if I'd mentioned adultery," Ophelia said. "She was so ladylike that it was challenging for her nerves to be in this house."

I felt a pang of sympathy. The abbey must have been a miserable experience for a woman afflicted by ladylike sensibilities.

Even I was close to miserable.

No, I *was* miserable.

"I shall not reprimand you for reading a book describing such liaisons, since you grew up with Sophonisba Ainsworth," I said.

"I learned about adultery when I was six years old," Ophelia announced, waggling her brows as she took another stab at shocking me. "Before that, I didn't understand Sophonisba and my father's relationship. My mother was a lady." Her hands tightened on the book.

She looked both shamed and hurt, though it was her father's sin, not hers. I decided on the spot that her favorite novel was a good way to discuss adultery. "You know all the fuss in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* about doors: always ajar, closed, locked, or smashed open, with everything intriguing concealed behind one?"

She nodded.

"In my experience—"

From behind me, a deep voice said, "Ought you to be sharing inappropriate reminiscences with a young girl, Lady Burnsby?"

I had been so focused on the conversation that I hadn't heard anyone enter the library. Godric strolled forward, folded his arms over his chest, and frowned at me.

"Sir Godric," I said, serene mask locked in place. "Ophelia and I are discussing a French literary masterpiece."

"She was consoling me," Ophelia said. "After all, I have grown up in a den of iniquity."

"An exaggeration, surely," Godric said, but his eyes were wary.

"Ophelia's father and brother allowed her to grow up in company with a fallen woman."

(Godric's jaw tightened, because—guess what—I was right.)

"My father thinks his name would be tarnished if I were known to exist." Ophelia capped that observation with a shrug intended to convey indifference. "Aren't you both supposed to be in the drawing room? I'm sure I heard the gong."

"I've been trying to find you, Ophelia," Godric said. "I hoped we could meet Lance's bride together."

She shook her head. "I'm not welcome in the drawing room. Can I keep Peony with me?" My piggy had taken the opportunity to nap, her nose snuggled blissfully against the girl's middle. "I'm sure she'd like to visit the nursery."

"Who has made you feel unwelcome?" Godric said, his scowl suggesting that he was thinking of Sophonisba Ainsworth.

"Lord Burnsby instructed me to avoid his presence whenever he is in residence," Ophelia reported. "I'm supposed to stay in the nursery."

Godric appeared shocked into momentary silence.

"Nonsense." I stood up. "You can be my ally."

"Your what?" Ophelia asked.

“My friend in time of need.” I bent down and scooped up my piglet. “Let’s drop Peony in my chamber. I’ll brush your hair, and you can escort me to the drawing room to greet Miss Ainsworth and the young Burnsby bride.”

Godric cocked an eyebrow. “Young, as opposed to?”

I ignored him because at twenty-five, I was supposedly young, but I felt as old as my husband.

Ophelia frowned. “You need a friend because Sophonisba stole my father? I think of her as—”

Godric interrupted. “Some things are better left unsaid.”

“I disagree. Plain speaking helps.” I turned back to Ophelia. “I feel humiliated by Miss Ainsworth’s presence, and I’d be grateful for your company.”

“Why should *you* be humiliated?” she demanded, scrambling to her feet, her book tucked under her arm. “*He* has the concubine, not you.”

(The very point I was planning to raise through discussion of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*!)

“*Concubine* is not accurate,” Godric remarked as we walked from the room. “Concubines are biblical figures, sometimes taken as second wives.”

Sophonisba basically *was* a second wife. And I, therefore, the fifth.

Thankfully, Ophelia was not concerned with semantics. “I’ll come with you to the drawing room, but I don’t care to have my hair brushed, and I’m definitely not joining you for dinner.”

“Being well groomed is the best armor against impertinence.” The moment I rattled off that decree, I remembered that my impeccable chignon had never discouraged criticism of my marital choices.

Yet another rule disproved.

“My eyebrows are untamable,” Ophelia said. “I’ll never be well groomed.”

“I like them.”

She turned to me, incredulous. “You do?”

“Mine are invisible, so my maid draws them in with charcoal.”

Godric made a choked sound, which confirmed—I suppose—a sense of humor. I stepped forward and trod deliberately on the back of his shoe.

“I will never have to use charcoal,” Ophelia said with some satisfaction.

“Exactly.”

Thankfully, Tess was still in my bedchamber, because I wasn't sanguine about my ability to tame Ophelia's hair—or my own, for that matter. Even as successive governesses stormed away in a huff, my father had managed to keep a personal maid for myself and Rosie.

"Ophelia, may I introduce you to my maid, Tess? The household knows her as Hughes, but I consider myself lucky to count her as a friend."

"Good evening, Miss Burnsby," Tess said, her eyes widening as she took in the tousled hair, battered boots, and dingy gown—especially around the waist, where Peony had snuggled.

"You could call me Ophelia, if you'd like," the girl offered.

Tess gave her a warm smile. "Hello, Ophelia. They tell me in the kitchens that you're one of the few people courageous enough to enter the library."

Godric cleared his throat. "My chamber is next door, if you would like me to escort you both to the drawing room. As an ally," he added, meeting my eyes.

"Crumpsall gave him the room that my father used to occupy until he moved into the second courtyard," Ophelia reported.

"We can make our own way to the drawing room, but may I beg you to return Peony to the kitchens?" I said to Godric, holding out her leash. "After which, please inform Crumpsall and Lord Burnsby that Ophelia and I will be tardy. You can have a 'drinky-poo' with the other guests."

He gave me one of his impatient frowns, muttering, "God save me." But he took the leash. "Come along." Peony snuffled his ankle and obeyed.

Once we had the room to ourselves, I unbuttoned my mantle and threw it off. "Would it be acceptable if Tess brushed your hair?"

Ophelia seemed transfixed by my gown, but she nodded.

"How would you feel about changing your frock, perhaps into one of a different color? I'm afraid Peony left some dust in her wake."

"All my gowns are white, except the black dress that I wore to Alice's funeral. My father said it turned me into a bony crow. Besides, I've grown, and the hem would be above my ankles."

I couldn't wait to inform Burnsby that he resembled a bony crow in his kilt.

"A crow?" Tess snorted. "Nonsense. The servants described you as a bonny lass, and they are right. Your mother must have been a beauty, because you didn't inherit that profile from your father. Let's brush your

hair and then see how you feel about changing your gown.” She guided Ophelia into one of the armchairs by the fire.

I seated myself in the other armchair as Tess picked up her hairbrush.

“I have a portrait of Hecuba under my bed that I can show you,” Ophelia offered.

“Why have you hidden your mother’s portrait under the bed?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“And why haven’t you a maid of your own?” Tess inquired.

“My father probably thinks I still have a nanny. There are so many people in the abbey that Crumpsall has trouble keeping track of them.”

I was certain that Burnsby knew Ophelia had neither nanny nor maid, but I held my tongue. I wouldn’t describe the abbey itself as soulless or malign, but Burnsby’s treatment of his daughter and his servants?

Oh, and his treatment of me and his other wives?

Diabolical.

(Lead villain? Godric had lost the role, but Burnsby? *Check!*)

“Tomorrow, we shall find you a personal maid, move you from the nursery, and hang your mother’s portrait on the wall of your new bedroom,” I announced.

(Remember when I described Sophonisba opening the tournament by throwing down a handkerchief? I just accepted the challenge.)

“In the morning, the household seamstress will begin working on a proper wardrobe for a young lady,” I continued. “That will do until we return to London and visit a proper modiste.”

Ophelia blinked at me.

“You can’t do better than to model yourself on Genevieve,” Tess said, grinning. “She’s brave *and* decisive.”

“Why don’t I read aloud from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*?” I asked, feeling myself turn a little pink.

“It’s not in English,” Ophelia said, craning her neck backward to look up at my maid.

“I was trained to be a French maid, so I understand the language,” Tess said, picking up her scissors. “Your hair is lovely, Ophelia. Like black silk, and that’s the truth. I’ll snip a bit around your face.”

“Please forgive my accent,” I said. “I’ll begin with the first letter.” (*Liaisons* is an epistolary novel.)

Two sentences later, Ophelia held out her hand and took over reading; my attempts were as terrible as I had imagined.

Sometime later Tess's brush suspended in midair. "That evil woman is directing a man to *seduce* a young lady just for the fun of it!"

"Isn't it awful?" Ophelia said, with relish. "Cecilia is awkward and unpolished. She just turned fifteen, not much older than me."

Might the fictional Cecilia explain why Ophelia loved the novel so much? Yet if people modeled their behavior on literary works, Ophelia would be at risk of throwing herself into a brook, à la her Shakespearean counterpart.

I hadn't known her for long, but she was bursting with resentment and energy, not melancholy. She would have countered Hamlet's nasty comments with a rapier thrust.

"No lady leaves *my* hands unpolished," Tess stated after Ophelia had read aloud a few more letters. She held up a mirror. Adorable wisps framed Ophelia's face. Some of her hair was braided back, entwined with a silk ribbon, and the rest fell in shining locks over her shoulders.

Ophelia drew in a delighted breath. "I'm not myself!"

"Yes, you are," I told her. "You are beautiful."

"But what about my eyebrows? My fath— Lord Burnsby said they were caterpillars crawling across my forehead."

"Burnsby is wrong." I dipped the tip of my forefinger in the oil Tess used to highlight my cheekbones and sleeked her eyebrows. "No charcoal for you. See?"

Ophelia touched her brows wonderingly.

"Genevieve's green evening dress would be flattering on you," Tess said, darting over to my trunk and taking out the gown. "It's not terribly creased. I can pin it now and alter it tomorrow."

"Is the front as low as Sophonisba's gowns?" Ophelia asked.

Tess shook her head as she brought the girl to her feet and began unbuttoning her gown. "You'd think the woman would take a chill from displaying so much flesh."

"You could wear a cravat like mine," I suggested.

"Aren't cravats for men?"

"Piglets and cravats are the newest fashions for ladies," I told her.

Ophelia chortled with laughter. "I don't believe you! I think you're a fibber."

She wasn't wrong. No gentlewoman gets through the day without offering at least four to five fibs. Since marrying Burnsby, lying had become my main form of communication. *Yes, canary-yellow pantaloons are flattering.* For example.

But no more.

Lord Burnsby was about to find his married life a good deal less comfortable and his wife a good deal less complimentary. In fact, not complimentary at all. Not even polite, and certainly not obedient.

(The tournament was open; he would have to accept the consequences.)

"It flatters you," I remarked, as satin settled around Ophelia's feet.

"The cut is too young for a married lady," Tess said dampeningly. "Lord Burnsby's eyes remind me of gooseberries, but yours are a beautiful greenish-blue, Ophelia. This sea-green color flatters your hair and eyes."

Gooseberries?

Tess had come into my life after a London employment agency had been instructed to supply a femme de chambre for the new Lady Burnsby. Had she been my personal maid before I married, she would have pointed out Burnsby's gooseberry eyes, among other attributes, and I might not have married him.

No, I would have.

Rosie had her dowry, and, despite my humiliation, that was all that mattered.

Tess held up a scarf. "A perfect lady's cravat." A moment later, cashmere frothed down Ophelia's bodice, covering her chest.

"You are exquisite," I told her.

"Not compared to you," Ophelia said bluntly. "When you took off your cloak, I thought you resembled a princess in a storybook. Why on earth did you marry my father?"

"Marrying him seemed like my best option," I said lamely. Perhaps I would tell her about Rosie's dowry—but not until her father had given *her* a dowry.

"Look at you!" Ophelia pointed at the mirror. "Sophonisba has a subscription to *The Gallery of Fashion*, and you look just like one of their illustrations. She will be jealous. Even if she went to a French modiste, she could never match you."

"The lady is a good deal older than Genevieve," Tess pointed out. "Well into her sixties, I suspect."

“Sophonisba says that women don’t have birthdays.”

“Don’t forget that my eyebrows are drawn in charcoal,” I put in. “My cheekbones stand out because Tess oils them, and I’m wearing peony lip color in honor of my piglet.”

“I’d like to wear the same color,” Ophelia said. “I adore Peony.”

“Lighter pink for you,” Tess declared, dabbing color on her bottom lip. “Try on these slippers.”

“According to my mother’s portrait, she didn’t have my eyebrows,” Ophelia said, standing in front of the glass again. “My last governess wanted to pluck them out.”

I shuddered. “I’ll be your shield against eyebrow haters, and you’ll be mine against the rest of the world.” I tucked my hand into her arm.

“I can do that,” Ophelia promised. “We’ll stay close to Godric. Sophonisba is terrified of him.”

I could believe that.

Snap! Snap! Snap!

Seven

If you are already feeling battered by life and have the opportunity to eavesdrop . . . don't.

As Ophelia and I traipsed around the cloister to the drawing room, I planned my morning meeting with Miss Wellington. I wanted Ophelia moved to a room close by so that Tess could train one of the housemaids in the duties of a femme de chambre, but also because I recognized her loneliness. I'd grown familiar with that particular emotion in the last few months.

We were approaching the open door to the drawing room when we heard Godric say, "He purchased a pretty face. Nothing novel about that."

I instinctively brought Ophelia to a halt, catching her arm to hold her back. I wanted to hear the rest.

"She's the kind of woman who follows a husband-hunting script—marry a wealthy man, no matter his age," Godric continued, his voice cold.

"She must have failed to snag a younger man," another man said. Perhaps Lancelot? "Likely she had no dowry."

"Her nose is short, her cheeks are round, and she has a halt in her gait." Obviously Sophonisba. "My dearest diddle-darling Clifford could have done better."

Bollocks.

"I suggest you don't cross swords with the new Lady Burnsby," Godric said, sounding amused. "There's a hint of the firebrand about her."

"Nonsense!" Sophonisba again. "She is boring, without a thought in her head. Bunny tells me that she regularly leaves him yawning."

Bunny?

Bollocks to that, too. My husband was definitely more boring than me. Ophelia let out a growl, and I put a finger over my lips.

"You think so?" Godric sounded even more entertained. "How would you characterize her? A shy fawn? A quiet cherub?"

"Corpselike," Sophonisba remarked.

I admit to feeling a chill. She wasn't right yet. But at the rate Burnsby collected dead wives, I might not be long for this world.

“She’s far livelier than you seem to think,” Godric said. “Offer a conjecture, Lance?”

“Did she weep or faint when she heard the news?” the heir inquired. I took that to be a direct reference to Hecuba’s and Alice’s introductions to Sophonisba.

“She remained composed,” Godric replied. “I don’t think she gives a damn for the old man.”

“Bunny told me that she adores him,” Sophonisba said. “My poor diddly-dums has been bamboozled.”

“I can understand the impulse to marry Burnsby, considering the likelihood of quickly inheriting a widow’s portion,” Lancelot said. “But any woman who would marry a man of such advanced age has neither morals nor character.”

“She’s a mercenary hussy,” Sophonisba declared.

Ho hum.

Not exactly a groundbreaking insult.

“I don’t agree,” Godric said. “Even if she were, blame should be laid at Burnsby’s feet. How do you think King Henry the Eighth managed to marry so many women?”

“Because he killed off the others,” Ophelia hissed.

“Why blame a woman when a man offers to share his fortune and title? By the way, Lady Burnsby may join us at any moment,” Godric cautioned. “We should shift the subject of our discussion to something less damning of her character.”

Too late.

Sophonisba ignored him. “She is nothing more than a strumpet!”

Silence seemed to indicate that her two companions were comparing pots to kettles, which set her back up. “A spendthrift who demands wine at five shillings a bottle!” Sophonisba added shrilly.

“Lance, you’ll be happy to know that Ophelia will join us this evening,” Godric said, brushing aside the cost of excellent port.

“I doubt it,” Sophonisba interjected. “The girl is not fit for a drawing room.”

Ophelia was grinning.

“Just wait until she catches sight of you,” I whispered.

“What an extraordinary thing to say about my sister,” Lancelot said, steel in his voice. “I shall be happy to see Ophelia and Aunt Mima. Though I was

disconcerted when Mima described you as her son, Godric.”

“I’ve corrected her to no avail,” Godric said. “She’s been addressing every woman in the abbey as her sister.”

“She never mistakes *me* for her sister,” Sophonisba said with a sniff.

I loosened my grip on Ophelia’s arm. “Time to join them.”

“Are your feelings terribly hurt?” Her eyes were wide.

“No, not at all.” I’d heard it all before.

“Godric said you were uninteresting, Lance said you were immoral, Sophonisba said loads of mean things, including that you have a short nose and like expensive wine.”

“Miss Ainsworth’s nose might bedeck a Roman coin,” I said, “but I shan’t be so rude as to point it out.”

(Though I just did. *Sorry!* Oh wait, I’m not sorry.)

“I try to be kind,” I added. “But do remember that port bought for less than seven shillings a bottle is undrinkable. The champagne that Crumpsall will serve tonight cost twelve.”

Perhaps I could train Ophelia not to be a lady, but a *woman* with sleek eyebrows and expertise in ordering wine.

As we entered the drawing room, I paused in the doorway to allow the assembly to examine my short nose and Ophelia’s fetching attire. I could see our reflection in the large glass hanging to one side. I looked my best, since embarrassment had given me an attractive flush. Ophelia was adorable, if one ignored her scowl.

Godric wore black again. He appeared shocked, frozen in place, staring at us with his brows drawn together. Of course, Ophelia bore no resemblance to the bedraggled girl he had seen a mere hour ago. Tess is a magician.

Sophonisba had changed into a gold evening gown, the bodice miraculously suspended just above her nipples. She glanced at us and turned away, patting her hair in the mirror.

The man who must be Lancelot, Burnsby’s heir, stood beside her, his bride nowhere to be seen. He was leaner than Godric but equally tall. His lavender coat embroidered with silver lilies shrieked of Parisian artistry. My husband would detest it on sight, as he considered an Englishman in “Froggie” garments a betrayal of heritage, just as he believed every foreigner deeply misfortunate to have been born outside the British Isles.

Lancelot had golden curls and had luckily avoided his father’s chin.

(In short, the hero has made his appearance. *Check!*)

Yet what a sour hero he was, calling my morals into question. Now I registered his dazzled expression with satisfaction.

He hastened across the room and bowed before me. “What a delight to meet you, Lady Burnsby. You would please me greatly if you addressed me as Lance. After all, we are family.”

I gave him a dispassionate smile as I curtsied and didn’t offer my first name.

He turned to his half-sister and bowed again. “Ophelia, when did you grow into such a delightful young lady?”

“About an hour ago,” she replied, bobbing a curtsy. “I am wearing Genevieve’s fine feathers. And lip color.”

“You are already on a Christian name basis with your new stepmother?” He threw me a charmingly plaintive glance.

“Oh, more than that,” Godric drawled, leaving Sophonisba behind as he joined us. “Despite having met only an hour ago, they’ve been sharing girlish confidences. Lady Burnsby is single-handedly making up for your sister’s lack of a governess by explaining mankind’s depravities.” He bowed. “Lady Burnsby, Miss Burnsby.”

When he straightened, Ophelia leaned forward and poked him in the chest. “You stop being so horrid,” she ordered. She scowled at Lancelot. “You as well.”

“Ophelia!” I grabbed her elbow, but there was no stopping her.

“We heard everything you said about Genevieve, and I’m ashamed of both of you.”

Godric just blinked, but Lancelot seemed genuinely regretful. “My deepest apologies, Lady Burnsby. I was an ass, spouting unfair comments when I had never met you.”

“Godric *had* met Genevieve, and he was still nasty,” Ophelia said. She glowered at him the way a constable glares at a drunk.

I groaned inwardly. “Ophelia, this is neither the time nor the place. People are allowed to have opinions you do not agree with. Sir Godric didn’t intend either of us to overhear his appraisal.”

“He said you were boring, and you’re not!”

“That’s not what I said,” Godric put in.

I ignored him. “You can’t scold people when you don’t agree with their assessments. We were eavesdropping, which is wrong.” I smiled at Godric,

and believe me, my smile can be as deadly as Ophelia's scowl. "Though it can elucidate the speaker's character and discernment."

"She's got you there, Godric," Lance said in a tone of deep enjoyment.

"*Il est mal élevé, faut dire,*" Ophelia said.

(I tried to puzzle that out. *He is rude, I must say.* Or: *He is rude, you should say?* I wasn't certain.)

Lance grinned at his half-sister, bursting into fluent French. They began speaking too fast for me to understand.

Godric stood beside me, mute as a stone, while I tried to think of a jest about my "cherubic" nature. Nothing came to mind. The worst thing about knowing that people find you boring is that it makes you more boring.

Naturally, Godric made no effort to converse with me. Ladies are taught to entertain, whereas gentlemen can stand around expressing apathy. Or surly discontent (the brooding, mysterious ones. You know the type).

Lancelot asked Godric a question, and he proved to have an excellent command of French. I couldn't follow.

Well, bollocks.

Eight

If you ever receive advice from a Frenchwoman, take it to heart.

When my husband entered the room, I was so stunned by his attire that I curtsied mutely—which Burnsby ignored. He pranced straight across the room to join Sophonisba.

The tartan designed by his mother resembled an outlandish chessboard, purple and green competing for attention. The pleated skirt stopped just above bulbous-yet-bony knees, and thick white stockings stopped just below. A black-handled dagger was tucked into the top of his hose, as if he might have to fight off a marauding tribesman at any moment.

“He’s still wearing that abomination?” Lance groaned, switching to English. “I had hoped it was a fever dream of my childhood.”

“He adores wearing that plaid,” Ophelia said dismissively. “Aunt Mima had a seamstress make up a gown in the pattern, but he forced her to discard it.” Her lip curled.

It seemed only the legitimate few were allowed to wear the Burnsby weave.

I wouldn’t be one of them.

As Sophonisba and Burnsby sauntered back to us, I once again had a disorienting feeling that the earth was moving under my feet.

“Where is your bride?” Burnsby asked Lance, irritation edging his voice.

“Colette’s toilette takes some hours. She is a treasured confidant to Empress Josephine, particularly in sartorial matters.”

Burnsby liked that; he gave his heir an approving smile. “While I cannot condone your living in a foreign clime,” he pronounced, “one must recognize that *our* dear king and queen feel some kinship with their French counterparts.”

Given Lance’s expression, I was certain that a withering comment would follow, but Sophonisba intervened with a gush of conversation—sallies in our tournament, since she addressed my husband as “Bunny,” “lovie-pie,” and “big boy.”

I caught Godric’s gaze when she called Burnsby the latter. The affront in his eyes made me choke back a hysterical giggle.

“Your conversational style requires amendment, Miss Ainsworth,” he stated. “You offer insult to Lady Burnsby.”

(Snap!)

My husband intervened without even glancing at me. “I’ve known Sophie since we were young. Her endearments reflect our enduring friendship.”

“We’ve been Sophie and Bunny since the day we met,” Sophonisba exclaimed.

Godric appeared as appalled as I felt, which was comforting. I found myself shifting closer to him, as if his glowering strength would deflect further humiliation.

Sophonisba put her hand on my husband’s cheek. “I’ve known Bunny since he was widdle, and now—”

I held my breath to see if she would remark on how “big” he’d grown, but thankfully she was interrupted by the door opening.

“Here is my darling wife now,” Lance said. My attention was caught by his voice: Why did he sound so amused, as if he were relishing a joke?

His bride paused in the doorway, flipped open a painted fan, and inspected everyone in the room with mischievous, seductive eyes, her red mouth an impudent curve.

Lancelot’s wife was one of most beautiful women I’d ever seen, her cheekbones high and her figure impeccable.

And she was of a different race.

Her skin was reddish-brown, a tone accentuated by a magnificent evening gown of blush satin, cut low and square in the bosom, and adorned with lace and diamond rosettes. Her thickly curling hair was piled high on her head and held in place with glittering pins.

Diamond pins.

“Father will have an apoplexy,” Ophelia whispered as we all gathered to be introduced.

True, Burnsby would have preferred a pallid Englishwoman. He shot Lance a furious glance, even as his lips curled in a sour greeting.

“Lady Burnsby, Lord Burnsby,” Lance said, “may I introduce my wife, Countess Marmont?” He aimed a smile like a burning arrow at his father. “In case you hadn’t seen the announcement in the *Times*, Napoleon granted me an estate and title.”

The countess's smile broadened, and she curtsied, bowing her head respectfully before her father-in-law.

Burnsby swelled like a toad about to sing an evening serenade, and for a moment he seemingly couldn't bring himself to bow.

If he'd been angry at the race of the lady who would carry on his name, Lance's new rank left him outraged to the bone. As opposed to paying obeisance to the Burnsby title, his heir had jumped several rungs ahead in the aristocracy.

His grandchildren would presumably become heirs to a French estate more impressive than the Burnsby holdings (a London townhouse, a modest Scottish country house, a haunted abbey).

At length, Burnsby managed to bow, his face red with suppressed emotion.

"It is a true pleasure, Lady Marmont," I said, dropping into a low curtsy.

She snapped her fan shut and surged forward, taking both my hands in hers. "There you are!" she cried.

Her smile was infectious. "Here I am," I agreed wryly. "Congratulations on your marriage."

"My name is Colette, and I understand yours is Genevieve. We shall be the closest of friends, since we were both foolish enough to marry into such a disreputable family." She flicked a glance at Sophonisba.

Goodness! She didn't pull her punches. I couldn't help thinking how refreshing it was to hear a woman speak her mind without fear. Colette had charm to go with her confidence. All my fears that she and her husband were chuckling behind my back faded into nothingness.

Burnsby sucked in an offended breath, but Lancelot began laughing.

"I would be happy to address you as Colette," I said.

"*Regardez.*" She nodded toward the mirror. We were of a height, and—I don't mean to be immodest—if we stood together at the court in St. James, the two of us would outshine the rest.

"I can't wait to walk through Versailles arm in arm with my mother-in-law," Colette said.

"Darling, may I introduce Miss Ophelia Burnsby, my half-sister?" Lancelot said. The fact he was now introducing a girl technically in the schoolroom suggested he had no intention of introducing Sophonisba to his wife.

(It's a sign of how discombobulated I was that the oversight occurred to me. I stepped back, struck by the idea that Lancelot's choice of bride hid an element of revenge.)

"What a stunning young lady you are!" Colette cried. "I'm hideously jealous of your eyebrows."

Ophelia turned pink. "You are?"

Burnsby made a stifled noise as he noticed Ophelia, scanning her head to toe. He opened his mouth, perhaps to command her to leave, but I caught his eye.

My gaze scalded him. To my satisfaction, he snapped his lips shut and pivoted away to whisper to Sophonisba.

Burnsby just met the *real* me for the first time. Not his fault, since I rarely share genuine emotion.

Lancelot turned in a leisurely fashion to Godric, emphasizing the fact he was not introducing Sophonisba. "Colette, may I introduce my dearest friend, Sir Godric Everley?"

The bride snapped open her fan again, examined Godric up and down, and twinkled at him. "I am honored that you traveled into this wilderness to meet me, Sir Godric. I hope to host you in Paris. My friends will be very happy to learn that Lance is not the only *délicieux* Englishman."

Burnsby cleared his throat, stepped forward, and introduced Sophonisba as a "world-famous opera singer." Given my inability to faint, I decided to pretend to be in another room, if not another country.

(The same advice a bride receives about the marriage night, which is an odd coincidence.)

"Most notably in Paris," Sophonisba gushed. "The city of *l'amour*. That's where we met."

I managed not to wince.

"The birthplace of arts, opera, and philosophy. No refinement would exist without the world's most glorious city."

"Then I assume you performed in the Théâtre National de la rue de la Loi, Miss Ainsworth?" the bride asked with a charming smile.

"Certainly," Sophonisba said uneasily.

For the first time, it occurred to me to wonder how Sophonisba had managed to achieve worldwide fame, since she'd been immured in the Highlands throughout the tenure of Burnsby's last two wives.

“After dinner, you must treat us to a brief concert. Opéra-ballet is so popular in the Théâtre National, or so my father has told me. Naturally, I was never allowed to attend because of its reputation. Unmarried ladies are so easily scandalized. Might you entertain us with a dance as well?”

Burnsby intervened, claiming that serious musicians like Miss Ainsworth remained in one spot without any disgraceful wiggling.

“I am certain that opera singers’ low reputation is undeserved,” the bride cooed, with an air of perfect innocence. “Do regale us with your triumphs.”

Beside me, Godric sighed and said in a low voice, “Lancelot married a female version of himself.”

“What does that mean?” I inquired.

“He is a barrister, as I am, but he rules the courtroom by being entertaining, inflammatory, and flamboyant. On the basis of those skills, he’s risen to be a consul to Napoleon, an expert on all things judicial.”

“You are ‘treasured’ by the English king,” I pointed out.

“By offering solid evidence that convinces the jury of my argument.”

“Berating people in the courtroom instead of entertaining them? Mima described it as browbeating,” I said sweetly.

He cast me an unfriendly glance. “The countess knows full well that the Théâtre National was established recently, which means that Sophonisba could not have performed there. Like Lance, she plays cat and mouse with her victims.”

“I’d like to watch him in the courtroom,” I said, as Colette covered her face with her fan, hiding (I was certain) a mocking expression. Her husband’s sneer was thinly veiled, if that. “How far will he go to entertain? Does he falsify evidence?”

“Never. Lance lures his opponents into lying and deploys their mistakes to theatrical effect.”

Colette abruptly turned away from Sophonisba and moved to my side, tucking one of my arms through the crook of her elbow. “We ladies shall sit over there,” she announced, nodding toward a far sofa. “Ophelia, do join us. Lance, dispatch someone with champagne, won’t you?”

When we reached the other side of the room, Ophelia succumbed to giggles. “We left her behind!” she gasped. “You said ‘we ladies’ and left Sophonisba behind!”

“The world is full of people whom you should leave behind for your own peace of mind,” Colette advised.

With her characteristic bluntness, Ophelia said, "I like you."

"I like you as well, even more than your magnificent eyebrows," Colette said. "Your honesty is refreshing."

She turned to me. "Have you been having a dreadful time? Lance was full of conjecture about why a fourth lady had agreed to marry his father, and after having met Lord Burnsby, I understood Lance's perplexity. But now, having seen you in person, I am more than perplexed: I am *stunned*."

I cleared my throat, trying to think what to say, as Crumpsall offered a tray of champagne.

"Let's drink to the remarkable good luck of the Burnsby family to have found the three of us," Colette said.

"They didn't exactly *find* me," Ophelia said, taking a cautious sip. "I've been here all along. They just forgot I existed."

"Now that you are a grown woman, no one will forget you again." Colette's husky laugh made her even more alluring.

Mima wandered through the door, wearing the same striped gown as on my arrival, her snowy hair now adorned with a circlet of red silk flowers.

"My goodness," Colette exclaimed. "Who is that lady? She resembles one of those red-and-white poles that marks a barber's establishment."

"That is Aunt Mima," I replied.

"Oh, yes. I have heard of her, as my husband feels great fondness for her. You must find her a better *femme de chambre*, Genevieve. The lady has need of assistance."

"I don't think Aunt Mima has a maid," Ophelia reported. "My father wouldn't want to waste the money, because she never leaves the abbey. In case Lance didn't tell you, Aunt Mima is addled. She can't remember much before her twentieth birthday, and most days she doesn't remember what happened yesterday. She'll likely greet you as her sister."

"No, she won't," Colette replied, very amused. "I inherited my mother's skin tone."

"You are very dark compared to me," Ophelia agreed, holding out her arm. "My skin resembles the underbelly of a dead fish."

"Never speak disparagingly of yourself," Colette advised. "Your beauty will inspire enough insults."

"We overheard Godric *and* Lancelot saying awful things about Genevieve as we approached the drawing room," Ophelia said, "but Sophonisba was the meanest."

“I shall reprimand Lance in private,” Colette promised.

“Ophelia has already done so, in public,” I put in dryly.

“Sophonisba said Genevieve has a limp and a short nose,” Ophelia said.

“I suspect a good many people delight in sharing unpleasanties about Genevieve’s perfect nose,” Colette said. “People always think that beauty signals that one rose above one’s station. They take savage delight in pointing out the supposed injustice.”

“In truth, my father is of higher status than my husband,” I said sheepishly. “Although less plump in the pocket.”

“Similarly, my father’s rank is higher than Lance’s—even more so if one takes into account the widespread disdain among Frenchmen for the *noblesse impériale* created by Napoleon. All the same, aristocratic gossip insists that I married Lance for his title.” She snapped her fan shut and leveled it at Ophelia. “Insults provoked by jealousy should always be considered beneath one’s notice.”

What a delightful notion. I was so *tired* of being reprimanded for my supposed greediness, no matter how often I pretended that I didn’t care or didn’t hear such comments.

Now I just had to figure out how to ignore those insults.

(Yes, I did catch the obvious parallel to ignoring mistresses. I had Sophonisba to learn to ignore as well.)

“I’ve been in this abbey for hours without seeing any ghosts,” Colette complained. “Lance persuaded me to join him by promising the phantoms marching up and down the ramparts would make up for his dissolute papa. I am a great reader, and I could not resist a haunted abbey.”

“Have you read *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*?” Ophelia asked. “It’s my favorite novel.”

“Many times. After my mother passed away, my father sent me to an English boarding school. That book did more to teach students French than hours of tutoring.”

“Did you enjoy living in England?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” Colette said. “At first, the other girls were startled by my skin color, but after an heiress from Saint Kitts joined us as a parlor boarder, I ceased to be a novelty. Her weekly pin money was enough to take the whole school to Gunter’s Tea Shop for ices.”

“I should like to go to Gunter’s,” Ophelia said wistfully.

“You shall,” Colette said. “Drink your champagne, darlings. I’m afraid I’ll have to return to my husband’s side. Dinner still lies ahead of us, and Lance seems to have launched into an inadvisable spat with his father. His lordship should be left to enjoy his sherry with his disreputable *très-coquette*.”

Sure enough, Burnsby had turned purple, and Sophonisba was patting his arm. Lancelot appeared sleekly amused.

“To clear the air,” Colette said cheerfully, “my darling Lance told me when he proposed that not only did he love me madly, but my nationality and the color of my skin made me the perfect revenge against his despicable father.”

“You took him anyway?” Ophelia asked, looking rather astounded.

“You will find, darling, that handsome men are to be found everywhere, but honest ones are few and far between. Moreover, his sense of humor agrees with mine.”

“A character trait I find more and more compelling,” I said.

(Having married a man neither handsome, nor honest, nor humorous.)

“Genevieve, I do understand that you are not responsible for your husband’s attire,” Colette said, “but *mon dieu*! His costume is such that I considered him a functionary, perhaps the fool in a royal court. The virulent checks, the reticule hanging over his crotch, the feather!”

I hadn’t noticed the furry bag strapped around Burnsby’s hips in such a way as to dangle over his private parts. His bonnet—for it could not be termed a hat—was adorned with a large silver badge, from which jutted a feather, even taller than Sophonisba’s.

“Gentlemen stow addleheaded wives in asylums,” Colette said. “Perhaps it’s time to turn the tables. Surely a judge would accept Burnsby’s costume as evidence of lunacy. I would also add that in France women can sue for divorce if a husband brings his paramour into the family home.”

My eyes widened. I doubted it was true in England, but what a lovely idea.

She patted my hand and rose to her feet. “I’ll separate the wild beasts.”

Ophelia and I watched her sail across the room. She detached father and son as neatly as a sheepdog divides a herd, bearing Lancelot away to greet Mima and leaving Burnsby with Sophonisba loitering at his side.

“Watch,” Ophelia exclaimed. “I’ll bet you anything that Aunt Mima greets Colette as her sister.”

Sure enough, Colette threw us a laughing glance over her shoulder and swept Mima into a warm hug.

“Poor Aunt Mima,” Ophelia said. “I always reject her greeting and insist that I’m not her sister, but Colette’s response was kinder, wasn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Godric is looking at you.”

Sure enough, he was over by the fireplace, glowering in our direction like a black storm cloud. I rolled my eyes—even less ladylike than shrugging, though I’m not sure why.

“Let’s go over there,” Ophelia said with sudden energy.

“Let’s not,” I said, finishing my champagne. “I have a great dislike of surly men.”

“It’s my job to protect you from Sophonisba, remember?” Ophelia dragged me to my feet. “She loathes Godric. If we stay here, she might decide to join us.”

I doubted that; ever since I entered the room, Sophonisba had been regarding me with caution. Her opening sally had been a string of babyish endearments, but mine was a costume fit for the royal court.

In conclusion, with the help of diamonds, I currently held the tournament advantage.

Ophelia and I reached Godric’s side just as Crumpsall announced that dinner was ready.

My heart squeezed when my husband escorted Sophonisba Ainsworth from the room without a backward glance. I had grown used to the public labeling me rapacious and an “old man’s folly.” I had brought the situation on myself and didn’t have the right to complain. I didn’t want Burnsby; I didn’t even like him any longer.

Yet to this point, my husband had treated me like a queen—buying the odd piglet and diamond hair piece, for example. Now he walked away, murmuring to another woman, their plumes brushing together. My stomach started burning.

Godric cleared his throat. “May I escort you to dinner, Lady Burnsby?” His eyes were sympathetic again, damn him.

What was the alternative? Set up camp in the cloister? Join Peony in the kitchens? Flag down a passing carriage and beg passage to London?

We hadn’t seen another carriage in the last two hours on the road, or I might have considered the latter.

“I can walk by myself,” I told him, squaring my shoulders.

“Genevieve’s maid says that she is courageous and decisive, and I should model myself on her,” Ophelia told Godric.

I opened my mouth to utter the obvious disclaimer—no marrying elderly men—but Godric surprised me. A smile touching his mouth, he said, “She’s a touch bossy, but I think you could do worse, Ophelia.”

High praise from that source.

I strode from the drawing room, because *striding* doesn’t imply that I bounded after my husband like an anxious rabbit.

(A bossy rabbit, maybe.)

Nine

*If you ever have the opportunity to dine with members of King Arthur's Round Table, model yourself on Morgan le Fay: powerful, magical, bad-tempered.
Definitely not Guinevere: powerless and betrayed by her husband.*

Burnsby walked to the head of the dining table, and I stalked to the foot. Sophonisba was seated to the left of my husband, and Crumpsall ushered Colette to his right. Godric and Lancelot joined me, with Mima and Ophelia sandwiched in the middle.

Every time I glanced at Burnsby and Sophonisba canoodling, I drank more wine. By the end of the second course, I was drunk—something that *never* happens to a proper lady.

Supposedly.

Feeling somewhat befuddled, I tried to summon up a sober subject of conversation. “Do you know much about Napoleon’s court?” I asked Lancelot, while we waited for the third course to arrive.

He nodded. “I attend the emperor on a regular basis, and I am familiar with most members of the court.”

“Have you met Pierre-Simon Laplace? I understand that the emperor is considering making him a count of the empire.”

“Are you referring to the mathematician?” Godric inquired with an incredulity that I recognized from earlier in the day.

I flashed him a look and then said, “Laplace is not a mere mathematician. He revised Kant’s nebular hypothesis regarding the evolution of the solar system.”

He gave a crack of laughter. Not exactly a smile, but close.

“I don’t know of Monsieur Laplace, but obviously I should,” Lancelot said.

It abruptly occurred to me that he resembled Rosie’s dream husband, a gentleman with blue eyes and golden locks. My next thought?

I had never had a “dream husband.” Ever since my mother died, I focused solely on Rosie’s well-being. Even during my first Season, I never imagined falling in love; I looked for a man with sufficient wealth to launch Rosie into polite society.

If I had allowed myself that sort of dream?

He wouldn't have golden hair, but black. Not blue eyes, but—

I ripped my thoughts away. I was *married*. I probably should have stopped drinking, but I took another gulp of champagne.

"How odd that you're my son—no, son-in-law—no, stepson!" I said to Lancelot.

He twinkled at me. "I have no memory of my mother, but you are my favorite stepmother. The others were melancholic doormats, albeit with good reason for their gloom."

I wasn't used to being anyone's favorite, although the category—wives of Burnsby—was not a classification I found pleasing.

"You have no memories of your mother? I'm sorry."

"She died in childbirth. I regret not knowing her, but I am grateful that my father fostered me with Godric's family."

I frowned, puzzled. "So you were sent to Godric's house as a baby, and then when you were boys, Burnsby became Godric's guardian, after which the two of you came here during school breaks?"

He nodded.

No wonder they were such good friends; they'd grown up like brothers.

"My earliest memory is Lance pummeling me with a toy soldier," Godric drawled.

Lance grinned at him. "I'm sure you deserved it." He turned back to me. "Why are you interested in Laplace?"

"I've followed his career, and I am pleased that Napoleon has recognized his brilliance."

"Mathematics?" Ophelia piped up. "That's the study of calculations and numbers, isn't it?"

My husband glared from the other end of the table. "A most irregular subject of conversation. Lady Burnsby displays a sad lack of etiquette."

"Etiquette? I am seated at dinner with my husband's mistress," I pointed out. "This is the most scandalous meal of my life. In contrast, discussion of mathematics is veritably prudish."

His lips thinned; I watched as Burnsby tried and failed to come up with a retort. Finally, he huffed and turned back to Sophonisba.

"Our conversation need not be as vulgar as the company," Godric commented, once Colette started chattering to Ophelia about mathematics.

I narrowed my eyes. "Hush."

“Did you hush me?” he said incredulously.

“I’ve had enough of men dictating which subjects of conversation they denote vulgar, when they themselves are—they are—”

“They are vulgar,” he said. “I beg your pardon, Genevieve. You’re right, and I was wrong.”

“You are forgiven,” I said magnanimously, even as I savored the fact he called me by my first name. “Mima believes that port has poisoned your brain, perhaps because the quality of wine in this abbey is extraordinarily poor.”

His eyes were dancing, even though his expression was stern.

“Etiquette is complicated,” I said, lowering my voice. “I don’t want what Sophonisba has—her bosom or her beloved—so why should I care that she and I reside in the same house?”

“Because it’s mortifying,” Godric suggested. “Burnsby shows no more respect for you than he did for his former wives.”

I poked at a piece of beef with my fork, thinking hard.

Since my marriage to Burnsby hadn’t been consummated, I had a hazy idea it wasn’t real. Or wasn’t legal? But if I told people that it wasn’t legal, would Rosie’s dowry be endangered? And what about Ophelia? I couldn’t leave her in the abbey. She needed to be rescued.

My brain was definitely scrambled by champagne.

When footmen began to arrive, carrying the next course, Colette rose and came down to my end of the table, dropped a kiss on her husband’s cheek, and smiled at me. “Are you as tipsy as I am?”

“More so,” Godric said dryly. “I have the impression that the new Lady Burnsby rarely imbibes.”

“Never,” I said, with a hiccup. “Inebriation might lead to imprudent behavior. But that hardly matters now, does it?” I had a sudden idea. “You know, *I* could take a lover.”

Godric, Lancelot, and Colette appeared stunned by this suggestion. True, one rarely hears about a lady openly considering a *cicisbeo*.

“I could bring him to Christmas in the Highlands every year, trotting him out like a roast peacock,” I added.

“Like a what?” Godric asked. His expression had darkened, so I gathered he wasn’t a fan of my proposal.

“Like the peacock served up for Christmas dinner,” I explained. “With a gilded beak. I’ve never cared to eat the bird myself, but it is traditional. I

could bring a gilded peacock to the Highlands.”

I turned to Lancelot. “Perhaps your tailor could recommend one of his customers. You couldn’t have done better than that coat if you were hoping to irritate your father.”

“Why *not* take a lover?” Colette said, with French *joie de vivre*. “I could introduce you to any number of men who would be ecstatic to be welcomed into your bedchamber.”

I was thinking about whether I wanted a man anywhere near my unclothed person when Lancelot drew his wife down to perch on his lap. The gesture struck me as uncomfortably intimate.

“I don’t want a lover,” I said regretfully. I glanced at Ophelia, who seemed to be concentrating on her meal. “Burnsby’s improprieties don’t change the fact that I’d have to actually contemplate intimacies. I’ve been reliably informed that sweating is involved.”

“You, my dear, are a delight. I’m so glad that I left Paris to travel to the wilderness, despite the paucity of ghosts,” Colette said, nestling against her husband’s chest.

“I feel the same about you,” I promised, beaming at her before taking another sip of champagne. “I’ve never met a woman as frank and funny as you are. I plan to emulate you in all respects.”

“I think I can take lessons from *you*, for example in the candid manner by which you squashed your husband’s pretensions,” Colette said, raising her glass to me.

“Before arriving at the abbey, I would have sworn Burnsby was as proper as I am—or, at least, as proper as I used to be.”

“No one understands their spouse until the jaws of matrimony close around him,” Lance said with mock sorrow.

“You beast!” Colette cried, hopping up and swatting her husband. “Go sit down by your father.” He left for the other end of the table, chortling.

“Lance may be right. I knew nothing about Burnsby’s true nature until those jaws closed around me.” I finished my champagne. “I can’t imagine why he would want to squeeze anyone’s bottom.”

“Especially *her* bottom,” Colette said, nodding. “I would guess that he’s never put a hand close to your rear end.”

“Nor any other part of me,” I said expansively. “Since we are washing our dirty linen in public.”

I could feel Godric's gaze burning into me, which was a most peculiar sensation. I wanted to look at him—but I felt too shy. Finally, I took the bull by the horns and turned my head, which I regretted as soon as our eyes caught.

I've never thought any man beautiful, one of the reasons why Burnsby's age spots and thin hair didn't bother me.

Yet another mistake.

Some men *are* beautiful, especially men whose eyes aren't blue and hair isn't golden. "Growing up with Sophonisba isn't the reason you've never married, is it?" I asked him. "My sister would like your profile, but I'm afraid she demands that her husband have blue eyes."

"Sophonisba Ainsworth has nothing to do with my unmarried state," Godric answered.

"She might have put you off the whole proposition, since you spent Christmases here as a boy," Colette pointed out.

He grinned at her. "Luckily for you, neither Lance nor I had that reaction."

"Do you have any sisters?" I asked Colette, changing the subject.

"I do not." She propped her hand on her chin.

No, her chin on her hand. I really was drunk.

"Perhaps you might become my sister," Colette suggested. "I've always wanted one."

"I love mine, that's why I got her a dowry." I blinked. "Oops. I didn't mean to say that."

"And . . . the mystery is solved," Colette said to Godric, confusingly.

"What mystery?"

"There are so many," Colette replied. "Why would one of the most beautiful women in London marry a man so old he has to shave his ears?"

That question pertained to the two wives who had preceded me as well. Presumably Burnsby had spun a web around them the way he had me, promising civility, kindness, and effortless companionship.

The subject made me recall another mystery: The first of Burnsby's wives died in childbirth and the second died from complications giving birth, but what of the third?

"I've been meaning to ask, Lord Burnsby, how did your third wife perish?" I called down the table to my husband. "That would be Alice," I added, in case he'd forgotten.

(Bloody hell! Did I just say that? Oh well. Champagne had lent me courage. Or peeled away my ladylike exterior.)

My husband had been murmuring to Sophonisba, their feathers mingling again, but his head swung up, his expression one of deep umbrage.

(*Umbrage* is a lovely word, not used enough. He resembled a bulldog. An elderly bulldog without a chin.)

"I never liked Alice very much," Mima put in. "Fainting! Always fainting! It was only a matter of time till she cracked like an egg."

"Did the lady fall from a rampart?" Colette asked.

"No, no, she was terrified of the roof," Mima replied. "She fainted on the hearth after yet another affront. Not offered by me," she added.

Burnsby turned a rich burgundy. "You make it sound as if I played a role in her death. That is untrue and unjust. I wasn't even in the room!"

Mima shrugged. "Would she have fainted had you not forced her to live with your paramour?"

"Alice fainted constantly," Sophonisba complained. She was clutching my husband's hand on top of the table; at least he was no longer groping her bottom. "She used it to communicate when words would have done just as well."

"I am appalled, Lady Burnsby, that you would raise such a distressing subject of conversation," my husband announced. "You exhibit an utter lack of proper feeling."

"You must be jesting!" I retorted. "I consider myself quite ladylike not to have raised the many distressing topics that come to mind. What *are* the topics of conversation suitable to this particular occasion?"

"Ghosts," Colette said cheerfully. "Had my husband not promised phantoms, I wouldn't be sitting at this table. In France, the aristocracy is taught that vulgarity is infectious." Her eyes rested thoughtfully on Sophonisba.

Since my husband seemed about to spit out an impolitic comment, I intervened. "As regards your former wives, Lord Burnsby, I intend to seek out our spectral guests in the library at my earliest opportunity."

"At least one ghost takes a daily turn about the library," Ophelia offered. "Everyone in the abbey knows it."

"She was my sister," Mima put in, her face woebegone. "She took my baby."

The table froze until Colette said kindly, “You still have me. Was that Hecuba?”

Mima blinked uncertainly. “Hecuba was Burnsby’s second wife. Perhaps Marigold?”

“Burnsby?” I prompted. “Surely you remember your first wife’s name?”

“Lily,” he said gruffly.

“So many posies in this abbey,” Mima said dreamily. “Me and Peony.”

“I would add my maid, Fleur,” Colette said. “Who is Peony?”

“My piglet,” I answered. “She’s very intelligent.”

Colette called down the table. “Lance, I would like a piglet.”

“You shall have one, darling,” Lancelot replied. “The French countryside is full of piglets who would prefer not be turned into *blanquette de porc*.”

“Lady Burnsby assured me that every eligible debutante has her own hog,” Godric put in. “Fashionably accoutered with leashes matching their mistresses’ costumes.”

“Luckily, all colors flatter Peony’s complexion.” I giggled because silliness felt good in the midst of marital tragedy.

Colette’s eyes lit up. “I shall have a leash sewn with pearls to match my favorite pelisse.”

Sophonisba appeared to be chewing on my husband’s ear, presumably a gesture of affection. I couldn’t tolerate another bite (ha!) sitting opposite that pair.

“I shall visit the library immediately,” I announced.

“Lady Burnsby!” my husband exclaimed, straightening. “Our guests are still dining.”

“Don’t pretend to care about propriety now, not when I, your wife, am forced to inhabit this house with your mistress,” I said, gesturing with my glass. A wave of champagne flew into the air and doused one of the candles. “To be precise, when all four of your wives are in residence.”

“No, no, dear, there can only be one,” Mima said.

Ever since meeting Sophonisba, I’d been reluctant to look at Burnsby, but now I found I didn’t mind. His mouth—his *painted* mouth—formed a shocked O. “Lady Burnsby, you have imbibed too much of the grape.”

“Dreadfully unladylike of me,” I said mockingly. “How vulgar. My spouse must be rubbing off on me.”

“I require that you retire to your chamber.”

“Why on earth would I do anything you want me to?” I leaned forward, just to make sure that Burnsby could read my expression, given his poor eyesight.

(In case you’re wondering, I aimed at an expression of murderous rage, like a woman planning to kick her husband off the ramparts.)

“Well, I never!” Sophonisba said with a sniff. “How ill-bred.”

“I would advise you not to go there,” I told her.

Mima began applauding, and Godric and Colette joined in.

“Really?” Burnsby huffed. How ill-bred of *him*.

“Yes, really,” I retorted.

He cleared his throat. “I am the master of this household—”

I cut him off. “Mastery is granted by respect. I have none for you, even more so since you resemble a bony crow in that kilt. A bony crow with a furry caterpillar draped in front of its privates.”

Ophelia snorted and began laughing helplessly, registering my use of her father’s insulting remarks.

“Is that a jest?” my husband demanded, starting to his feet, which allowed the dinner guests to ogle the furry bag he had strapped around his waist. Even the footmen craned their heads to look.

“Both funny and accurate,” Godric remarked. He was lounging back in his chair, amused rather than solemn, for once.

“Why should I jest?” I asked Burnsby. “You seem to believe that life will continue precisely as it was before you offered me this insult. I never liked your yellow pantaloons, but the kilt is fifty times worse. Your knees should be exhibited to your valet alone—who ought to be sacked for allowing you to wear that caterpillar in the open air.”

“Your opinion is irrelevant,” my husband said.

“Presumably you wouldn’t want your wife to emulate your adultery,” Godric said, his voice suddenly curt.

“That’s a direct hit, as they say in *Hamlet*,” Mima observed, before Burnsby could overcome his indignation and answer.

I smiled at her. “Will you join me in the library?”

“I’ll join you and the ghosts next time,” Mima promised. “Cook has made one of her marvelous soufflés, and there’s an almond cake as well. Besides, Alice may make an appearance. I didn’t like her.”

“Almond cake *and* soufflé,” Ophelia said, her eyes glowing. I had a strong suspicion that the nursery fare hadn’t included many sweets.

I stood up. "Would anyone else like to join me in the library?"

Next to me, Godric rose to his feet with a speed that suggested that he, too, was eager to escape the charming dinner party.

"I, for one, would be happy to troll the abbey in search of ghosts," Colette said. "Lance, do accompany me."

"Forgive me, Colette, but your husband should remain at the table," I said to Lancelot. I let my gaze say what I hadn't yet voiced: He had shirked his responsibility to his half-sister—understandably, since he lived in France—but that stopped now. No young girl should be left in company with a canary bird, as my father labeled women of Sophonisba's ilk.

"Aye, aye, Captain," Lancelot said, sitting back down. "Will ghost hunting take long?"

"Surely not," I conjectured, setting down my glass. "Hamlet no sooner shows up on the ramparts than Hamlet senior begins airing the family's shame." I let my gaze rest on Sophonisba's bosom. "One could argue that this family's dirty laundry is already on display."

My husband scowled at me.

"Another hit," Godric drawled.

"A hit, a very palpable hit!" I said, smiling at him.

"Quoting *Hamlet*," he said, raising his glass. "Brilliant *and* witty."

The amused gleam in his eyes made me feel . . . happy. Ridiculous, under the circumstances, but he felt like a port in my marital storm. A decent man who would never betray his wife, once he had one.

"Queen Gertrude couldn't see or hear the ghost, which gives me hope that I'll be spared," Godric said, standing back so that I could precede him to the door. "After all, if ghosts disclosed themselves to solicitors instead of to grieving and deranged children, revenge would be guided by the law, not by a poisoned rapier. Much less theatrical."

"You've discovered a sense of humor," I said.

"Like an illness or a ghost, it's being forced upon me."

In a day full of shocks, here was another: Godric's sober eyes could be surprisingly warm.

Ten

*Reserve judgment if you meet a sober-eyed gentleman; he may be possessed of a sense of irony.
Perhaps even the ability to laugh.*

I couldn't bear another moment in that dining room," Colette remarked, as we walked into the chilly open air of the cloister, led by two footmen carrying lamps. "You must have suffered from a bout of insanity when marrying Burnsby, *ma chérie*."

"I don't want to talk about it," I muttered.

"It would be like marrying a prune," Colette said. "A prune in possession of fifty thousand pounds is still a dried plum."

"The snow has arrived," Godric said, coming to my rescue by changing the subject. I hadn't noticed when we first entered the cloister, but now I saw snowflakes dancing through the air in the courtyard. "The abbey will be buried by morning."

I digested that in silence. There went any hope of commandeering Burnsby's traveling carriage and heading back down the road to Edinburgh. Or even farther, to London.

The footmen lit the wall lamps in the library and roused both fires to roaring before they left. I almost requested more champagne but decided against it.

(No more drinky-poos for me.)

Colette curled up on one end of a sofa before the fireplace, and I dropped onto the other. Godric seated himself in an armchair to my right. He was as elegant as when I met him earlier in the day, his cravat snowy white and perfectly starched, his hair a gentlemanly tumble, his expression inscrutable.

I felt as if the day had aged me a hundred years. Normally, my hair remains in a prim chignon, but ringlets were bobbing around my face, and curls had fallen down my back. My neck scarf was hopelessly crumpled. Despite walking around the snowy cloister, I felt flushed and uncomfortable, so I untied it and put the lace to the side.

"What a ravishing gown," Colette said, leaning forward to inspect the silk lilies. "And your shoulders! Just think of the sensation we'd create if

we wore similar *robes de soirée*.”

“Burnsby sometimes insists that he and I wear matching garments,” I remarked. “If you’ll forgive me, Colette, I shall never again pair my attire with another person.”

Godric frowned, puzzled.

“So that bystanders grasp that we’re married, as opposed to father and daughter,” I explained. “He gets frightfully cross when strangers assume I’m his offspring and furious when complimented on his granddaughter’s beauty.”

“That man will go to his eternal reward soon enough,” Colette said.

That was blunt.

“Just think, he might have asked you to wear a fuzzy caterpillar and a plaid gown!” She shuddered. “Freedom will come along with your widow’s portion, and you can live with us. Perhaps you should move to France right away. It would be easier to keep your dignity.”

“I haven’t any dignity,” I said. “Burnsby’s entire household in the Lowlands, where we’ve lived for months, knew the truth, and I didn’t. I’ve had no dignity for the whole of my marriage. I just didn’t know.”

One side of Godric’s mouth quirked. “You do have dignity. I promise that.”

“I shrieked like a fishwife at my husband before a tableful of guests.” The champagne was wearing off. “I am shocked at myself.”

“But not regretful?” Colette said, eyebrow raised.

I shook my head. “I found it enjoyable. Few opportunities to speak the truth have presented themselves in my life.”

“You should do it more often,” Godric advised.

I eyed him. “Says you, the man who spreads rancor about the courts of law.”

“The men whom I prosecute have no right to insincere courtesy. Neither has your husband, to be frank.”

“Still, that behavior isn’t like me. I’m a ‘quiet cherub,’” I reminded him.

“I meant the comment jocosely.”

“Was ‘cherub’ an insult?” Colette asked.

“I’m a mercenary social climber with a short nose, a limp, no dowry—that *is* true—I can’t remember the rest.”

“Your nose is perfect,” Colette said consolingly.

“I don’t have a limp, either.”

“Almost every descriptor was wrong,” Godric said. “Though I accurately called you a firebrand.”

“I am boring,” I said, shrugging. Champagne had blunted the sting of that fact.

“Not a bit of it!” Colette exclaimed.

I leaned over to kiss her cheek, loving her insistence. “You haven’t known me long enough,” I told her, a little sadly. “Sir Godric is right to claim that I followed a husband-hunting script. I wouldn’t know how to behave without one.”

“Pooh!” Colette said. “You are utterly wrong, Genevieve.”

Godric’s eyes met mine. “If you won’t believe me, believe the countess. Frenchwomen don’t bother to lie.”

That must make life much easier.

“I wish ghosts or crumpets would make an appearance,” Colette said. “Burnsby put me off my meal by fondling his *courtisane*, and now I’m hungry.”

She and I glanced around the room, but no phantoms were to be seen, even in shadowy corners.

Godric didn’t turn his head to search for a ghost. His steady gaze made me restless. If I wasn’t so tipsy, I would wind my hair back up, but I wasn’t good at wielding hairpins at the best of times.

“The wives are probably thronging the ramparts instead of the library,” Colette decided. “That’s a classical location, befitting ladies of the nobility.”

“The ramparts are dangerous in a snowstorm,” Godric said. “Lancelot would never allow you to venture out.”

“Why should husbands believe that they have the right to disallow anything?” I asked.

“If Bathsheba’s husband knew she was sunning herself in the nude, he would have tried to stop her, because it resulted in his death,” Godric pointed out.

“Are you equating the biblical Bathsheba with Sophonisba?” I asked, surprised by the digression.

“I don’t remember anything about Bathsheba’s husband,” Colette said.

“King David ordered him to the front lines of war, where he perished, allowing David to marry Bathsheba,” I said.

“This is such an intellectual conversation,” Colette cried. “It’s your influence, Genevieve. I fritter away my time discussing frivolities like

bonnets and gloves, whereas this evening we've discussed biblical marital advice, not to mention *Hamlet*."

"I don't think theologians would consider a discussion of King David's homicidal actions markedly intellectual," Godric said dampeningly.

"I stand corrected," Colette said, giving him a dimpled smile. "Then let's talk about you."

"There's nothing to know."

"I understand that you are unmarried, but are you betrothed?"

"No."

"I promised Sir Godric that I would find him a wife," I put in. It wouldn't be hard; I was certain any number of women would like to marry him. The villain in this story was not Godric, but Burnsby.

That left two heroes, Lancelot and Godric, both in possession of titles and appropriately heroic jaws (the firelight did marvelous things for Godric's rough-hewn male beauty). Both honorable, unlike my husband.

I couldn't interpret Godric's expression as his eyes lingered on my face. It made me feel prickly and self-conscious.

"Perhaps we should ring for tea," I said.

"And toast. I'm starving," Colette said, jumping up and heading for the bell, which hung beside the door.

"What sort of woman would you like to marry?" I asked Godric. "I have any number of acquaintances I might introduce you to at musicales and balls."

"The life of a barrister to the Crown hasn't allowed for such diversions. Have you missed balls in the months since you married?"

"Not particularly, but I do miss the theater. So, the qualities of your would-be wife?"

"I should like a wife who had a sense of humor, an understanding of irony, curly hair, an educated mind, and a strong imagination."

I couldn't help smiling. "You would like my sister as much as she would like you, despite your lack of golden hair. She will be debuting next year."

"Too young for me."

"I shall think about suitable ladies."

"Would it be easier if I asked for a brunette with the voice of a lark?" he asked.

"Miss Melton," I said instantly. "She has lovely dark hair; she knows reams of poetry by heart; and if she's not precisely a lark, she is surely a

linnet.”

His eyes were laughing now. “No, no, I want a lark or nightingale. A linnet is far too commonplace.”

“I suppose a barrister to the Crown has the right to demand musical perfection,” I said.

“Can you sing?”

“Are you discussing possible spouses for Godric?” Colette called from behind my back. “I have friends who—”

Her voice broke off. I turned my head to see her eyes widening before she clasped her hands over her bosom and let out a piercing shriek.

I leaped to my feet. “What did you see?” I cried, fear exploding in my body as I turned in the direction of the shadowy rows of books.

Eleven

If you have the opportunity to meet a ghost, pay attention to her accessories.

Godric rose more slowly, his face stubbornly unimpressed.

“*Mon dieu*,” Colette cried, one hand on her heart, the other pointing toward the bookshelves. “I saw a shroud!”

“I saw a slipper,” I said, heading in that direction.

(I didn’t say it aloud, but that was an awfully familiar slipper. Perhaps one of Burnsby’s former wives shared my taste?)

“Ghosts wear slippers?” Colette caught up to me. “Well, why not? Why should we be unshod in the afterworld? I hope to wear my favorite shoes with clusters of emeralds on the toes.”

“These were plain,” I said. “No heels.”

“I require heels,” Colette declared. “It’s bad enough that one has to dash around in a sheet.”

I walked into the alcove where I had found Ophelia reading earlier that day—and into which the ghost had disappeared. “Ophelia?” I peeked behind her chair.

Colette raised an eyebrow. “So it’s like that, is it?”

I turned to Godric. “Surely you know how to access the passage?”

“Naturally, there’s a secret passage,” Colette muttered to herself. “*Quel imbécile!* How could I have not thought of it? I’ve read all the books.”

Godric obligingly walked to the back wall, where an alcove held a heavy leather-bound book. “Dante’s *Inferno*.” He picked it up.

A narrow door swung silently open to reveal a dark hallway.

“I shan’t enter,” Colette said, peering inside. “My maid would be enraged if I soiled my hem. Where does it lead?”

“To the second garden,” Godric said.

“Where are the other passages?” I asked.

“We know of three. This one from the garden to the library; another from the kitchen to the corridor outside the dining room, allowing delivery of hot food; and a third from the servants’ quarters to the kitchen. A lost passage is rumored to have led from the sanctuary to an unknown location. It would

have been useful for the monks but no one else, likely why its location has been forgotten.”

I turned to Colette. “We should search the chapel, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely,” she responded, eyes glowing. “The passage may contain the bones of a monk who lost hope of rescue.”

Godric poked his head into the passage and bellowed, “Ophelia!”

Footsteps pattered in the darkness, and Lancelot appeared, his half-sister close behind. After they walked into the room, Godric dropped the *Inferno* back into place, and the door swung shut.

“How did I do?” Ophelia asked excitedly. “I heard a terrific scream.” She was wearing a white hooded cloak edged with snowy fur.

“That was me,” Colette said, leaning against her husband as he wrapped an arm around her and kissed her forehead. “Genevieve was frightfully brave and didn’t even squeak.”

“I recognized my slippers,” I admitted. “Have you played a ghostly role to ensure privacy in the library, Ophelia?”

She nodded. “The nursery is freezing in December, so I often wear my mother’s cloak to stay warm because it’s lined in fox. My father won’t allow me to be in the library while he’s in residence, but a few years ago he caught sight of me here and ran away. Later I scared Alice, without meaning to.”

“Thus, a legend was born.” Godric smiled at Ophelia, which changed his entire face. His cheekbones . . .

Anyway.

“When Burnsby encountered you here, did he offer to ease your passage into the underworld?” I asked with some curiosity.

“What? No,” Ophelia said. “He squawked like a chicken and fled. The one thing I’m sorry about is that maids won’t enter the room. Footmen set the fires, and Miss Wellington has to do the rest.”

“Colette’s maid and mine have volunteered to dust the books, the better to prove the courage of their respective nations,” I said. “Perhaps you might join them, Ophelia, standing for brave Scotswomen.”

“That’s fair,” she agreed.

We returned to the couches before the fire, Lance drawing his wife down beside him.

“What shall we report tomorrow morning? What did we see?” Colette asked, tapping her chin with a finger.

“We saw nothing,” I decreed. “Even Burnsby would smell a rat if Ophelia left the table and a ghost immediately appeared. What excuse did you two offer for leaving before the sweets course?”

“I’m afraid that my dear papa took the opportunity to air his feelings regarding my choice of bride,” Lance said, his arm tight around Colette. “I warned you, didn’t I, darling?”

“You did,” Colette said. “Was he dreadful?”

“Yes,” Ophelia said bluntly.

“Surprisingly theatrical,” Lance said. “Calling on the spirits of our ancestors, talking of my mother’s dishonor, threatening to disinherit me.”

“He can’t disinherit you,” Godric remarked. “The laws of primogeniture guard against bigotry. That’s not legal grounds for disruption of an entailed inheritance.”

“I’m not surprised to hear of my husband’s intolerance, but I am deeply apologetic,” I said, turning to Colette.

“No need,” she said lightly. “I wouldn’t have cared to be part of Lance’s revenge if he had kept it from me, but he divulged everything before he asked for my hand. My husband loves me no matter the color of my skin.”

Lance’s smile was achingly adoring. “Your skin, like the whole of you, is exquisite.”

“I suppose you informed your father of the error of his ways?” Godric asked.

“They began shouting,” Ophelia reported.

“A spirited discussion ensued,” Lance said. “Burnsby called on the gods of propriety and rectitude; I retorted with an unkind reference to Sophonisba; he invoked my mother, which was a low blow, since I never knew her.”

“Did you steal away?” I asked Ophelia.

“Mima did, but I was waiting for Lance to resort to Shakespeare,” Ophelia said. “I would have used Shylock’s ‘If you prick us, do we not bleed?’ from *The Merchant of Venice*.”

“I was too angry for literary references,” Lance said. He kissed his wife’s forehead. “I was literally seeing red. I knew our marriage would infuriate my father, but I had no idea how enraged I would become. I lost all composure.”

“You had imagined yourself making suave rejoinders?” Godric asked, amused.

"I came close to knocking a septuagenarian from his chair," Lance confessed. "Instead, I informed him that he'd never see either of us after this visit and left. Unfortunately the snow has prevented a dramatic exit from the abbey."

"I ran after him," Ophelia said. "Lance was feeling rather gloomy, so I suggested we venture into the passage and try to scare all of you."

Godric gave Lance one of those manly pats that gentlemen exchange. "Well done."

"In marriage or life?" Lance asked, his mouth forming a crooked smile.

Godric turned to Colette, picked up her hand, and kissed it. "In marriage *and* life."

"We could take our meals in the library from now on," I offered. "You needn't face Burnsby again."

"I don't mind," Colette said jauntily.

"There's my brave wife," Lance said. His eyes narrowed. "I have a mind to ruin my father's birthday celebration with our presence. I shall toast you at length as the mother of future Burnsbys."

"Very well, dear," Colette said, with the air of a wife allowing her husband a foolish treat.

"Are you sure you won't mind?" I asked, searching her eyes.

"French society is far more accepting than English, but I have weathered my share of unkind remarks." She shrugged. "My mother was rich and beautiful, and so am I, which meant we were both lucky enough to marry the gentlemen whom we chose. For a lady, that is the greatest gift life can bestow."

She leaned forward and kissed my cheek in a silent acknowledgment that I hadn't been as lucky.

"Shall we retire to the breakfast room?" Lance asked. "I directed Crumpsall to set up tea and toast."

"Fabulous!" Ophelia cried, jumping up and dashing over to the door.

I rose and shook out my skirts.

As Lance helped Colette to her feet, he muttered something in her ear. She crowed with laughter. "Darling Genevieve, my husband thinks you are even more delectable without all that lace around your neck."

I felt myself turning pink and instinctively glanced down at my modest cleavage.

Godric's face darkened, and he glared at his friend before he picked up my lace cravat and draped it so it covered my front.

Lancelot winked at him before he turned to me. "Please don't be offended, stepmama. I meant that as a private compliment, but my wife has never heard a secret she didn't want to share."

Colette elbowed him. "Genevieve has had enough of your private assessments. I heard about those insults."

"None of them true," Godric said again.

I glanced up at him as he put a hand on the middle of my back. His touch burned through the fabric of my gown as we walked to the door to join Ophelia. "That's kind of you," I said, sounding uncertain even to my ears.

He *was* kind.

"Though you were an idiot to have married Burnsby," he added.

I took it back; he wasn't kind. I scowled at him. "No one has been idiotic enough to marry you."

"I haven't been searching in the right places," he said.

"I can help you," I said, a bit flustered by the intensity of his gaze. "I shouldn't have implied that you need to take out an advertisement. I can find you a lovely woman to marry."

"Aren't you kind?" Colette said, gurgling with laughter.

"I have no interest in taking a wife at the moment," Godric said, shooting her a reproving glance.

"Why on earth not?" she asked, her tone very innocent. "How old are you? Some women prefer older men."

"He is not too old," I said.

"I'm nearing thirty," Godric said, "but I have an important case coming up in the new year and no time to spare for wife hunting. Perhaps the year after."

"Or the year after that?" Lance suggested, flagrant amusement in his voice. "One can hardly tell how long your case might last. If I remember correctly, the battle over Sir George Downing's will wasn't settled for forty years."

"I trust it won't take that long," Godric said dryly.

As we emerged into the night, freezing air slapped my cheeks. The snow had stopped swirling in pretty patterns and was coming down thick and fast beyond the stone roof that covered the colonnade.

"May I offer my coat?" Godric asked.

I shook my head. “No, thank you. We’ll be outside for two minutes at most.”

His right hand returned to the middle of my back, a touch that warmed my entire body.

(Yes, I was drunk. You already know that.)

Ophelia skipped up and clutched Godric’s other arm. “It’s so cold!” she squealed.

“This storm will likely continue through Christmas,” Lancelot told his wife, taking off his lavender coat and bundling her in it.

A week of continuous snow? I felt a sudden wave of uneasiness. I hadn’t grasped the weight of being “snowed in,” as Miss Wellington called it. We were all trapped, not just with my wretched husband, but with dead monks, dead wives . . . even the rats.

(Was it too much to say that the abbey loomed balefully around me? I had to remind myself that while I may have fallen into a novel, I would never start screaming like a silly girl. Probably.)

“I brought a trunk of delicious treats from Paris,” Colette said, peeping at me from inside her husband’s coat. “I suggest we create a refuge in the library.”

I pulled myself together. “I’ll request that Crumpsall reserve the wine I had sent here for us.”

Godric made a quiet sound that might have been a chuckle in a less serious person.

“I adore you even more now I know you are responsible for the excellent champagne,” Colette said. “But at the moment, I need a cup of English tea.”

“So do you, or you’ll have a powerful headache tomorrow,” Godric told me, steering me around the corner of the quadrangle.

“Perhaps not,” I said, trying to ignore a glow caused by the press of his fingers. “It could be that champagne is like mother’s milk to me.”

“So you plan to begin drinking *and* take a lover?” Godric asked.

I hesitated to answer. I know that I announced my intention to find a Frenchman, but the word *lover* sounded so raw. Even, dare I say it, impolite.

Ophelia dropped Godric’s arm, darted ahead, and pushed open a door.

The breakfast parlor was a charming room, wallpapered in silk printed with strawberries. One of three small tables was laid with a white cloth and

held a teapot, triangle-cut toast in a rack, crumpets, floury scones, and gingerbread.

I hadn't eaten my dinner, and suddenly I felt ravenous.

Ophelia threw her cloak on a chair and sat down. "I approve of your taking a lover," she said, with no regard for the footman who had taken a pot of boiling water from the hob and was pouring it into the waiting teapot.

(Yes, I had been taught to show discretion before household staff—yet another useless rule, since our employees had known more about my marriage than I had.)

"I believe in revenge," Ophelia continued blithely. "Unfortunately, there aren't many appropriate gentlemen on offer in the Highlands. Since you dislike surly men, Godric is out of the running."

"Actually, Lady Burnsby plans to acquire a French peacock in the male form and import him to the Highlands next Christmas," Godric informed her, once we were all seated.

I couldn't quite interpret his tone, but it reminded me of Burnsby talking about Peony.

"My father would be far more irritated if Genevieve took an English lover," Ophelia said, "preferably one with a seat in the House of Lords. If he was English, everyone would know, you see."

"Burnsby takes his reputation very seriously," I agreed.

"Ophelia, your avoidance of hypocritical delicacy together with your excellent command of the French language make you an honorary Parisienne," Colette said, raising her teacup in a salute.

"Delicacy would have been difficult to achieve, growing up around Sophonisba. I will miss all of you when Christmas is over."

Colette and I smiled at each other in perfect agreement; Ophelia would leave with one of us. "My husband didn't come here merely to introduce me to his father," Colette said. "He came to fetch you, his sister."

"Really?" Ophelia asked, clearly astounded.

"You merely need to decide whether you'd prefer to live with Genevieve or me. London or Paris?"

I abruptly realized that I was now unconstrained by loyalty or respect. I had planned to live in the London townhouse during the Season, but I could remain in England permanently, even when my husband returned to Scotland.

I could—and I *would*.

“I’d prefer to live in Paris,” Ophelia said. She took my hand and clasped it tightly. “Merely because my father doesn’t care to be around me. And I don’t like him.”

“I completely understand,” I assured her.

“We would be happy to have you reside with us,” Colette said.

“Lovely,” Ophelia said happily. “This toast is also lovely. By the time afternoon tea arrives in the nursery, it’s always stone-cold.”

“Couldn’t you ask for tea in the library since it’s close to the kitchens?” I asked.

“I’m not allowed to eat anywhere other than the nursery and the breakfast room. Miss Wellington sometimes leaves plates of food in the library despite my father forbidding it, *and* her fear that rats will find them before me.”

“I’m sorry,” Lancelot said in a rough voice.

His sister turned to him, surprised. “I’m not afraid of rats.”

“I shouldn’t have left you here. I fled to France the moment I left Eton, and I should have taken you with me.”

“I was a child,” Ophelia pointed out. But she gave him a blinding smile. “You can make up for it now. Like your wife, I would like a piglet of my own.”

“We shall have a familial pigpen,” her brother promised.

“I can bring Peony for a visit when I travel to France to scoop up a lover,” I said.

Godric made a low sound in his throat. I didn’t bother to look at him; the man clearly felt he knew better than I. He didn’t.

“When one’s husband is deranged, one can do whatever one likes,” Colette declared. She threw her husband a provocative glance over her teacup. “Take that as a warning, *mon chéri*. If you lose your mind as your father has, I shan’t hesitate to find a peacock of my own. He won’t be wearing a kilt, either, because I will reserve his bare knees for my private chamber.”

Lancelot murmured something in her ear; I glanced away, conscious of an ache in my chest. Colette’s husband regarded her not with adoration—a questionable emotion, to my mind—but with laughter, admiration, and *joy*.

I still couldn’t fathom the idea that I could find happiness in male company, but that might be an excellent proviso if I did take a lover: Any man in my bed had to have that expression.

“Forget it,” Godric said roughly. He buttered a piece of toast and handed it to me.

I turned to him, my lips rounding in surprise. “How did you know what I was thinking?”

“You’re imagining your future lover. Eat that. Toast will soak up the champagne.”

I took a bite, deciding he knew more about drinking to excess than I did.

“You’re not very good at keeping your emotions to yourself,” Ophelia informed me. “I can see everything you’re thinking. I’m sure Godric can, too.”

“I’m *excellent* at disguising my emotions,” I said indignantly.

“Let’s do an experiment. How did you feel when you saw my ghost?” Ophelia asked, staring intently at my face. “Were you frightened?”

“Terrified.”

“You’re fibbing,” she said with satisfaction.

“I’d say you were disappointed,” Godric said.

“I had been eager to exchange notes with a predecessor,” I admitted.

“What on earth would you talk about? Alice wasn’t at all like you,” Ophelia said. “She was frightfully boring. If you even mentioned Sophonisba, she would faint, ghost or no.”

Alice was boring—and I’m not? Yes, I savored it. They were regarding me with an intensity that no one ever had in my experience—which may have been why I had found it easy to disguise my emotions in the past.

“You would have liked your mother, Ophelia, if you’d known her,” Godric said.

“Mima told me that my father squashed the life from Hecuba,” Ophelia said. She shivered.

“Another experiment to test my ability to read your expression.” Godric met my eyes. “Were you forced to marry Burnsby because of your father’s debts?”

“No.”

“Someone would have to force me to marry a man that old,” Ophelia said with relish. “I’d wait until we were at the altar, and then I’d scream and scream, tearing at my hair.”

“Not your hair!” Colette interjected, aghast.

“Fine. I’d tear my clothing and pretend to have lost my mind. Burnsby is always running away from Aunt Mima because you never know what she’ll

say next. My would-be spouse would dash back down the aisle.” She took a satisfied bite of crumpet.

“Not a terrible plan,” Godric said, “but perhaps you could find a groom whom you liked and preserve your wedding gown.”

I cleared my throat. “I liked Burnsby.”

I let them regard me with pity because?

I deserved it.

Still . . . I wasn’t sure that Godric *was* feeling pity. His eyes had a gleam that was hard to read. I decided that he was swallowing a laugh and frowned.

He leaned close to me and said in a voice as rich and dark as hot chocolate, “So it wasn’t your father’s debts. From something you said at dinner, I’d guess that Burnsby promised your sister a dowry?”

I nodded. “Her name is Rosie.”

“You sacrificed your future to make Rosie happy,” Godric said, as if the matter was settled.

His smile fizzled down my spine.

(Yes, I know how odd that sounds, but it’s accurate).

Godric reached over and tapped the back of my right hand with his index finger. “Saintly women are boring. Firebrands like you, Genevieve, do not qualify.”

My breath caught because an excess of champagne had destroyed my restraint. His compliment nestled in my heart, and his light touch felt like more than a fizzle. It was—

Intoxicating.

I blinked down at his hand, and he moved it away.

“Did you ever meet a man whom you’d like to marry for himself?” Godric asked, as casual as if he’d never touched me.

I frowned, confused.

“Despite his title or wealth,” he clarified.

“No, never.”

“When you were twirling around ballrooms and musicales and all the rest of that claptrap surrounding the marriage market, you never met a man whom you admired for himself?”

I shook my head. “I did not.”

(You’ve probably grasped that he was the first man who’d caught my attention. How embarrassing.)

“How did you get the scar through your eyebrow?” I asked, changing the subject.

“A mishap with a poker at twelve years of age,” he said. “You didn’t what? Find the right man? Or you found him, but he wasn’t free?”

“Perhaps he didn’t want me,” I said with a peevish edge.

“That’s absurd.”

They all turned to us. “Good God,” Lance said. “It’s a Christmas miracle. The most severe man in the law courts is smiling.”

“Please share the jest,” Colette said.

“Genevieve is trying to convince me that she married Burnsby because the man she preferred didn’t want her,” Godric said, his voice deep with amusement.

I rolled my eyes. “There was no such man.”

“Obviously not,” Colette said.

“Perhaps if I’d been courted by a viscount or a duke, I might have been tempted,” I said (untruthfully, but this was embarrassing).

Next to me, Godric snorted.

“Genevieve would have scooped up that viscount before he knew what happened,” Ophelia said. “Burnsby allowed her to keep a piglet as a pet, but he won’t even allow me to sit at the dinner table.” She waved a crumplet. “Poor Alice was unable to counter him on any front.”

I couldn’t help being thrilled by her approval.

“You would make an excellent viscountess,” Lance said, laughing as he stood up.

Colette allowed her husband to draw her to her feet. “We should stop by the library and check whether a real ghost is waiting for us.”

“Perhaps tomorrow,” Lance said, towing her away. “It’s bedtime. Farewell, everyone.”

I stifled a jealous sigh.

After the door shut, Ophelia said, “It’s a good thing I grew up in this abbey, because otherwise I’d be scandalized. Shocked to the bone. Fainting like Alice.”

“Newlyweds can make anyone feel lonely,” I said.

“Do you often feel lonely?” Godric seemed genuinely curious, as did Ophelia.

Feeling humiliated was becoming so commonplace that I scarcely registered it.

“On occasion,” I said lightly.

Godric’s lips compressed.

Ophelia sighed. “I feel lonely most of the time.”

“We’re not leaving you here,” I reminded her. “You’re moving to Paris, although if you prefer England, I have decided to live in London. Burnsby will remain in Scotland.” I intended to make sure of that.

Godric stirred, and something flashed through the air between us.

(Yes, I *know* how stupid that sounds.)

“Time for bed?” I said, and felt myself color. *Now* Godric had taken up smiling, after I inadvertently echoed Lancelot’s bawdy jest? I probably shouldn’t drink champagne again. I cleared my throat.

Ophelia got up slowly. “This has been the best day of my life.”

The worst day of mine?

Perhaps?

Or perhaps not.

Twelve

If you face an imminent battle, remember this ancient proverb: If the enemy leaves a door open, rush in. (That might be General Wellington? I'm not sure.)

December 14

I took breakfast in my chamber before seeking out Miss Wellington. I wasn't risking the embarrassment of finding Burnsby and Sophonisba seated together at a small table.

When I ventured into the cloister, I found the sky a heavy gray, with snow coming down in flurries. Luckily, I have a pair of sturdy ankle boots. Tess had reported that grooms had spent most of the night shoveling snow.

By dinnertime yesterday, the abbey felt insidiously evil, as if my misbegotten marriage was a symptom of deeper rot. Today the fresh snow lent me new strength.

I would get through Christmas as best I could, sort out the household and Ophelia's future, and consider myself free. No more listening to Burnsby's homilies about vulgarity, no more praise of his garish pantaloons, no more Christmas hymns in June.

I had no intention of ever living with my husband again.

That thought made me smile and try to catch a snowflake on my tongue.

(Ladies never show their tongues. I have no idea why that part of the body is intrinsically improper.)

The kitchen was large, clean, and thankfully warm. Peony trotted over as I tossed off my cloak, her curly tail wagging as she oinked a greeting. I plumped down on the floor and gathered her into my lap, letting her warm, wiggling body heal the lingering ache in my heart.

After I'd been introduced to everyone from the cook to the bootblack, Miss Wellington and I retired to her study, bringing Peony with us. We spent a few hours reviewing the housekeeping accounts and the menus for the coming week before Christmas, discussing the provisions I'd sent ahead as well as Colette's trunk of Parisian delicacies.

Miss Wellington readily accepted the news that Burnsby and Sophonisba would dine alone from now on.

“The rest of us will sup in the library, as we are waiting for ghosts,” I told her.

(While avoiding my lascivious, bigoted husband, but I didn’t explicate.)

“Ophelia will join us,” I added, “but at other times, she may ring for a meal from whatever room she chooses to be in.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” the housekeeper said, nodding.

I reached out and squeezed her hand. “Thank you for the plates of food you have left in the library, despite knowing that vermin might have found them.”

Her face wreathed in a huge smile.

“Our next challenge is the freezing colonnade,” I said. “I suggest hooks by every door leading to the cloister. Thick, woolen cloaks may be worn interchangeably by whoever has to run around the walkway.”

Before she could explain my husband’s point of view, I said, “Like our dining arrangements, I will inform Lord Burnsby of this change in policy.”

We turned to Ophelia’s prolonged residence in the nursery. The room to the left of mine was empty, and Miss Wellington promised to have it cleaned before teatime. She had three young maids eligible to serve as Ophelia’s *femme de chambre*.

She folded her hands on the table, her eyes on mine. “However, I would be remiss not to tell you that Lord Burnsby has refused to assign a maid to serve the young lady.”

I made an unimpressed—extraordinarily vulgar—sound. “Please send the maids to my chamber before luncheon, and Ophelia can chat with each, one by one. While we’re on the subject, has Aunt Mima a personal maid?”

“No, his lordship feels—”

I raised my hand to stop her. “She could join us to meet these young women.”

“Actually, an elderly maid helps Miss Mima secretly, as it were, because Lord Burnsby has been reluctant to pay her a personal maid’s wages.”

“My lady’s maid is paid twenty guineas a year,” I said. “I trust you are being paid twenty-four guineas?” That would put her on a par with Burnsby’s other Scottish housekeeper.

She nodded.

“Excellent. Please inform Mima’s maid of her new status and salary. Speaking of the household, I understand that a footman with a rash should be restored to employment.”

“That would be marvelous,” Miss Wellington exclaimed, beaming again. “The poor lad is the only support for his aged mother, but Miss Ainsworth decided that he was diseased with smallpox. We had an outbreak when I was a girl, and the disease starts with a rash *inside* the mouth and throat, not around the chin.”

“He might be allergic to starch,” I suggested.

Miss Wellington blinked. “That would make sense. The rash appeared two weeks ago after Mr. Crumpsall put the household in livery. We had anticipated his lordship would arrive at an earlier date.” She hesitated. “If you don’t mind my saying so, Lady Burnsby, you seem to have a great deal of experience running a household for someone so young and newly married.”

“My mother died when I was young, and I took over my father’s household. Our staff kindly taught me everything.”

“But surely your father had a housekeeper?”

Sometimes, when a salary could be found.

I smiled and dodged the question. “I came to enjoy it.” I’m proud of the backbone that equipped me to run a household at such a young age.

“If you wouldn’t mind another somewhat impertinent observation,” the housekeeper said, “Miss Mima is not well.”

“She does seem confused.”

“Her memory has never been good, but lately she spends all day wandering the abbey, searching the rooms one by one. No one knows what she hopes to find. The other day we found her in the attics in her nightgown. She might have taken her death of cold.”

(Madwoman in the attic? *Check!*)

Alas, in life—as opposed to fiction—an eccentric, lonesome woman is more heartbreaking than intriguing.

“Let’s assign the footman with the chin rash to follow Mima wherever she goes, making certain that she wears a cloak outdoors and doesn’t get lost. He needn’t put on a starched cravat for that.”

“A perfect situation, my lady. He is accustomed to elderly women, and he’ll be kind to Miss Mima.”

So far, Miss Wellington and I hadn’t discussed the elephant in the room: to wit, Sophonisba Ainsworth’s assumption of the role of Burnsby’s wife, even when his actual wife was in residence. I accepted another cup of

expertly brewed tea. “I hope I can rely on your discretion, Miss Wellington. Things in this abbey must change.”

The advice I gave to Rosie about rushing through an open door into battle? Burnsby had left a door open when he married me.

I *was* Lady Burnsby, and Sophonisba was *not*.

Like any wife with backbone, I meant to clean house.

“I have decided to ask my husband to establish Miss Ainsworth in a home of her own, even given her thirty-year residence here.”

“It might be forty years,” Miss Wellington offered. “None of us know for certain because after his first wife died, Lord Burnsby dismissed his entire household and sent the baby, Sir Lancelot, to foster with Sir Godric’s family. He moved abroad, leaving the abbey empty, and didn’t return home until a few years later. He brought Miss Ainsworth with him, or so rumor has it.”

Presumably having lured Sophonisba from her career as an “opera singer.”

“My mother was hired as the abbey housekeeper after Lord Burnsby married a second time,” Miss Wellington continued. “She arrived at the abbey to find Miss Mima and Miss Ainsworth living here. Mr. Crumpsall was already in residence, having been hired when the abbey was reopened.”

She hesitated. “My mother was a good woman, and she didn’t care for the situation. But she was born not far away, and she always said that she’d live with the devil if it meant she could stay in the mountains.”

Just like that, my husband descended from garden-variety villain to devil.
(*Check!*)

“I hope you don’t mind my saying that this household is lucky that his lordship married you.” Her smile suggested utter faith in my ability to effect the changes we’d discussed.

I was hoping that the French law allowing divorce when a mistress was brought into the family home would be useful. My husband would be horrified by divorce proceedings; he treasured his reputation more than his estate. I would gladly visit the House of Lords and describe his mental capacity, albeit after my sister was happily married.

But in the meantime, on to the next problem.

“Ophelia tells me Sir Lancelot plans to venture into the forest to find a Yule log that will burn in the drawing room fireplace on Christmas Day,” I said.

“Yes, Miss Mima has told her stories about the boys finding Yule logs,” Miss Wellington said.

“The lighting of the log will take place in the drawing room,” I said. “Given that Christmas is also Lord Burnsby’s birthday, all guests should dine together. However, I cannot envision a joyful gathering around the fireplace with that monstrous portrait glaring down at me.”

Miss Wellington was startled into a giggle.

“I considered a hospitable wall in the cowshed, but I believe an unfortunate accident would be a better outcome.”

(Petty revenge, but would you blame me?)

Her eyes widened. “What kind of accident?”

“A footman wielding a fireplace poker might trip and rip the canvas, straight down the middle,” I said with relish.

She bit her lip. “Miss Ainsworth would demand the footman be fired.”

Oh, right.

“I understand,” I said. “Please forget that I mentioned it. The less you know, the less you can be blamed for. Please don’t share this conversation, even with Crumpsall.”

She nodded.

Peony was snuffling around my ankles and let out an oink that meant, *Please pick me up.*

“She is heavier than she was only a week ago,” I said, snuggling the piggy into the crook of my arm in her favorite position. Peony would always be a runt, but her stomach had rounded. I started scratching her under the chin, and she closed her eyes blissfully.

“She’s such a sweet pig, and so clean,” Miss Wellington said. “She’s better than a dog, the way she—”

The door to her study opened without notice, revealing Sophonisba Ainsworth in a morning gown that exposed an acre of bosom.

“Good morning, Miss Wellington,” she said.

The housekeeper rose and curtsied.

I did not.

“Lady Burnsby,” Sophonisba said, after a moment of silence. She bobbed a curtsy.

“Miss Ainsworth. Can either of us help you with something?”

“I always design the birthday menu,” she said, tossing her head so that her plumes danced in the air.

Oh, right.

That.

“We shall have venison and a roast peacock, as is traditional on Christ’s birthday,” I informed her, shaping my vowels to sound as royal as Queen Charlotte. “Duck and sweetmeats for the second course, followed by salads and savories. Miss Wellington’s menu concludes with gingerbread, Christmas pudding, mince pie, a cheese course, and, finally, ices.”

“Lord Burnsby doesn’t care for mince pie or plum pudding.” Her tone was markedly condescending. “It is *his* birthday, his seventieth birthday.”

“The Christ child takes precedence,” I stated, my tone precluding argument. “Perhaps you and Lord Burnsby might provide some entertainment before the meal? I know that Countess Marmont is eager to see the spectacle that her father once denied her to preserve her innocence—if not a dance, perhaps a song or two?”

Sophonisba stared at me. I squared my shoulders, reminding her silently that I’m neither a fainter nor a weeper, and I won’t be hiding in my room.

“Lord Burnsby and I will select some appropriate hymns.” She stepped close enough that I could smell her sultry perfume, bent down, and tapped my piggy on the nose. Hadn’t she heard that you don’t wake a sleeping baby? Peony’s extravagant eyelashes fluttered open.

“No roast suckling pig on the Christmas menu?” Sophonisba asked. “I understood from Lord Burnsby that this piggy-wiggy may be served up.”

Apparently, her knowledge of Burnsby’s favorite dishes hadn’t been challenge enough. Not only was this piggy-wiggy nestled in a lady’s lap, but Peony was wearing a turquoise velvet leash with silver stitching.

“My pet will never be eaten,” I said, allowing my expression to convey surprise at the lady’s obliviousness.

Sophonisba wrinkled her nose. “Surely a sow doesn’t go nighty-night in your boudoir?”

I’m proud to say that I did not make a vulgar joke about *her* boudoir in response to this artless question. “When she is fully grown, Peony will move to a barn. She will miss me, but we all know that time changes circumstances.”

(In other words, prepare to be put out to pasture.)

Sophonisba tapped my piglet’s nose again and said casually, “What a shame. Bacon is one of my favorite num-nums.”

The only threats that have ever frightened me relate to my sister's well-being. Miss Wellington had assured me that the household loved my piglet; they would never allow this woman to pop her into a stewpot. Since Peony was now awake, I set her on the ground.

"Would you be so good as to return my pet to the kitchens, Miss Ainsworth?" I handed her the leash.

If I say so myself, I know how to issue an order. Not a threat, an order.

She blinked down at the pig.

"Or was there some way we could assist you?" I inquired, mimicking Queen Charlotte once again.

Color faded from her cheeks, highlighting the patches of rouge she'd painted on earlier that morning. I might have felt apologetic, but we all have our roles to play, mine being the betrayed and disrespected wife. Threatening to turn Peony into bacon?

Unpardonable.

Without a word, Sophonisba turned and stalked out. I met Miss Wellington's mirthful eyes. "Please follow closely and make sure that Peony doesn't end up in the stewpot? And warn the kitchen to keep a close eye," I added.

"No one will harm that darling baby under my watch," the housekeeper vowed. "Or you!"

With a jolt I remembered that the household had reason to believe I might be next seen in ghostly form. I had no intention of going to my grave before my eighties. Perhaps my nineties.

After she bustled away, I paused to collect myself. I still had to talk to Mima about her maid, find Ophelia in the nursery, locate the seamstress and set her to work, figure out what to do with the portrait, and speak to my husband.

I had spent half a year vibrating to his moods like a tuning fork, judging whether he would be happier if I remained silent, murmured a platitude, or threw him a compliment.

As Lady Burnsby, I'd been almost as constrained by propriety as I'd been as a debutante.

No longer.

Thirteen

If (when?) you argue with your husband, I recommend the use of blunt facts. Gentlemen so rarely hear the truth.

I moved to the small parlor next to the drawing room before ringing for Crumpsall and asking him to summon my husband. I heard Burnsby's cane tip-tapping down the corridor before he walked in, his eyes pinched and chilly. He bowed. "Lady Burnsby."

I rose, hands clasped at my waist, and did *not* curtsy. "Lord Burnsby."

"I trust you have something imperative to say. I just finished my toilette and have not yet broken my fast."

I refused to consider why he was rising so much later than his normal practice and waved him toward a chair. "Would you like me to ring for tea?"

"No."

"Buttered toast? Cheese? Perhaps a slice of gingerbread?" I asked with an air of unruffled hospitality.

"No."

Burnsby was squinting at me like a mulish schoolboy. I assumed the role of a governess, sat down, and gestured toward the chair opposite me. He reluctantly joined me, plucking at his kilt until the pleats lay neatly.

"The situation is untenable," I said, politely enough.

I was coming to understand my husband. As Mima had mentioned, Burnsby refused to acknowledge facts that he found disagreeable. He went his own way, and his previous wives had allowed themselves to be trampled.

"Sophonisba Ainsworth and I cannot reside under one roof. Moreover, I do not wish to encounter her in any establishment that I might visit. You should buy her a house and move her to it."

"This is her *home*," Burnsby said, with surprising force.

Or not surprising, if I conceived of "Sophie" as his true love. A true love he hid in a mountain range and visited once a year.

"Your son will inherit this abbey, will he not?"

"He shouldn't count on it," Burnsby spat.

I'd forgotten that he had threatened to disinherit Lance—but Godric had said that was legally impossible.

"The law will not allow you to disinherit Lancelot," I pointed out.

Burnsby let out a harsh laugh. "The law will bend. My fellow lords will be appalled, recognizing that my sainted father is turning in his grave. The faults of that race, the spice of the devil, will never defile the honored Burnsby line."

"The only faults that threaten the Burnsby lineage are your own: arrogance, bigotry, cruelty, and stupidity overlaid by a thin veneer of the gentleman. We both know how shallow your adherence to propriety is. Colette's intelligence and beauty can only—"

"She is a blot on the fair face of creation!" Burnsby called shrilly.

(I didn't think it was possible to loathe my husband more than I already did: Welcome to reality.)

"You are that blot," I retorted. "*You*. Dishonoring three wives, imprisoning your only daughter, now trying to disinherit your only son for the sin of marrying an exquisite, aristocratic Frenchwoman. Shame on you."

He gaped at me, momentarily silenced. I had the feeling that no one—except, perhaps, Lance—had spoken so forthrightly to Burnsby.

"No legal grounds exist to disrupt an entailed inheritance," I said. "Even if you managed it, you would be cutting off your nose to spite your face, Burnsby! You have no other heir. Would you prefer that the Burnsby title be relinquished to the king to reward the latest sycophant to the Crown?"

"*You* shall bear me a male child."

I snorted. "You're joking. I will never allow you near me. Moreover, you are too old to father a child. You are *seventy years old*, Burnsby. Most men die in their sixties, and you yourself told me that the majority of your schoolfriends have passed away."

His chin trembled with agitation, but I kept going. Women had been far too reluctant to remind him of his frailties.

"Which brings me to the subject of Sophonisba Ainsworth. What do you think will happen to her when Lancelot inherits? Will your mistress be welcome at the next Christmas celebration, when Colette holds the title of Lady Burnsby?"

Burnsby's eyes blinked rapidly, his throat moving as if he was suppressing one angry outburst after another.

“Colette is unsentimental and French. She will evict your mistress immediately, and your Sophie would be lucky to take her plumed bonnets with her.”

He got that. I saw it sink in.

“However, I have no intention of leaving that unpleasant task to the future Lady Burnsby.”

His brow furrowed. No, his brow is always furrowed. It furrowed *more*.

“I will allow Miss Ainsworth to remain in the abbey until the first of February, after which I shall have her thrown out,” I announced, a placid mask fixed to my face. “I would advise you not to test me, Burnsby. In France, it is grounds for divorce to bring a mistress into the family home.”

He let out a raucous crack of laughter, a sound I’d never heard from his (supposedly) cultured lips. “Typical of Froggies, and not true in England.”

“Requests for divorce are adjudicated before the House of Lords,” I said, catching his attention. “Whether I am successfully granted divorce or annulment hardly matters, does it? How much your former colleagues and schoolmates—those who are still alive—will enjoy hearing about this vulgar little hideaway. You will be the talk of every ballroom and gentleman’s club for months, if not years.”

He sucked in air. “You would not dare!”

I laughed. “I shall enjoy it.”

“No decent wife would share intimate details of her marriage!”

“Is that how you kept your former wives from screaming about their mistreatment? You misjudged me, Burnsby. Appealing to propriety won’t work.”

He was thinking as fast as he could, his nose quivering like that of a cornered rat.

“Perhaps they’ll call Ophelia to testify,” I continued. “She will describe fourteen years of being confined to a freezing nursery, treated like the dirt beneath your feet, never permitted to have an adequate wardrobe or a personal maid, never allowed to eat in the dining room!”

He turned an unattractive shade of puce. “Poppyc—”

I cut him off. “Do you think your daughter’s testimony won’t matter because *you* consider her peculiar? You saw her last evening. No gentleman will understand how you could consign an obvious innocent, one of the most beautiful young ladies they’ve ever seen, to live with an ill-mannered harlot.”

I rose to my feet. "I have made changes in the household, which you will accept without question and maintain in my absence. Aunt Mima and Ophelia shall both have personal maids. The household seamstress will fashion new wardrobes appropriate for their age and station. Several people whose employment had been unfairly terminated will be invited back to the household at a higher salary."

"Why do you think I would agree to any of that?" Burnsby snarled. "Even if you got on your knees and begged, after this display of insolence, you'd be lucky to find yourself eating anything more than bread and water! *You're just a woman!*"

"I have already written a letter to my father, and placed it in Sir Godric's safekeeping in the event that I find myself locked in the dungeons," I said (untruthfully, though it wasn't a bad idea). "I'm afraid that you won't like the contents, which I directed him to spread far and wide. Moreover, Sir Godric will be most unhappy to learn of any mistreatment. He is so powerful, isn't he? Beloved at court, I understand, as well as famous for his bad temper."

Fury was evident in the jiggling of Burnsby's knees, visible as his kilt had slid up, revealing an unattractive stretch of pallid, wrinkled thigh. His gaze followed mine, and he yanked down the fabric.

"You will be sorry for this," he said, his voice rasping.

"I trust you already are," I retorted. "You imagined that I could be destroyed by casual cruelty, as were Hecuba and Alice? I wouldn't be surprised if your first wife wasn't crushed by you as well." I showed him my teeth, for all the world like one of the wolves in the forest. "You made a mistake, marrying me."

"I can plainly see that you are no lady," he said. The *real* Burnsby gleamed in his eyes: cold, superficial, even sadistic.

I let my smile widen because I would be *damned* if I let him frighten me. "On that front, and that front alone, we are well matched."

"You'll be sorry," he rasped again.

"A threat as flaccid as you are," I remarked. "I'll be living for years after your death, an event that you ought to consider imminent, Burnsby."

"Poppycock!"

"A trifle vulgar," I commented. "Isn't *cock* one of those words that a true gentleman never allows to pass his lips?"

The blood had drained from his face, leaving spots of red in his cheeks. I hadn't known he wore rouge as well as lip color. Perhaps he and Sophonisba shared a pot of color.

"You are an ignorant fool," he spat. "Don't you appreciate that I can invalidate your bid for annulment in the simplest of ways? And I *shall*."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I had one more thing to make clear. "Ophelia plans to move to Paris. Naturally, you will give your daughter an excellent dowry, identical to or larger than that you settled upon my sister. I shall visit your solicitors in London to assure myself of your generosity."

"Ophelia won't move anywhere!" he hissed. "My daughter will remain here where she won't embarrass me."

"You are afraid that *Ophelia* will embarrass you, when polite society will have so much else to chortle over?" I gave him a sympathetic smile, as false as his marriage vows. "Perhaps she will join me in the townhouse in London, where I shall be residing without you."

"My wife lives with me, in Scotland!"

I laughed. "You gave up the right to dictate my circumstances the moment you dashed ahead of me into the abbey, so eager to greet your strumpet that you didn't escort your new wife through the door."

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, Lady Burnsby!" he hissed.

"Jealous? Of Sophonisba?" I curled my lip. "During our marriage, you have repeatedly shown yourself to be slow in understanding, but your delusion that I care for you in a romantic sense—which I have never implied in word or vow—is astonishing."

His gaze was burning with rage. "Perhaps you forget that under the laws of England, wives have no power nor—"

"The House of Lords," I reminded him, following it up with a blinding smile. "It speaks to your startling embrace of vulgarity that you have donned that kilt, caterpillar, and bonnet again today. I don't mind telling you that the costume will feature in my testimony before your peers, including the fact that, by my calculation, your mother illegally designed the tartan at a time when wearing it was prohibited. It's legal these days, but . . ." I shook my head perplexedly. "Perhaps I shall add a charge of insanity."

His eyes were bulging, and sweat was beaded on his forehead. I decided it was time to wrap up the conversation. Despite my homicidal fantasies, I

didn't want my husband to drop dead before my eyes.

"I have one more point to make. While we remain under the same roof, if you denigrate your daughter by comparing her to a caterpillar or a crow, I will throw Ainsworth, her trashy wardrobe, and that execrable portrait into the snow—even if it's Christmas morning. Do I make myself clear, Burnsby?"

"You would not dare!" he hissed.

Again.

I let out an incredulous laugh. "Yes, I dare. *I am Lady Burnsby*, a title you granted me."

With a jerky motion, he stood up and raised a curled fist, as if he might try to strike me.

"Hit me, and I'll kick you in the furry caterpillar. Don't think you can drag me out on the ramparts and toss me off, either. You haven't the strength for it." I went ahead and said it, because, why not? In for a penny, in for a pound.

"You haven't the *balls*."

"I was bitterly deceived in you," he wheezed. His eyes glowed with malice. "Beware, Lady Burnsby. I shall invalidate your annulment plea."

I shrugged. "Had you kept to the script with which you wooed me, I would have adhered to my script as well. Now I intend to take a French lover and flaunt him all over London. You want another son? Perhaps he can give it to you."

My erstwhile husband stared at me as if I'd grown horns.

"You wouldn't dare," he bleated.

Was that the third time he said it?

"I dare," I repeated, tired of the whole conversation. "Why shouldn't I, in light of what you have done? By the way, you and Miss Ainsworth will be dining alone, with the Christmas meal the only exception. The rest of us shall eat in the library. On your birthday, we will gather in the drawing room before adjoining for dinner, likely the last meal of your life with your daughter, and certainly the last with your son."

He stared at me, his jaw moving in an unattractive fashion, side to side, the way grasshoppers chew grass.

"I believe we understand each other, Lord Burnsby. Buy a house and move the woman out before the first of February, or I shall evict her well before the snow melts."

I started walking around him when I noticed that Godric had entered the room. He was standing in the door, his shoulders almost filling the opening, his mouth a firm line.

I'll admit it: My heart leapt. He was my refuge in the abbey.

Putting a finger to his lips, Godric grabbed my hand and drew me out the door and along the corridor until we reached a sizable niche in the wall. Dropping my hand, he lifted the heavy vase that had presumably replaced a Madonna.

A door silently swung open.

A second secret passage!

Fourteen

A secret passage is just as delicious and entertaining as you might imagine.

I felt a thrill of delight as Godric reached up to take a lantern from a hook above the alcove. “If I remember correctly, this leads to the kitchens,” I said, following him into a narrow, brick-lined corridor.

“It does.” He caught my hand and turned up the lantern wick so that light flooded the passage. After a few moments of walking, the hallway bent to the left in the direction of the kitchens.

Then he slung the lantern on another hook, illuminating a generously sized alcove fitted with a cushioned bench. “It would be best to allow your husband to calm down before you encounter each other again. May I offer you a seat?”

“This abbey has so many intriguing secrets,” I said, sitting down and tipping back my head to admire the arched brickwork above. “Did you and Lance play here as children?”

“All the time,” Godric said, joining me on the bench. “We fancied the abbey a refuge for persecuted priests and this alcove a bed for a diminutive clerical. We didn’t know that Queen Elizabeth had ignored Scottish Catholics.”

“Based on the brickwork, the alcove doesn’t date back to the 1600s.”

The side of his mouth quirked up. “Did you learn about brickwork in a novel?”

“No. My father has a copy of Sir John Soane’s *Designs in Architecture*. In the middle of one particularly boring Season, I kept myself awake at balls by reviewing Soane’s drawings.” Since he seemed puzzled, I added, “In my head, obviously.”

“Soane, the architect of the Bank of England?”

I nodded. “Taking into account what I know of brickwork, the abbey was renovated in the 1730s.”

“The abbey was in bad shape when Lance’s grandfather bought it. He rebuilt this passage, presumably because it’s the only way for food to arrive from the kitchens without a blanket of snow.”

“Why the bench?”

“Burnsby requires footmen to stand ready against the dining room walls. They take turns resting their legs during long meals.”

I wiggled on the plump cushions. “It’s comfortable.” My arm was almost touching his—which wouldn’t matter, except for the temptation to lean to the side and rub my cheek against his sturdy shoulder, like an affectionate cat.

“Did you overhear the entire conversation with my husband?” I asked.

The lantern was casting delightful shadows on Godric’s cheekbones as he searched my face for some emotion he didn’t find. Fear, perhaps, given Burnsby’s threats?

“I arrived while you were declaring your eagerness to testify in the House of Lords. You have taken a terrible risk, Genevieve.”

I frowned. “Is that why you drew me away so quickly?”

“You not only thwarted Burnsby, you humiliated him, which is worse. In my experience, he won’t regain his composure for hours. He might grow even more enraged, depending on whether or not Sophonisba goads him.”

“He humiliated me first,” I noted, refusing to regret a single sentence.

“I’m not saying he didn’t deserve it,” Godric said. Still, his dark eyes were troubled.

“What could he do, hand me a poisoned potpie?”

“I trust not,” Godric said slowly.

I felt giddy. After seven months of following a “dutiful wife” script, I had discarded it. Telling my husband the truth had been a heady pleasure.

Now that I’d stopped fibbing, who knew what other conventions I’d defy? I felt free, truly free, for the first time since my mother died.

Godric shook his head. “No poisoned food, since everyone in the kitchen adores you. But that doesn’t mean your husband won’t take revenge.”

“You’re being absurd!” I said, giggling.

“You’d be surprised how quickly barristers come to accept the absurd.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

He leaned closer. “Damn it, I’m afraid for you, Genevieve. I know you’re intelligent and beautiful, but did you have to prove yourself brave as well?”

My smile turned into a grin. An impudent grin, not unlike Colette’s. “No need to worry. I can take care of myself.”

He cleared his throat and looked away from my mouth. “As Burnsby told you, English laws do not parallel French decrees with regard to a mistress

moving into the family domicile. You cannot divorce your husband on those grounds.”

“I guessed as much, but I knew the threat of embarrassment would terrify Burnsby. Why do you think he’s kept Sophonisba Ainsworth in the Highlands instead of establishing her in a house in Covent Garden, the way other gentlemen do with their mistresses?”

“Her flamboyancy?”

“Precisely. Burnsby told me himself that Sophonisba was vulgar and attention-seeking. Her babyish vocabulary alone would earn her a weekly mention in the gossip columns.”

Godric put an arm around my shoulder and drew me closer until our legs touched.

I swallowed, startled by a hot, sweet feeling in my stomach. My mind became attuned to my body pressed to his, hip to hip, thigh to thigh, until all other sensations were pushed aside. It was as if the rest of me went numb, and all I could feel were the parts of my leg that were touching his.

“Just so you know, not every man desires a wife *and* a mistress, although it might appear that way to you,” he said.

“No, it feels as if I have rotten taste in men,” I admitted.

He turned his head, pressing his lips to my forehead for one forbidden moment.

(My heart leapt. A cliché but apt.)

“You would appeal to the House of Lords for a private act for release *ex vinculis matrimonii*. ‘From the bonds of matrimony.’”

“Then that’s what I shall do.”

“You’d essentially be asking for annulment on the grounds of impotence and nonconsummation. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

My eyes rounded. “Burnsby would *hate* being considered impotent.” I considered it some more. “No wonder he turned white when I said he was flaccid and had no balls.”

“Alice’s lack of children could be submitted as evidence,” Godric said, sounding like a prosecutor. “I would consider it a long shot, but possible.”

“Did Burnsby know that my argument for divorce would be on the grounds of impotency, when I was babbling about Sophonisba and Ophelia?”

“Without question. Divorce pleadings are rare in the House of Lords, but at seventy, he must have witnessed several. Do you understand your danger,

Genevieve?”

“You are suggesting . . . that’s what he meant by saying it would be easy to invalidate my divorce plea? *Rape?*”

Godric nodded calmly, as if husbands threatened their wives with such violence every day of the week.

Horror crawled up my spine. “When he said that I would bear his next heir, *that’s* what he meant?”

(The evidence for my foolishness has already been proven, don’t you think? But honestly, young women aren’t told anything.)

“Yes,” Godric said. “Your virginity—as proof of his insufficiency—puts you in danger. A second son would invalidate your claim to dissolve the union.”

I smoothed my gown with trembling fingers. I sucked in a breath so deep that it hurt my ribs. I couldn’t get my head around it. Burnsby had threatened to violate me. “He can’t have really meant it.” It was one thing to break the rules of polite society involving mistresses and wives, but abuse of that nature?

Godric had the severe look of an avenging angel. “On first encountering Sophonisba, Hecuba announced a lifelong ban from her bed that was heard by everyone in the household—yet Ophelia was born some nine months later.” His voice was gravelly and definite.

“Surely not.” My voice wasn’t convincing even to my own ears.

“Burnsby did *not* seduce his wife into compliance. Hecuba was never the same after that.”

His comment went through me like a blade. I could see in Godric’s eyes his utter certainty that Ophelia was the product of a brutal rape.

“Poor Hecuba,” I whispered.

Logic forced me to accept Godric’s account. Marriage, after all, is governed by the husband’s desires—and his wife’s safety lies solely in his adherence to codes of conduct.

“Lord Burnsby is not a good man,” Godric stated. “As I said, your virginity would be crucial evidence in a divorce plea—unless it no longer existed.”

“That’s terrible,” I whispered. My younger self, the hopeful eleven-year-old who gobbled advice books, was weeping, but I wasn’t. I felt dry and airless, like a barren desert. That big breath I had drawn in was gone; now there was no air in my lungs.

“I’m sleeping in Burnsby’s former room just on the other side of the wall from you,” Godric said. “Our bedchambers are connected by a door behind one of the wall hangings.”

I was fighting a wish to run screaming into the snowstorm.

I said I wouldn’t be a silly heroine who dashes into the dark, but that was before. The idea that Burnsby might commit violence against me simply to spare himself embarrassment before his peers was stunning.

“Make the faintest cry, and I’ll come to you,” Godric promised.

I suddenly remembered all the rumors. “Did Hecuba take her own life?” I asked, my voice grating.

He shook his head. “She died here in the abbey, while Lance and I were on holiday from Eton for Christmas. Still weakened from giving birth, she caught an influenza. Mima nursed her, but Hecuba passed away.”

“I married Burnsby because I believed he was *kind*, but in reality, he is unprincipled and violent,” I whispered, stunned once again by my own lack of judgment.

“I wish I could comfort you by saying violence is unlikely, but my experience as a prosecutor suggests otherwise. Had a betrothal been announced in the *Times*, I would have stopped the marriage, Genevieve. I promise you that.”

Godric’s free hand, the one that wasn’t around my shoulders, slipped to my cheek in a caress that made me gulp air. “I will not allow him to do you any harm.”

His touch was caring. Even me—a virgin wife married to an ogre—grasped that.

“Thank you,” I whispered. My heart and stomach were twisted into a knot.

For a long moment, we sat silently, he with one large, warm hand curving around my cheek, me with my hands clenched in my lap, because otherwise I would have drawn his mouth down to mine.

A stifled sound in his throat startled me back into the world. His hand fell away from my face. How long had it been since someone touched me so intimately? When Rosie kissed me goodbye, seven months ago.

“Forgive me,” Godric said, his voice a rumble.

I stared at him, my mind reeling. Parts of my body felt liquid—*merely because he touched my cheek?* I’d lost my mind. Perhaps I could blame

Burnsby. He had knocked me off a ladylike pedestal and proven himself to be a villain.

And now—

“I am not an adulterous woman,” I said, putting my thoughts into words.

His breath caught, and he said, “No, you are not.”

In the flickering light of the oil lamp, I read his eyes better than I had in the brightly lit library. Godric meant it. Yet he shared the feverish heat that had swamped my body.

I jumped up, but my feet tangled with my gown, and I pitched forward. Godric caught me as I was about to slam face-first into the brick wall opposite the bench. He instantly let go—but now I knew what it felt like when his hands wrapped around my waist.

“I suspect you would like some tea?” he asked, his tone that of a courteous gentleman.

“Oh, God, yes,” I gasped, in a most unladylike fashion.

“Burnsby should be long gone. Sophonisba was waiting for him in the music room. Still, I suggest we follow the passage to the kitchen,” he said, taking the lantern down from the wall.

For a moment, I didn’t remember who Sophonisba was. When I did, I noticed that the tinge of humiliation I had been feeling at the sound of her name had eased. Burnsby was a dreadful man, and she’d spent thirty, even forty years with him. That was its own punishment.

Godric began leading the way down the corridor. My heart beat in time with his footsteps. All I could think about was his hands on my waist. I touched my cheek, and it was as if I could still feel his fingers there, reassuring and somehow comfortingly familiar.

“Was she eavesdropping during our argument?” I asked, summoning up composure.

“No, Sophonisba appeared to be preparing a song list when I last saw her,” he replied, obviously having no idea what I’d been thinking about. “Did you really ask her—*them*—to put on a concert?”

“It will give her something to do,” I explained. “Perhaps she was forced to stay with Burnsby for financial reasons, Godric. He didn’t buy her a house, and likely he didn’t give her pin money. He can be very cheap. She has remained with him through three wives. *Three*.”

Godric had stopped and was gazing at me as if I’d surprised him—and as if everything that I said mattered. “Few women would contemplate

Ainsworth's predicament, let alone give her a role to play on Christmas Day."

I shrugged, reluctant to interpret the tenderness in his voice. We had to return to talking in a normal manner, despite my feeling that everything between us had changed with his touch.

I was *married*.

Even if my mind had gone to absurd places, a respectable solicitor with a prominent role in the government could never marry a divorcée.

"Sophonisba's life cannot be pleasant, living so isolated in the mountains," I said, pushing away that thought. "The servants don't respect her. Mima strongly dislikes her, have you noticed?"

He turned his head. "I have."

"You should smile more often," I said, the words tumbling from my lips. "Perhaps that's why you don't have a wife. Women may have been afraid that they'd be unable to make you happy."

"The right woman will easily make me happy," Godric stated, with complete assurance.

I had believed him ill-tempered at our first meeting, but he wasn't at all. My heart winced at the image of Godric smiling down at a wife he adored. A wife who wasn't me.

The corridor ended in a brick wall. He patted a protruding brick. "When I push this in, a door will open into the pantry." But instead of doing so, he hung the lantern on yet another hook and turned to me. "You told Ophelia that eavesdropping gave you insight into my character and discernment." He caught my hands in his.

I felt myself turn pink. "I was cross."

"I already knew you to be intelligent and extraordinarily beautiful. Now I know you are courageous and protective of your sister."

My cheeks—and my eyes—started to burn. No one had ever said anything like that to me. "Thank you," I said, trying not to appear flustered, and failing.

"Mind you, marrying Burnsby was a step too far, even for the sake of loyalty."

"It was my decision," I said, studying the way his hands engulfed mine.

"You had good reasons." He raised up my hands to his face and kissed first one, then the other.

My hands burned where he kissed them. My brain did not seem to be functioning correctly; I couldn't form words or sounds, let alone a coherent response. All I could think was, *He just kissed my hands*, over and over, each time a different word underlined in my mind's eye.

"The dowry will allow your sister to choose a spouse," Godric said, dropping my hands, wrapping his arms around me, and drawing me close.

(Yikes!)

"This is most improper," I mumbled. He smelled like chilly air and lemon soap. My cheeks heated as I resisted the impulse to melt against his chest. "You were right in your initial judgment. I was a fool to marry Burnsby, because I didn't understand who he was."

His grave, beautiful eyes met mine. "You deserve a better husband, a man who would care about your happiness."

Given my lack of dowry, I had never allowed myself to imagine such a marriage. Perhaps I didn't consider myself deserving of such a husband. I didn't realize I had begun crying until he handed me a handkerchief.

I also didn't know how warm a hug could be until he closed his arms even tighter. I put my cheek against Godric's chest and listened to his heartbeat while I tried to stop the tears rolling down my face.

After a while, he put his chin on my head and rocked back and forth, the smallest amount.

Just enough to make me feel as if the earth was moving beneath us.

When I finally stopped crying and wiped my eyes, Godric opened the door into the pantry. The first thing I heard was a loud—and satisfied—*oink*.

"Lady Burnsby!" the kitchen boy, Archie, squealed.

Peony was standing before the door. When I picked her up, she snuffled my cheeks as if she could kiss away the tearstains.

"She kept sniffing at the wall," Archie explained. "Miss Wellington was afeared that rats were nesting in the passage, so we didn't open the door."

Godric laughed. "We've been chatting on the other side of that wall for a good ten, fifteen minutes."

"She *smelled* me," I said, giggling as I kissed Peony's intelligent, adoring face. I glanced at Godric's face, and laughter died in my throat.

"Jasmine soap," he said. "Silk, a hint of starch, a touch of Genevieve."

He could smell me, too.

I blinked at him, torn between embarrassment and delight.

Godric leaned closer. “Of those four things, guess which one your piglet finds addictive?”

Whenever I picked up Peony, she acted as if I had been gone for a month. Her snub nose was turned against the side of my breast, long eyelashes curling on her cheeks as she breathed me in.

A touch of Genevieve.

“Addictive,” Godric repeated softly.

Fifteen

If you ever have the opportunity to listen to howling wolves, ignore everything you've read about slavering beasts. Think of them as gossiping old ladies.

I went to bed with the fireplace poker.

If Burnsby entered my room, I planned to slash my husband's weaker leg out from under him. The poker was made from wrought iron and would deal a stout blow. Sitting propped up against the headboard, I practiced swinging it through the air.

Time went by slowly. Sometime around midnight, a groom outside began shoveling snow in the colonnade, humming tunelessly to himself.

Burnsby was surely in bed. He religiously protected his sleep, once leaving a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* before the fifth act because he feared traffic would disturb his bedtime. We weren't married at that point; why hadn't I seen his lack of consideration for my wishes as a warning sign? I hadn't wanted to leave the performance, but he hadn't asked for my opinion—he just announced that we were leaving.

I had to stop blaming myself. I wasn't a fool. I was a woman who married the wrong man: to wit, the villain. That woman might well slay the villain if he entered her room with violence in mind.

The thought was very pleasant. I practiced a few more slashing movements with the poker.

Earlier the six of us—myself, Godric, Ophelia, Mima, Colette, and Lancelot—had eaten our evening meal in the library, while Crumpsall served a six-course meal to Burnsby and Sophonisba in solitary splendor. Ophelia had peeked into the dining room and reported a staggering array of silver platters, silver candelabra, and silver tableware.

I was drowsily thinking about how pleasant the meal had been when a wolf howled in the distance. I sat upright. Its voice rose, fell, and rose again. Another answered, low and mournful.

When my favorite novelists write about wolves howling in the night, they describe wild animals whose bloody fangs shine in the moonlight. More poetically, Shakespeare labels that famous rapist, Tarquin, as a wolf coming to Lucrece's bed with "ravishing strides."

I had seen the implacable, cold calculation of a wild animal in Burnsby's eyes. I took in a quick breath and reminded myself that his limp made "ravishing strides" an impossibility.

Still: The real wolf was within the gates, inside the abbey.

Outside, animals howled again, answering one another. They sounded like scandalized ladies blathering over cups of tea.

I was waiting for it—expecting it—but nonetheless the rattle of my door opening sent a bolt of shock down my body. I threw back my covers and leaped from my bed.

Burnsby was no Tarquin. In the flickering light of the fireplace, his hair blazed white, his chin disappeared altogether, and his back rounded over his cane.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, keeping my voice low. I didn't want Godric to play the hero and burst through the adjoining door. I could handle this.

(Though obviously I was glad to have a reserve army at my call.)

"I've come for my marital rights," Burnsby said.

My heart was beating fast, but I told myself that *I* was in control of the encounter. I pitched my voice to a scathing knife's edge. "When you raped Hecuba, you were young and fit. Younger and fitter."

"How dare you accuse me of such a vile—"

"Because you *are* vile," I said, interrupting. "You committed the crime. How dare you refuse the vice?"

"You have lost your mind," he said, looking shaken. "God forgive me, I married a madwoman."

"You're a rapist, Burnsby. You did so in the past, and you have come to my bedroom for that purpose."

"Nonsense. A husband and wife are of one body," my husband explained, with the unblinking air of virtue he wore so well.

To my right, the tapestry concealing the door to Godric's bedchamber shivered as if a breeze had lifted it slightly.

I raised the poker between myself and Burnsby, keeping my distance. "This implement is solid," I remarked. "One blow would shatter your cane, toppling you to the floor. Don't imagine that I'll summon Crumpsall to help you. You would be unable to reach the bell cord, so you would have to crawl through the door and into the snow to reach your bedchamber."

“I was much mistaken in you,” my husband rasped. “Does your conscience not reproach you for this despicable defiance, this unchristian mutiny?”

My bloodthirstiness shocked him, though he’d entered my chamber with violent intentions?

(I could scarcely believe it, but the man considered himself sinless.)

“No,” I said. I slashed the poker through the air to encourage him to leave. Burnsby fell back a step. “Out the door. Unless you wish to crawl.”

His cane was visibly shaking in his palsied clutch. “You are perverse, a woman who transgresses the sins of your sex.”

“Luckily for you, I will be seeking a divorce,” I said, forcing myself to sound amused. “Godric assures me that my case for annulment is sound, in light of the lack of children in your last marriage, not to mention your long and childless relationship with Miss Ainsworth. Though perhaps her children were discarded like stray puppies?”

A wild look crossed his face; if he had been at full strength, I would have found myself grappling with him on the bed, fighting for my very life.

Yet the ferocity in his eyes quickly waned with acknowledgment of his physical weakness. He turned, barely catching his weight on the cane as he reached for the latch.

I watched him leave from a safe distance and then used the poker to slam the door closed.

“Genevieve?”

I startled and turned around. “Did Burnsby wake you?”

Godric shoved the tapestry to the side and walked into my room. “Yes.” His eyes rested on the poker. “I wondered about your weapon.”

I set it to the side. My body was consumed by a burning wave of triumph. Should the occasion rise—in other words, if Burnsby or a wolf attacked me—I could trust myself to be thoroughly unladylike, even aggressive.

“You were right about his intentions,” I said.

“Keeping silent just now was one of the hardest things I have done. Would you have preferred me to intervene?”

“Definitely not.” I collapsed into a chair and gave him a thankful smile. “I protected myself. I do believe that Burnsby felt powerless.” I paused, stunned by that fact.

“Your defiance terrified him. He’s a coward at heart.” Godric examined my face. “You are no longer afraid of him,” he said, as if reassuring

himself.

“No,” I admitted. A maidenly maiden would still be petrified, but I have always faked genteel emotions. “Even if I don’t have a poker at hand, I can defend myself against him. It was a matter of convincing *myself* that a lady is not a fragile and breakable reed.” I narrowed my eyes. “Actually, I’d welcome a chance to revenge Hecuba.”

Godric made a sound in the back of his throat, a hoarse noise that sounded like desire. Or admiration. Or affection. Or tenderness. I could think of all sorts of ways to explain it, though none to explain why the sound made my legs melt and a flush burn up my cheeks.

Hopefully the room was too dim for him to see.

“You are—” He caught himself.

“Bloodthirsty, as my husband described,” I said cheerfully. “Will you defend me in court on charges of homicide, if required?”

“I will always defend you.” The words hung in the air between us. “No matter how brave or homicidal you are, Genevieve, I’d prefer that you weren’t alone in your bedchamber unless I’m next door. Just in case.”

“I have my poker.”

“Your courage is exemplary. But please avoid being alone in this room unless I’m next door.”

“All right,” I agreed, because I heard strain in his voice. “He won’t come back tonight—or ever, in my estimation. My husband would be humiliated if the household knew his wife had kicked him from her room like a stray dog.”

“Burnsby doesn’t give a damn about his servants’ opinions,” Godric said, shaking his head. “Sophonisba is proof of that.”

“Fair enough,” I agreed.

Godric walked over and threw another log on my fire, revealing that he was wearing the same breeches he’d had on earlier in the evening, along with his shirt and cravat, but no coat.

“Would you like to join me?” I asked, gesturing toward the other chair.

We sat in silence. I was sorting through the experience in my mind, trying to calm my thumping heart.

“Most of the time I have no idea what you’re thinking about,” Godric said, sometime later.

“I’m not as proper as I pretend to be,” I admitted.

The new log caught, and the fire leapt, making his nose look like a blade and his jaw as strong as if it had been cut from volcanic rock.

I didn't want to lie to him. "I often act a part."

"So I have come to understand."

I cleared my throat. I'd be damned if I apologized. "You already know that I think about architecture in ballrooms."

"I suspect that any lady of your stamp would be forced to dissimulate in order to survive polite society."

"A lady of *any* stamp," I corrected. "Ladies are required to be ladylike. From the moment we memorize the script, we all begin feigning, some more than others."

He nodded.

I was *aware* of him in a way I'd never experienced before. My stomach curled into a knot. A lustful knot. A hot, intense, dangerous knot.

"Earlier, those howling wolves sounded outraged, like gossips complaining that a lady had breached propriety," I said hastily.

Godric ignored my digression. "I wish I had your composure. I lose my temper in the courtroom and spew hostility, as Mima described. I'm no good at lying."

Sir Godric Everley had a gruff expression, in the normal course of things. He didn't smile. He judged. Yet now his voice had a vulnerable note.

"Why would you wish to lie?" I asked. "I only do it because I must, because society demands it."

His brow knit, his expression even more surly than normal. "You do *not* have to."

Grumpy—and ignorant.

"Ladies are not allowed to have a temper," I said, gazing down at my hands because it made me feel peculiar to meet his eyes. "If I were an attorney, I might be like you. Perhaps. But in that case, I would be a man."

I didn't lean toward him, but he bent toward me, until we were almost touching. "You'd be angry, like me," he continued. "I can't wield a poker in court, but at times I wish I could."

"Perhaps," I said, thinking that it would be fun to shout at criminals. But I was also thinking about his lips. He often pressed them together, but other times—like now—his bottom lip was sensual and plump.

"Do you suppose that you could be truthful with me, in private?" he asked. "I find myself longing to know what you're thinking. I may be

growing obsessed.”

I blinked. “You are?”

He nodded, regarding me steadily. “You resemble a china doll, Genevieve, but inside you’re a tornado.”

Tornado? “Well, all you need is a long beard, and you’d look like a minor prophet,” I retorted.

“*Prophet?*”

“Judgmental, surly, superior.” I paused. “Disparaging, disapproving, disagreeable.”

“Am I to understand that you stand around ballrooms looking ravishingly soft and pretty, but inside, you’re thinking up alliterative insults?”

“Sometimes. Why would you want to know when or if I’m daydreaming about architecture?”

(Yes, I sounded disbelieving.)

“You think you’re boring,” Godric said, distinctly amused. “You’re the least boring woman I have met in my entire life.”

My mouth fell open, inelegantly. He grinned at me with a hint of smugness before he stood up and walked to the connecting door.

Godric’s bottom lip had curved into a smile that made my heart pound. Hopefully he didn’t catch the raw desire that pulsed through my body.

The wolves kept howling, but as I snuggled under the covers, my trusty poker tucked beside me, they sounded like friends.

Gossiping friends.

Sixteen

An ancient Roman philosopher named Seneca wrote that happiness is enjoying the present without worrying about the future. I wouldn't have believed myself capable of that feat. It seems I am.

December 18

By the time four days had passed, life in the abbey had taken on a rhythm. Without discussion, Burnsby and I had divided the abbey into two parts: He took the drawing and dining rooms, the music room, and the breakfast room; I took the kitchen, the small parlor, and the library.

I met with Miss Wellington every morning and then breakfasted in the parlor. Ophelia, Godric, and I would eat luncheon together; the newlyweds were never seen until the afternoon. After the meal, Ophelia would retreat to her new bedroom to curl up by the fire and read one of the books I had brought with me.

"I feel as if I'm living in a novel," I told Godric a week before Christmas. "Unfortunately, it seems to be a dark one, like *The Monk*."

"I haven't read it."

"Rape and murder," I said, wrinkling my nose. "Thrilling on the page, but not in real life."

"In my opinion, Burnsby is not a murderer."

As I saw it, a man capable of rape was capable of murder. Thankfully, my husband had made no further attempts to enter my bedchamber at night.

Godric and I went to the library to search for a copy of *The Monk*, which would prove my point, since the evil monk Ambrosio is not only a rapist but a murderer (not to mention a sorcerer). When we couldn't find one, Godric tried to persuade me to read the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, announcing that my literary tastes were deplorable. I confessed that I'd taught myself French not to peruse salacious novels (or to read Rousseau), but to follow the work of the mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace.

No one other than my bookseller knew of my secret collection of books addressing celestial mechanics. Godric insisted that I had a mathematician's

brain, an idea that made me laugh.

“You don’t see yourself as you are.”

I enjoyed his flattery, but: “No woman is a mathematician.”

“There’s no law against it.”

“I suppose you know every law in the country?” I asked teasingly.

“I know which books to consult. I might become a judge in the new year.”

I gave him a huge smile. “How marvelous!”

Inside, my heart sank. No judge could have a scandalous wife. Unladylike though it was, I couldn’t help hoping that . . . well, that Godric might consider taking a scandalously divorced wife. But if he became a judge? Impossible.

“Do you know what the lord chancellor does?”

I nodded. “He is the keeper of the king’s conscience. You would be an excellent lord chancellor.”

“He presides over his own court, the Court of Chancery. And yes, he *should* be the king’s conscience-keeper.”

“What’s wrong with the current Court of Chancery? Your scowl suggests it’s corrupt.”

“The lord chancellor must swear to ‘apply the law of equity’ with evenhandedness and fairness. A judge in a criminal court ought to adhere to the law, whereas the chancellor can reach more creative conclusions in pursuit of equity. The current chancellor ignores both fairness *and* legal precedent.”

“If the chancellor doesn’t follow the law, he’s like a second king,” I said, thinking it through. “A power unto himself. Yes, you must become lord chancellor, because you could never be bought.”

Only scandal would bring down Godric’s career, never corruption. I decided then and there that I would never allow his future to be marred by association with me.

At twilight, we ventured outside, walking around and around the snowy cloister, marveling at the way a down quilt seemed to have been thrown over the apple tree’s shivering branches. Falling snow created a white haze through which I could only dimly see the other side of the cloister.

Godric’s hand rested on my back, warming me through my cloak. Once it accidentally slipped down and touched my bottom. The feeling of that

caress, no more than a brush from his fingers, lingered in my body, simmering in my belly and even lower.

As we turned into the colonnade that led to my bedroom, I jerked to a halt. A man wearing a black cloak had just slipped through my door.

“That wasn’t my maid!”

“I saw him,” Godric said, as calm as ever. He strode away from me, threw open the door of my room, and disappeared inside.

I ran after him, trying not to slip on the snowy bricks. What would Burnsby use as his excuse this time?

But it wasn’t Burnsby; it was his valet.

“What are you doing in my room?” I demanded.

He eyed me, an insolent gleam in his eye. “The master told me to check whether your windows were rattling.”

“Get out,” Godric ordered. “Do not come back under any circumstances. Do you understand me?”

“I go where I’m ordered,” the valet said, whining.

“Enter Lady Burnsby’s chamber again, and I shall do you an injury,” Godric said. He stepped forward, masculine rage filling the room.

“Right,” the valet said, scuttling around him and pushing past me.

I couldn’t manage more than a hoarse whisper. “Surely Burnsby wouldn’t have ordered him to—to do me an injury?”

Godric shook his head, closing the door. “The man thought to find an empty room. He had every reason to believe that you were in the library, where you’ve been all day, and that your maid is presumably in the kitchen.”

I shivered. “Then what was he doing here?”

“I have no idea,” Godric said, his eyes furious. “He might be a petty thief. From now on, the door between our rooms will not merely be unlocked, but left ajar.”

“I hate this abbey,” I said, shivering.

The next morning I awoke to find Tess opening the curtains. “Sunshine,” she remarked, “but so much snow.”

That was unsurprising, given as it had snowed steadily for days.

I climbed from my bed, my toes curling on the chilly floor. Fitful light shone on pine trees blanketed in snow as far as the eye could see. When we first arrived, I had giddily imagined besieged marauders climbing the

stepped roofs, daggers in their teeth. Now silent, humped giants seemed to be drawing close, encircling the abbey on all sides.

“Can you imagine living here the whole winter?” Tess asked.

“Absolutely not,” I said (yes, my voice was fervent). I planned to leave as soon as the snow would allow, taking Ophelia with me.

“Me neither,” Tess said, turning away from the window. “Miss Wellington is waiting for you.”

An hour later, I encountered Burnsby on the way to the kitchen. My eyes passed over my husband as if he were a scrawny chicken, a wizened plum, a scorched slice of bacon: something no reasonable person would appreciate.

When I took leave of the housekeeper, I lured Ophelia from her room to take a brisk walk around the cloister before we curled up to read until luncheon. In the library that evening, candles flickered against mullioned windows piled high with snow, rather than glinting on silver platters or servants’ brass buttons. We passed dishes around the table ourselves, since the footmen had been assigned to stand against the walls in the dining room.

No ghost dared to make an appearance—perhaps because specters aren’t brave enough to float through a room echoing with laughter.

After we finished eating, we moved closer to the fire and played weathered children’s games rescued from the nursery: knucklebones and checkers, followed by card games of commerce and whist.

I particularly enjoyed playing cards. I could keep a whole deck in my head, and unless luck went against me, I calculated odds well enough to win groans from Lance, French oaths from Colette, and complaints from Ophelia.

As well as frowns from Godric as he tried (in vain) to beat me. “Gambler,” he said, under his breath. “Mathematician.”

I felt like *myself* sitting around that table, laughing and dealing out cards, showing off the four different ways I know how to shuffle while blithely doubling down on Colette’s saucy insults.

As I put down my cards after winning another game, Ophelia scowled. “I think you do it deliberately.”

“Winning? Absolutely.”

“No, appearing docile *while* winning,” she complained. “Ladylike. Cultured and modest. But secretly smart.”

“That’s a false syllogism,” Godric said.

“What’s a syllogism?” Ophelia inquired.

“A three-part logical argument,” I said. “Major premise: Ladies are docile and ignorant. Minor premise: I am a lady. *Ergo*—which means ‘in conclusion’—I am ignorant. Since, in fact, I know something about cards, that was a false syllogism.”

“You are far from ignorant. Do you puzzle over riddles while waltzing?” Godric asked.

“Sometimes.” I found myself turning pink at his expression.

We spent the rest of the night making up syllogisms.

“Peacocks are gaudy and do not waltz,” Lance offered. “Frenchwomen love to waltz; therefore, Frenchwomen are not gaudy . . . except for my wife.”

“As a bird, I would marry within my species.” Colette laughed, smoothing her ruby-colored gown. “An ostrich is six feet tall and detests mince pies; Lance is six feet tall and detests mince pies; *ergo*, I am married to an ostrich.”

“Hedgehogs cannot read,” Ophelia put in. “I’ve never seen my father open a book or newspaper; *ergo*, my father is a hedgehog.”

She was angry at Burnsby, for good reason. Most of her comments about him were improper, but I said nothing. Perhaps I could raise her to be a lady, in the best sense of the word—able to dance, go to the theater, flirt with a man—without muting her emotions with a polite mask.

Why should Ophelia look and act like everyone else?

“Time for my peacock to go to bed,” Lance drawled, bringing his wife to her feet.

“Slugs can’t read, either,” Ophelia said to me, as we left the library. “*Ergo*, you married a slug, Evie!” she squealed, with a sudden girlish shriek of laughter.

Evie.

I’d never been given a nickname until Ophelia casually shortened my name to Evie a few days ago. I secretly loved it, especially after Godric said “Evie?” like a question, and when I nodded, “Suits you.”

I had never thought much of my name. *Genevieve* was staid, but a nickname coming from his lips, rolling off his tongue, was beautiful . . . and felt like the most natural thing in the world.

Now they all call me *Evie*, and even Tess had picked it up.

Later that night I sat up abruptly, my hand tightening on my poker. I held my breath, but no sound came from the cloister. "Godric?"

"Yes, Evie," he answered instantly.

"Did you hear something?" I threw my braid over my shoulder and clambered from my bed.

The tapestry was swept aside, and Godric stepped into the room, keeping his eyes fixed on my face. All the same, I put on my wrapper.

"I heard something, perhaps from outside," I said.

"There's nothing there but miles of forest and gossiping wolves," Godric said, bending to throw another log on my fire.

As if to disprove him, a confusion of voices sounded from the garden.

"What the devil?" He wheeled about, and we both moved to the window.

I yanked back the curtains. The baleful moon was surrounded by a corona of silver light, but far from seeming romantic, it appeared to be glaring down pitilessly at the abbey. Wind had shaken the snow from tangled black tree branches, leaving a wild solitude that stretched as far as the eye could see.

A scuffle of sound, closer than the trees, caught my attention, and I leaned forward, putting my nose close to the cold glass. A group of men holding burning torches were clustered by the thick outer wall of the abbey.

"Wolves have attacked!" I gasped, my mind reeling with an image of a swift, silent army rushing over the walls, their teeth bared. Didn't I read somewhere that wolves are strongest under a full moon?

Torches reflected against the icy stone wall and darted through the crevices of the iron grates guarding an open sepulcher.

Open?

"No wolves." Godric wrapped his arm around me. "There's been a death in the abbey."

His calm tone deflated my terror. I squinted, making out a cluster of cloaked men.

"The abbey has over fifty people living inside or in the stables. If this were a country estate close by a village, they would return regularly to see their family, whereas those who work here can be isolated for years at a time. Some spend their entire adulthood within the walls, remaining here until they pass away of old age."

"Burnsby continues to support them?" I said, thinking of the elderly footman whom my husband had turned off without a farthing after he

dropped a tureen of soup (not to worry: I followed the man out the door and ensured he had an appropriate pension).

“Without express knowledge, yes.”

I registered his amused tone. “Because the household is so large?”

Godric nodded. “The coachman, Trundle, puts aged or injured people on the payroll as grooms. Being wary of large animals, Burnsby never ventures into the stables. He doesn’t know that Trundle turned many of the horse stalls into snug little bedrooms—women on one side, men on the other.”

“Burnsby is stingy about small things but careless about large ones,” I agreed. “He never reviews his accounts. I pensioned off some of our servants after he dismissed them, but he’s never noticed. Are the rooms comfortable?”

“Yes. The stable is on one level. Cows and horses keep the building warm, and, most importantly, the pensioners are all together. Lance and I spent days there as boys, listening to stories and playing jacks. The population has changed, but the warmth and cheer haven’t.”

As we watched, a man with a torch emerged from the open tomb, and the men put their shoulders to the heavy stone door, shoving it closed.

I gasped and pulled Godric backward. “We’re standing before a lighted window!”

“They’re already gone. It doesn’t take long to add a body to a sepulcher.”

“Why didn’t Crumpsall wait for morning?”

“Perhaps due to rats. There’s no controlling them, not in a building this age, with ancient sewers and passages behind the walls.”

I shuddered.

“Lance used to keep a trained rat named Peter in the stables,” Godric added, his eyes alive with mischief. “He would curl his tail around our wrists.”

“Hush,” I told him, just as I might a silly boy.

“We tried to catch a rat for me by leaving out cheese in the nursery. They would steal in during the night, take cheese from our traps, and leave. They were too intelligent to be caught.”

“They entered the nursery,” I said, dumbfounded. “Rats, more than one, came into the nursery and ate cheese.” I stiffened. “What about Peony? What if she’s attacked by rats?”

“Archie, the kitchen boy, sleeps on the hearth next to Peony’s box,” he reminded me. “Rats won’t go near either of them.”

“I can’t wait to leave the abbey,” I admitted, feeling my stomach pressing on my throat.

“Unfortunately, Crumpsall says there’s another storm coming up the mountain.”

“But what about a funeral for the person who just died? Will they be laid to rest without a blessing?”

“There is no priest for miles,” Godric reminded me, closing the thick curtains before he drew me away. “When the roads are passable, Crumpsall will send a message down the mountain. In time, a priest will make his way here and bless all the souls who passed away. Would you like me to go to the kitchens and inquire about the death?”

I nodded. He returned ten minutes later. An elderly man had passed away peacefully during an afternoon nap.

“They buried him at night to avoid explaining his death to Burnsby,” Godric told me.

“I won’t say anything,” I promised.

After Godric had returned to his room, I snuggled under the bedcovers, thinking drowsily about how safe I felt when he was nearby.

Though *I* had protected myself from Burnsby’s loathsome attentions. I didn’t need a knight in shining armor, a man who would leap from his bed when I called for him.

All the same . . .

I was happy.

Seventeen

If you ever have the opportunity to make a snow angel (I can explain), be sure that your husband is on hand to pluck you from the snowbank so that your angelic skirts aren't marred.

December 20

You're a menace," Ophelia remarked the next evening, watching as I spread cards into a fan, each perfectly spaced from its fellows.

"She must be cheating," Colette said. She was seated on her husband's lap, one arm slung around his neck.

"I'm not!" I protested. "*Je ne triche pas aux cartes.*" I don't cheat at cards—uttered with the correct accent. Ophelia and Colette were tutoring me. Even Mima taught me a random phrase, when she could remember the words.

"But you *could* cheat," Godric said, his eyes lingering on my face.

He was the only person who had grasped that I disliked my husband even before Burnsby's villainy was apparent, that I regretted not meeting a ghost, and that—yes—I could cheat if I wished.

I shrugged.

"When you visit us in France," Colette said, "you must play my friend Claudine. She boasts of being the finest card sharp in Paris."

"Genevieve could beat her without cheating." I didn't need Godric's lips to curl to signal his amusement. If he could read my eyes, I could also read his.

"That's the point," Colette said. "Claudine is so good at cheating that no one will play with her at all. She will adore Genevieve!" She leaned over and dropped a kiss on my cheek, as Frenchwomen do. "All my friends will."

Everyone in polite society would claim my life had changed for the worse since arriving at the abbey. *Au contraire*: My life had changed for the better. I was even grateful for the snow that had kept us confined to the abbey.

I have been thinking hard about why I married Burnsby. Yes, Rosie's dowry was a pivotal factor, but I had also thought he was a good choice

because of his age. Because bedding a man was intrinsically distasteful.

I didn't feel that way about Godric.

I may lie easily, but I'm not in the habit of lying to myself. It's only since coming to know Godric that I can imagine joining a man in bed with curiosity as opposed to dread.

He and I are growing unnervingly, audaciously closer day by day, hour by hour. He's intelligent, brusque . . . *kind*.

For example, before dinner I found him sitting beside Mima, who regarded me with watery eyes. "I'm telling my darling boy how ruddy his face was at birth." My heart twisted as Godric brushed a kiss on her cheek, and she smiled through her tears. "I had him as a baby, but Hecuba sent him away."

"My goodness," I said inadequately.

Not only was Mima illegitimate, but she gave birth, presumably out of wedlock? A baby who was removed from her care—albeit for obvious reasons. Mima didn't seem capable of raising a child.

I opened my mouth to point out that Hecuba didn't enter the house (and marriage) until Godric was eight years old, but he shook his head. Logic would never convince Mima that he wasn't her lost child.

"I'm sorry," I said, seating myself.

"*She* took him," Mima said.

"Hecuba?" I asked.

She nodded. "I'm sure it was Hecuba, not Alice. Burnsby only has one wife, you know. One at a time."

"Generally speaking, people do adhere to that rule," Godric said.

"There can only be one wife," Mima said, nodding like a marionette.

"I wish your baby hadn't been taken away," I said, taking her hand.

We three sat in silence until Mima's expression abruptly changed. "I'll go for a walk," she announced, jumping to her feet.

"Perhaps the child was raised by the sister she keeps trying to find," Godric said, after the door closed. "Sophonisba may know what happened to the child, and who the father is, for that matter."

"As must Burnsby," I said. I couldn't imagine asking either of them, and regardless, it wasn't our business.

My heart sped up the following evening when I walked into the library and discovered Godric by himself. I pretended to be overheated and

removed my cravat. My evening gown practically bared my breasts, which felt luscious and plump. Desirable.

Godric was not a man who disguised his emotions. When he was annoyed at me—we really don't agree about the gold standard's importance for British currency—he showed it with a fierce scowl.

When he was charmed, his eyes softened. When he desired me . . .

Desire isn't a character trait, like charm. It's a *need*. Godric taught me that without touching more than my hand and the middle of my back.

"Do you wish you had a fur cape?" he asked me, as we seated ourselves before the fireplace. "Ermine, perhaps?"

I frowned. "My mantua is warm Norwich wool, with rabbit at the wrists and hood. What's more, unless I'm mistaken, ermine is reserved for royalty. Isn't that a law?"

"The sartorial laws regulating garments were repealed in the early 1600s," Godric replied. He took my hand, brought it to his lips, and said, "Am I being too forward?"

(That sucked the air from my lungs, let me tell you.)

I shook my head as he kissed my palm. The feeling flared down my arm as he folded my fingers around that kiss. Exhilaration swept my entire body.

I cleared my throat, and said, "You have kissed my hand before."

He smiled. "Well, yes, that is true." And: "Burnsby has bestowed an ermine cloak on Sophonisba, as a Christmas gift."

I didn't care.

"I have no wish to break the outdated sartorial laws of England," I said, laughing with my eyes. "I don't give a fig."

("A fig" is slang, by the way. Unladylike slang. Even worse, *American* slang.)

Godric uncurled my fingers and kissed my palm again. "Do you give a fig when I kiss your hand?"

I swallowed, unsure what to say. He kissed it one more time and folded my fingers again, as if to preserve the touch of his lips.

"Have you seen a footman scurry after the king, holding up his train so it never touches the ground?" he asked. "Ainsworth's cloak sweeps the snow as she passes."

"We might send her round and round the cloister," I suggested. "The grooms seem to be endlessly shoveling."

“The footmen are warmer and more cheerful since you allowed them cloaks. When I arrived, I didn’t understand the extent of idiocy presiding over the abbey. Not knowing that Ophelia had been banished from the dining room, I endured such a cheerless meal with Sophonisba and Mima that I considered leaving.”

“Thank goodness you didn’t!” I cried from the heart. Then I colored. “This is hard to endure, and you are a refuge, not being a Burnsby.” Embarrassment chased down my spine like ice. “*I’m* a Burnsby.”

“No,” he said. “You’re you, Evie.”

(I am still trying to figure out who “Evie” is, but I appreciated it.)

At dinner I sat between Mima and Ophelia and practiced my French by asking them about their days, even though Miss Wellington had already told me that Mima wandered for hours in and out of the chilly cells built for monks. She had repeatedly tried to open the door to the ramparts.

“I found something for you,” Mima said unexpectedly. Her footman wheeled forward a baby carriage with black wheels and a wooden body. “It was made after a design for the Duke of Devonshire.” She frowned. “I think there ought to be a green parasol.”

Did she think I was carrying a child? Burnsby’s child? Or had my preference for Godric become so obvious that she assumed I was committing adultery?

Humiliation twisted my gut. I detest the idea of people whispering about infidelity, the way they had about my reasons for marriage.

In my mind, the wolves howled back and forth.

“Peony *is* becoming too heavy to carry,” Ophelia said, getting up to investigate. “This is so adorable, Aunt Mima! She will love it.”

I let out a soundless breath before I leaned over and gave Mima a kiss on the cheek. “It was very kind of you to think of my pet. Thank you.”

“It was moldering in the attics,” she said. “Better off being used, if only by a piglet.”

After the meal, the six of us sat around one of the library tables and sorted delicate, pastel-colored Parisian sweets onto squares of green gauze, adding a shilling, and tying each gift with a sprig of holly.

“Just like my mother used to give to the household,” Mima said, blinking. “I don’t remember her.”

“I don’t remember my mother, either,” Ophelia said matter-of-factly.

“Few of us do,” Lance added. “Will you help me tie this bundle, Aunt Mima?”

The evening ended with Ophelia wheeling Peony back to the kitchen, the piggy gazing over the side of the carriage at the ground with evident surprise. Godric escorted me around the colonnade to my chamber, his hand stretching the width of my back.

Though I had decided to reject society’s idea that ladies are delicate, I loved it when his size made me *feel* delicate.

“Good night,” Godric said at the door, his hand lingering. “Knock on my door tomorrow morning?”

I bit my lip. I wanted to put my arms around his neck, the way Colette did to Lance. Kiss the corner of his mouth, because I’m not brave enough to take his hand and draw him through the door into my room.

(How can I be thinking such suggestive thoughts? I’m no adulteress!)

I shaped my lips into a smile and tried not to read anything into his gaze. Godric didn’t smile back, but a wild emotion lurked in his eyes. Covetous. Ungentlemanly.

I’m almost certain he had never given another gentlewoman this look, because if so, he would be married.

Remember that tournament between myself and Sophonisba? I had the sudden, blinding idea that perhaps he was engaged in a similar battle—and the prize was me. “Good night,” I yelped, and fled into my room.

Waking up on the twenty-second, I told myself (not for the first time) to stop being so foolish. All chatter about French peacocks aside, I would never commit adultery.

When Tess first entered my employ, she had decreed that drinking tea in the bath was a heathen practice. Now she understands that I am barely sentient in the morning and hands me a steaming cup as soon as I’m immersed in hot water, allowing me to think (and soak) in peace.

This morning I lay back, my head on the edge of the bathtub, and wondered about adultery. Exactly how sinful is it?

Very, my scanty religious training told me.

Once I was dressed, I drew aside the tapestry and knocked on Godric’s doorframe.

“One moment,” he called.

Was he unclothed? Perhaps he was tying his cravat. I was consumed with curiosity about his neck. The closest I’d come to seeing a gentleman’s neck

was when a footman splashed tomato soup at the table. Burnsby had torn off his cravat, trembling from irritation, and I'd caught sight of a scrawny neck, white as cream from never seeing the light of day.

I didn't peek through Godric's door, no matter the temptation.

"I'll meet you outside," I said instead, then walked into the cloister.

Across the colonnade, Sophonisba was snuggled against my husband's side, looking for all the world like a royal bear in her ermine coat as they made their way toward the second garden and his bedchamber.

Resentment flared in my gut, but I told myself again that despite my husband's perfidy, I would not break the vows I made. I would never commit adultery, especially for revenge.

Godric's door opened. His eyes met mine, heat curled in my belly, and I forgot the sour taste of the word *adultery*. He glanced across Sophonisba and then smiled at me.

(Yes, *smiled*.)

"Shall we go to the kitchen and wish Peony good morning?"

I was not mistaken in what I saw in his face. His eyes were neither condescending nor contemptuous.

I nodded jerkily, because I don't know how to be this person. A wife, contemplating adultery. The thing that society despised, and the thing that now felt most necessary to my well-being.

Godric turned to walk beside me. The snow had let up for the time being, and fitful sunshine lit the courtyard. "Did you hear the wolves howling last night?"

I shook my head. When we left the library, I had been filled with the warmth of a good Bordeaux and even better friends. Thinking of my dreams sent a blush up my cheeks.

Godric cast me a quick glance. Instead of his hand landing on my back, he held it out to me, eyes intent on my face. I drew my right hand from my muff, and his gloved hand curled around mine.

I felt suffused with embarrassment and, at the same time, longing. How do people survive polite society, feeling like this? How do they go about their daily life, struck by so much desire for a person's touch that they would beg for it?

Neither of us said a word, and he dropped my hand when we reached the kitchen door. I hung up my mantua and went to my knees to greet my piggy,

Peony's tail wagging so quickly that it seemed likely to spin off her body. She scrambled into my lap and snuffled at my face as I kissed her.

"She is the love of the kitchen," Miss Wellington said, coming over to greet us. "Do you suppose she'll grow much larger, Lady Burnsby?"

"She is rounder, but her legs are still short," I said. Burnsby had nonchalantly informed me that runts are usually killed at birth, a fact that made me hug Peony tighter.

Godric came down on his haunches and scratched behind the piglet's ear. She cheerfully scrambled from my lap to his knee, accepting caresses as her due.

"Cook requests your advice regarding the Christmas puddings," Miss Wellington told me, as I rose and went to wash my hands, leaving Godric and Peony together. "There's the rump steak pudding, as I told you, to be served with oysters and kidneys. She'll leave that in the cook pot until the last minute, but we were wondering what you'd think if she removed the plum pudding from the steamer early, on Christmas Eve."

"My family's cook always did so the night before," I said, smiling across the room at the abbey cook. "Christmas morning is so busy; it's a relief to have the plum pudding out in one piece."

"It might grow cold," Cook said anxiously.

"Wrap it in several cloths and put it on the hearth. You did make two, one for the household and the other for us? Flaming brandy will warm them up."

"We made two of everything," Miss Wellington said. "It'll be a feast such as this household has never had."

"You'll need to keep Peony away from the puddings."

"Miss Ainsworth has expressed a fear that a pig in the kitchen might lead to smallpox," the housekeeper said expressionlessly. "I promised to share her concern with you."

Godric was washing his hands; he glanced over his shoulder and said, "Smallpox is spread by people, not piglets."

Miss Wellington beamed. "Archie will be turning the spits all afternoon and tomorrow morning for roast peacock and goose. He said he doesn't dread it like usual, because Peony will keep him company."

My heart skipped a beat at Godric's expression. He wasn't precisely smiling, but I could see his emotion. He liked Peony. He liked me.

When our eyes met, I had the strangest feeling that he and I were thinking the same thing. This visit felt as if we were master and mistress, come to the kitchens to check on the progress of the Christmas feast. The idea pierced my heart with longing.

I did remember the danger my annulment posed to his judgeship, but I couldn't seem to keep it in mind.

"Have the grooms collected greenery for decorations?" Godric asked Miss Wellington.

"Aye, we have a towering pile waiting outside the sanctuary, since no one in these parts dresses a house before the twenty-fourth. We'll trim the drawing room last, after you and Sir Lancelot return with the Yule log."

Godric walked casually to stand beside me. His shoulder touched mine as he talked to Miss Wellington about hawthorn, holly, and ivy.

I stood still, investigating the coal burning in the vicinity of my heart, while the housekeeper explained that kissing boughs would be hung in the doorways, as mistletoe can't be found in Scotland.

I flinched, picturing Burnsby embracing Sophonisba.

Godric stopped her midsentence. "There's no need for kissing boughs this year."

Miss Wellington's eyes flickered. "Lord Burnsby will request them. We've already woven three."

"Put one over the door in the library, one over the newlyweds' bedchamber door, and the other . . ." He glanced at me.

"Over the door to the music room," I said. Sophonisba and Burnsby could grope each other at a threshold I would never cross.

Miss Wellington nodded.

"Lance and I will find a Yule log as soon as that lazy sod gets out of bed," Godric said. He turned to me. "You and Ophelia could accompany us, if you wish."

"We're definitely joining you." My family had always spent the holiday in London, where new snow turned to coal-black slush within the hour and Yule logs were things of legend. I couldn't wait to explore the white cotton that padded the tree trunks surrounding the abbey. I was curious whether we'd find wolf tracks circling the walls, or whether the gossiping wolves stayed far away.

"I'll send a maid to bring the count and countess morning tea," Miss Wellington said, her eyes twinkling.

By two hours later, when we set out to hunt for the log, I was drunk on heady, improper feelings. Godric's leg brushed mine as he helped me put on my mantle. I felt as if I was rushing headlong into a deep ocean, heedless of water splashing in my face.

I didn't care.

Lance and Godric led the way from the abbey, followed by two boisterous grooms with axes on their shoulders. Colette, Ophelia, and I traipsed after, swathed from head to foot in heavy wool, our furred hoods up, since snow was sifting like sugar from the sky.

The forest seemed to stretch for miles in all directions, the abbey walls behind us the only interruption. We set off randomly in pursuit of a fallen log thick and hard enough to burn for all twelve days of Christmas.

"We won't go far," Godric said, dropping back to walk next to me. My heart spun—because there he was.

"I'm quite warm," I said, as he took my mittened hand.

"We won't walk far from the abbey walls due to the wolves," he clarified.

I glanced around. The woods that seemed so ominous when I first arrived had transformed into a frosted paradise. I didn't see tracks of any kind. As I watched, a red cardinal streaked between tree trunks, setting off a snowfall.

"Found one!" Lance bellowed ahead of us.

"If you will forgive me, my lady," Godric said. His voice dropped when saying those two common words: "my lady." And his smile?

He *smiled*.

Remember how hard his eyes were when we first met? They weren't anymore, not when looking at me. I almost glanced behind me to see if there was another woman in sight, someone who was everything that I'm not.

Not married, for one. Not scandalous.

Ahead of us, the men were clustered around a fallen tree, discussing the measurements of a perfect Yule log. Godric squeezed my hand, a feeling as fleeting as a kiss, before plowing through the snow to join them.

"Get to work, *mes amis*," Colette shrieked. "It's bloody cold out here."

Ophelia threw herself backward into a bed of snow. "Let's make snow angels!"

"Why would you do such a thing?" Colette asked. "What if you disturb a wolf's den? The mother wolf will be upset. She will emerge and bite your toes off."

“Rubbish,” Ophelia said, holding her red mittens out to me. “Pull me up, Evie. I don’t want to ruin my angel’s skirts.”

We both admired her angel, but Colette shuddered at the idea of lying on the ground. She and Ophelia went over to watch the tree being chopped into a log.

Since no one was watching, I toppled backward into a fresh blanket of snow. Thankfully, the mother wolves remained hidden in their burrows as I spread my arms and turned a swath of pristine white into angel’s wings. I began to widen my legs to brush snow to the sides for skirts—and froze.

This was *so, so* improper.

A lady’s legs are never spread wide. Never. Not even in the privacy of her own bedchamber, let alone in the out-of-doors and in the presence of men. One of the advice manuals I’d read and reread as a girl described a lady as a clothes-peg, her legs as immovable as if they had been whittled from a single piece of ash wood.

Yet Ophelia had blithely created an angel, and no one was watching me. I swept my angel’s wings again, thinking about it.

I didn’t want my angel hobbled like a clothes-peg, so I pushed my legs apart. Cold air stole under my mantle. I wore wool stockings that tied with a ribbon above my knees. My thighs prickled to life, making the private area between my legs feel—

Odd. Cold. Vulnerable, but not in a bad way.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pushed my legs even farther apart, as wide as I could force them. Snow melted into my boots and soaked my stockings, turning the silk ribbons holding them up into chilly worms.

All the same, the feeling was so enlivening, unladylike, and plain *fun* that I kept sweeping the snow with my legs even after my angel’s skirts were surely perfect.

When I opened my eyes and raised my head, I saw that Godric was waiting at my feet, dark eyes fixed on me.

Shame blazed over my body. *He’d seen me.* Seen my legs. I snapped back into a ladylike pose although it was too late; he’d already seen me splayed out in the snow. Despite the freezing air, my cheeks were suddenly roasting.

“I’m not sure what you are doing, Evie, but may I help you up?” He held out both hands.

“Be careful of my angelic skirts,” I managed, pointing to the sweeps of snow on either side of my legs.

He bent over, caught my waist, and lifted me straight into the air. I squealed like a girl—except I was never a squealing type of girl. His arms closed around me, drawing me tight against him.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, his voice gravelly and low.

“No!” I gasped, unable to disguise the breathy note in my voice. A burn of desire roared down my legs, despite the shame and wet stockings. “I must have scratched . . . scratched my neck on a twig under the snow.”

Godric didn’t glance about to see if anyone was watching us. He bent his head and pressed his lips against my throat. They lingered there for a moment, long enough for my knees to go weak.

“Better?” he asked, his voice a deep rumble.

Stupefied, I stared at him, because honestly? I *knew* what was happening. I had watched Colette give Lance kisses full of promise and desire. I saw a silent invitation in Godric’s eyes.

My lips parted, thinking of it.

“I know it’s not gentlemanly, but you were on your back, your legs wide,” he growled under his breath.

My heart thumped. This was precisely why women don’t spread their legs around men.

But there was nothing disgusting in his gaze.

“Your expression— Evie, what do you want from me?”

The burning coal was in my chest again, sending a dangerous heat rushing down my stomach, down my legs, *between* my legs.

“We could make a snow angel together. My body would keep you warm,” he whispered. I imagined his heavy body pushing me into a snowbank.

Married.

Married, married, married.

The word sounded through my heart and body like a warning bell. When I married Burnsby, I had vowed to be faithful, without regard to the fact our marriage would never be consummated. It had been an easy promise—at that point I had no plans to go anywhere near a man, be he French peacock or English lover.

Now I felt like a Christmas pudding steaming in the pot, flushed and tingling with the heat of embarrassment.

And desire.

Godric's eyes were slightly glossy, a streak of color on his cheekbones. "You—" he said, his voice guttural. "Damn it, I've never felt so fucking greedy."

His crude sentence should have outraged me, but it didn't. I wanted to hear more. I didn't care what he said, as long as his words had that hungry note.

We *shouldn't*, I reminded myself, excellent reasons tumbling through my mind. Instead of voicing them—mentioning his judgeship for example—I licked my lips.

His eyes caught the movement of my tongue, and his eyelids drooped. "Evie," Godric said, raw and desperate.

"Hoy!" Lance bellowed.

Godric's lips moved again, and he moved away from our embrace. "Hell."

"B-bollocks?" I offered, as I summoned up a smile. Everything happening between us was wrong, and yet it was so delightful that I couldn't help laughing. My next sentence came out without forethought, without a ladylike wrinkle of my nose, a simper, a whisper. Nothing. Just blunt words.

The truth.

"I've never been this happy."

Eighteen

At a young age I concluded that shamelessness was a sin. Now I think that “shame” is a terrible thing, a weapon society wields to force everyone to adhere to their laws. So far, I have come up with two laws of my own: Be Kind. Don’t Lie.

Godric swallowed hard; I saw his throat bob. He met my eyes with an expression that promised he understood me.

I don’t understand myself. I’m a mess, an improper, emotional mess.

“Godric!” Lance shouted. “Get your arse over here!”

“Stay close,” Godric ordered.

I stared at him. My mouth couldn’t shape a reply. Not when I was caught in a daydream in which a man—*this* man—was making love to me in a snowbank.

“Evie,” he whispered, his voice hoarse. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“I’m not!” I squeaked, with all the credibility of a cat staring into a bowl of cream. “Go, go!”

He dropped my hands and walked over to stand shoulder to shoulder with Lance, slinging one of the ropes over his arm. He twisted around once again. “Walk in the track of the log, just behind us.”

I nodded. Colette waded through the snow to stand next to me. “Don’t worry. I will defend her,” she called.

Godric and Lance took the lead, bending at the waists and straining forward as they shouted encouragement to the grooms. The enormous trunk jerked once, and again, before it began carving a track through the snow.

Shrieking, Ophelia ran ahead of the log, acting more like a ten-year-old than a young lady of fourteen. Why shouldn’t she? She hadn’t had much of a girlhood.

As commanded, Colette and I walked in the thick scar left by the log.

Her eyes were bright as she watched Lance strain against the rope. “There’s something about it, isn’t there?” she asked me, impish and naughty. “It wouldn’t suit me to marry a farmer. I like Lance’s embroidered coats and his elegance while dancing the quadrille. I couldn’t marry a man of lesser stature, no matter how attractive he might be while laboring. But. *But!*”

But indeed.

Halfway back to the abbey, the men paused to remove their heavy coats and toss them on top of the log, wiping sweat from their foreheads. Snow filtered off tree branches high overhead and glistened in Godric's hair, shining for a moment before melting.

He turned around and shouted (again), "Stay close!"

"We are!" Colette bawled back at him. "Bloody bossy man," she muttered. "Does he think that we want to be picked off by a wolf? See what I have?"

She waved a thin spike. "If a wolf runs at us, I shall poke him in the eye. You could use one of your hairpins."

"What if you haven't time before the animal gobbles you?"

"Fleur told me that wolves howl as they run, which will give us warning," she told me blithely.

Godric picked up the rope to begin pulling again, now without a coat. His thighs strained. My breath caught.

His thighs were massive.

His *arse* was massive. How did he hide that under sedate black coats? No wonder he went to Weston for tailoring; Weston is famous for tailoring military men, those whose haunches are socially acceptable due to their profession but must be disguised.

When Godric's arse flexed, his tight breeches outlined every muscle.

It occurred to me that I must be experiencing a fit of madness induced by the shock of being confronted by Sophonisba. Hecuba became grieved and wept; Alice became affronted and fainted; Genevieve became . . .

Angry and adulterous?

The church wouldn't accept Burnsby's mistress as an excuse. I may not have attended Mass regularly until my marriage, but I have managed to pick up some tenets here and there.

A few *Thou shalt not*s.

Adultery is the slippery path to hell, for one.

There's another key *shalt not* about murder. Last night I dreamed that Burnsby was trampling a flower garden, and somewhere among the blooms his first wife was hiding. Hoping to save Lily, I was about to accost him with my poker when the blossoms changed to stone ramparts.

Even in my dream, I didn't push Godric off. But I considered it. Sadly for my immortal soul, I considered it again in the morning, while wide awake.

The moment we entered the outer courtyard, grooms swung the huge gates shut and shot a steel bolt across them.

"If it hadn't been for the rear view of such well-shaped men in wet breeches, I'd count this a waste of time," Colette said, putting away her spike. "Wolves were as scarce as ghosts."

I turned to her, eyes wide. "What did you say?"

"Thighs, breeches—what is English for *le cul*?"

"Arse," I said.

"That," she said, grinning.

"You're so confident," I said, hearing the ache in my own voice.

"My mother taught me confidence. Given the color of her skin, Paris society was unfriendly when she first arrived, married to my father and much in love. But she persevered."

Back in the abbey, Godric escorted me to my room.

"I need a bath," he said, lingering at my doorway. His hair wasn't in its gentlemanly tumble. It was tangled and sweaty, which should be disgusting.

It wasn't, not after that display of rawboned strength.

And the way he smelled? Like a sweaty god collided with a fir tree.

Apothecaries should bottle Godric Everley's sweat and sell it to weedy aristocrats hoping that the right perfume will catch an heiress.

"My clothes are clammy and wet, thanks to the snow angel," I said, trying to sound casual. "Undoubtedly, Tess has prepared a bath for me." Our eyes met, and I caught my breath again.

"Now that the door is open between our rooms, I hear you splashing around in the bath," he commented.

I didn't only see his expression; I saw straight into his imagination. He was kneeling by my tin tub, carefully running a sponge over my skin.

Naked skin.

I almost choked on a wave of hot desire. I swallowed hard, and before I could stop myself, said the only thing that came to mind: "What do you think about when you hear me splashing?"

How did I think his eyes were hard? They're soft. And grave. And . . . full of desire. Desireful. Right now he was just staring at me as if—

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"You would be shocked. Aghast, perhaps." He pronounced *aghast* with a purposefully elongated *ghast* that made me giggle.

“I know what men think about in these circumstances,” I said, not entirely truthfully. I couldn’t meet his eyes; instead I studied the puddle of melted snow around our shoes.

His finger curled around my chin, gently bringing my face up to his.

“What things do they think about, Evie?” His eyebrow, the one with the slash through it, raised ever so slightly.

My hands still felt clammy, but the rest of me was hotter than his rear end in those breeches.

I wanted to disappear before saying it aloud, but I held his gaze and whispered, “You know what things, Godric.”

His mouth parted, as if he was shocked (dare I say *aghast*?) by my honesty.

“You said I was brave,” I reminded him. “I think of it as blunt.”

But when his expression changed, I proved myself a coward. “Never mind. Later,” I added, breathless. “See you, dinner, library.” With that incoherent snippet of speech, I backed into my room and closed the door on his amused expression.

“Here you are!” Tess called. She took a pan of steaming hot water off the fireplace and added it to the bath she had waiting, rose petals floating on the surface. “You have a good soak. I’ll run out to the kitchens and fetch hot chocolate to warm you from the inside. It’ll be a wonder if you don’t catch your death of cold, wallowing through snowbanks to find an old log.” For all her French training, Tess is an East Londoner, where no one plays in the snow.

There was nothing new about that bath, and yet everything was new.

I didn’t listen to Tess’s chatter. I went through the motions as she undressed me, paying no attention, because all I could think of were Godric’s parted lips, and how easy it would have been to rise up on tiptoe and lick them.

Wait, lick his lips? Maybe I was going round the bend. People didn’t lick each other’s lips. Or did they? I’d only seen kisses and stolen glances over cups of tea. But surely I was not the only one who—

I heard a splash from the adjoining room. Godric was in the bath, naked, just as I was. When had I paid enough attention to him to be certain what his body would look like without clothing?

If I was right about what he was imagining—and I *was*—to tend my bath, Godric would kneel by the tub, naked. Above the rim I would see a brawny

chest, because he was brawny. His neck was thick, too. And his chin was square, almost square. An assertive chin.

I have an assertive chin, too. I touched it, to make sure that it was square-ish, but the touch of my own fingers sent a zing through my body. He would touch me with fingers much wider and more powerful than mine.

The last few nights, sitting by the fire after dinner, he had cracked nuts and handed me the meat, watching to make sure I ate the whole handful, a shadow of pleasure crossing his face every time my lips opened. I often caught him looking for me, *at* me. Taking care of me, making sure I was fed and warm, and not in danger of being caught by wolves. He had become as nimble at buttoning up my mantle as Tess was.

He regarded me with affection.

I'm not stupid. I know that a motherless childhood leaves a person vulnerable. Yet another reason why I ended up with a septuagenarian? Burnsby had pretended to like me. That's seductive for someone such as myself, who had played mother to another child and was never mothered herself.

I couldn't help thinking that Godric would never allow his daughter to marry a man who'd had three wives and was rumored to have killed them.

He wouldn't even allow me, a relative stranger, to trip over an uneven cobblestone. Or starve for lack of fourteen almonds.

Leaving his imaginary daughter to the side, if Godric knew how I felt at this moment, he would do his best to help. He would ease this intolerable *ache* where no ache had ever existed before. An empty, longing, utterly improper ache.

His fingers would brush over my shoulders and run down my arms in a sweet, delicate stroke. I caught sight of my breasts, my nipples standing out like chilled raspberries, dropped my head to my knees, and closed my eyes.

On the other side of the open door, Godric's valet offered him a bowl of water to rinse his hair. Water must be flowing down his chest, thighs, those male bits that hang off male bodies and don't appear ridiculous nor small—not after seeing Godric in clinging breeches. Heat spread through my whole body like a fever.

I. Was. Married. *Married, married, married.*

To a very rich old prune.

(But really, truly, why have a prune when you could have a young, juicy plum, or, more precisely, a pair—I cut that thought off. Had I lost all claim

to being a lady? It seemed so.)

When Tess bustled back into the room, I was still sitting there, head propped on my knees, praying for sanity. There seemed to be precious little of it around. I couldn't sum up the decency to be ashamed of my adulterous inclinations.

Me.

Contemplating adultery. *Me*.

Not Lady Burnsby.

Me: Evie. Making decisions for myself. Making mistakes sometimes, but making choices. I prided myself on my independence, but I had never imagined I would face this choice.

"The kitchen is fussing over Ainsworth's cloak," Tess announced, handing me a mug of hot chocolate.

I thought about Godric's lips. I imagined dripping hot chocolate down his chest and licking—

"Ermine is terribly hard to clean. The cloak he gave her was meant for a taller person, and by evening the hem is black from dragging. Still, Ainsworth wants it delivered to her in the morning, spotless."

"Huh," I managed.

Tess's lip curled. "I saw her making her way around the cloister like a big sheep walking on its hind legs. She'll be lucky if a wolf doesn't creep in and gobble her for breakfast."

"Tess!"

My maid was unrepentant.

I went back to thinking about Godric's lips. *I'm* unrepentant. Longing for Godric was dragging at my bones. A lady is governed by shame.

And yet, here I was, shameless.

Nineteen

If you ever find yourself in mortal danger, believe in ghosts. Keep your head. Oh, and trust your piglet.

December 23

The next morning, I called a greeting to Godric through the tapestry and set off for the kitchen alone. Outside, I paused to enjoy the peacefully falling snow that had turned the quadrangle into a puffy featherbed, before I set out for my daily review of the menus with Miss Wellington.

Halfway to the kitchen I stopped, because the door to the chapel stood open. Normally, it was kept closed and barred, ensuring that Mima wouldn't catch her death of cold wandering through it.

Curious, I walked into the vestibule. If I were building a secret passage, I would disguise it among the elaborate wood carvings of vines and berries that lined one wall of the sanctuary.

The chapel was even colder than I remembered, its windows white with frost. I ran over to take a quick look at the vines, thinking that I'd need Sophonisba's ermine cloak to give the chapel a proper search; my breath wasn't a vapor, but a white cloud. I peered at the carved vines for a minute before deciding to ask Godric if he and Lance had tried turning every wooden berry in search of knobs.

Already shivering despite my mantle, I turned around and dashed back across the chapel. Miss Wellington would be waiting for me.

When I reached the vestibule, the door to the cloister was closed.

I shoved the door, dismayed to find that it wasn't merely closed; it had been bolted. One of the grooms assigned to shovel the walk must have seen it open and unwittingly locked me in. Yet I'd only been in the chapel for a moment. He had to be close by.

I banged and shouted as loudly as I could.

Then I screamed.

I heard nothing through the thick door. What's more, the snow likely muffled my voice.

If I survived, I would insist that furs be hung in the vestibule. I had an hour, if that. I could stand by the door screaming, or I could try to find that passage, if it existed.

No time to be cynical. There would be time for that when I was a ghost, a time which hopefully wasn't drawing nearer. I knew what a heroine in a novel would do.

I compromised. I ran over to the walls and poked at berries until my fingers were frozen, whereupon I tucked them back inside my sleeves, ran back to the door, and screamed. At some point, I ripped strips off my chemise and wound them around my hands. All the while, I prayed. I was in a chapel, after all. It seemed axiomatic.

But what did *axiomatic* mean? Did I know the definition? The cold was freezing more than just my fingers. My memory seemed to be going with it. Perhaps if I survived, they would find me as addled as Aunt Mima.

Thirty minutes later, my voice was hoarse, and I was losing the inclination to run. I was unbearably cold. Part of my brain insisted that if I huddled in the vestibule, I could rest, since that room was a fraction warmer than the chapel. Another part stubbornly forced me to run back and forth, even after I began stumbling.

I didn't want to die. Bloody hell, I wanted to outlive Burnsby.

I wanted to hug Rosie one more time. I wanted to help her find love. I wanted to raise Ophelia to be the lady I'd been too afraid to become. And I wanted my own dreams to come true, big and little. I wanted to make a snow angel with Godric's body on top of mine. I wanted to make love. I wanted to have Godric's children.

All the things that I had barred from my life by marrying Burnsby raced through my mind, but they were becoming confused. Had I lived a life before him? Rosie's face danced in my head. My father's, too. They would be devastated if I died.

That was a certainty. I grasped onto my family's grief and made myself run across the chapel one more time, beating ineffectively at the door and shouting. At this point, I was croaking.

No one answered. I staggered, turning back toward the sanctuary, my feet so numb that they felt as if they didn't belong on my ankles. My very bones were cold, and my teeth had stopped clattering, which seemed like a bad sign.

I put my hand on the doorframe of the vestibule, gathering strength. Could I push at one more berry? Two more berries? Oddly, I felt somewhat warmer. Falling to my knees seemed like a good idea. After all, it was a chapel.

Then I saw a flutter of movement from the corner of my eye and flinched. The rats were coming, and I wasn't even dead. That thought stiffened my knees.

Maybe they couldn't get up onto the altar. Could I climb the altar to avoid being nibbled? It seemed a herculean task.

The flutter came again, and this time I turned my head, catching sight of something white near the far wall of the chapel. White, like fox fur. Like the ripple of Ophelia's cape. It was gone as suddenly as it appeared. Was I hallucinating?

I walked over to that wall stiff-legged, as if my knees had frozen. Perhaps all I had below my waist were two wooden canes, the clothes-peg legs that a lady was meant to have.

No berries had been carved here. There was nothing to push. No ghost presented herself.

I thought the flutter came from an alcove that might have held the statue of a saint, years ago. The base where the statue would have stood was white with frost, and I didn't want to touch it. My fingers curled with dread. But I did it.

I reached out and pushed down as if I were a statue, perhaps a Virgin Mary. I shoved as hard as I could and prayed as hard as I could—and let go.

A door opened in the wall, revealing a dark rectangle. I staggered through; behind me the door closed as silently as it had opened, leaving me in utter darkness.

Perhaps I was daft with cold because the air felt like warm velvet against my cheek. Darkness was not tangible. Tangible was Godric's warm palm on my cheek, sliding down my waist, wrapping around my—

Goodness! Even on the brink of certain death—death by becoming a human icicle, no less—my body roared back to life. *I wanted to live.*

The passage was so narrow that I could touch both sides at once, but since my fingers were numb, I leaned against one side instead and forced my feet to move. I desperately wanted to curl up and take a nap, but if I died here, no one would know what had happened to me.

I kept going, step by step, focusing on Godric's face. He would search for me. He would tear the abbey apart but would find no trace of me, the footsteps leading to the chapel long since swallowed by snow. They might decide I had ventured into the forest and been dragged away by wolves.

I couldn't bear thinking of Ophelia's face. Colette would care for her. Rosie would weep and so would my father. He would grieve for me and care for his remaining daughter.

No one would care for Godric. He would return to London, his temper a scourge against criminals, his heart cracked.

I staggered along the passage until it turned, and I turned with it. Didn't Godric say that this passage ended in the kitchen? Or perhaps he didn't know. My mind was so confused.

How would I find a protruding brick to open the door in this darkness? I might die close to people, just on the other side of the wall. No, I wouldn't. I would rather beg for my life than surrender to my own death. I am an English lady.

(An axiomatic truth: English ladies do not beg.)

Abruptly I walked straight into a brick wall. The dislodged brick had been at Godric's shoulder. I pretended he was beside me; he was feeling the wall, not me. I was too tired and cold.

Strangely, wonderfully, the wall was warm. I spread my fingers against it and, unable to find the dislodged brick, went down on my knees. My eyes were closed, but I fancied that I felt the brush of warm fox fur, as if an invisible cloak, the cloak Ophelia had worn, wrapped around me.

I mouthed, "Thank you," just in case Hecuba was keeping me company.

At least I would die knowing what it meant to love someone other than a family member.

To *be* in love.

To be loved.

I felt a twinge of regret, followed a flash of gratitude because I heard his voice once again.

"Evie!"

Twenty

If you ever have a near-death experience (and I hope you don't!), you'll find it tiring, but remember that it's worse for the people whom you almost left behind.

I didn't die.

In novels, the hero saves the heroine. My twist on that narrative? I had been saved by a ghost (a real ghost, not a teenager in a cloak), a pig . . . *and* the hero.

I woke up hours later, enveloped in a blissfully warm cloud. The moment I stirred I realized that Godric's arms and legs were wrapped around me. We were lying under a pile of blankets and a quilt.

I was only wearing a chemise.

(Scandal! That jolted me fully awake.)

"Evie?" Godric gently rolled me onto my back.

"Hello," I whispered hoarsely. I felt like a raw egg, as if I might crack.

"Darling." He cupped a hand around my cheek, leaned down, and put his forehead against mine. "You almost died. Evie, *you almost died.*"

"Did you find me in the corridor?"

"Peony did." His voice was hoarse. "Without Peony, we couldn't have found the passage. I searched the chapel, but of course you weren't there. How do you feel?"

"My bones ache. My fingers and toes are prickling." I brought one of my hands from under the covers and said, somewhat wonderingly, "My fingers didn't fall off from the cold."

"Crumpsall thinks the kitchen wall saved you from frostbite." Godric's voice cracked. "How in God's name did you find the passage?"

The morning's horrors felt dreamlike, theatrical, as if some other person had run back and forth in the freezing chapel—though the way my body ached suggested otherwise. My legs, in particular, were throbbing painfully.

"A ghost showed me the door," I said. "And before you tell me that hypothermia made me hallucinate, there *was* a ghost, Godric."

"A monk in a habit?" He sounded skeptical.

I shook my head. "I believe it was Hecuba, wearing her fur-lined cloak. I think she wrapped it around me when I was lying by the wall."

He kissed my forehead again. "Blessed be Hecuba."

(Not that he sounded convinced, but he is a barrister, after all.)

The door opened. Tess ran over to the bed. "You're awake." She was smiling, but her eyes were strained.

Godric slipped from under the covers and stood.

(Disappointingly, he was fully clothed. If one had to be discovered in bed with a man—albeit by one's maid—oh, never mind.)

"Hello. Do you have any tea?" I asked hoarsely. I regarded my hand. "Perhaps I should wait until my fingers stop trembling."

"You're lucky not to have frostbite," Tess said, at her most tongue-wagglingly severe. She turned to Godric. "My lady should soak in a hot bath."

"One question first. What were you doing in the chapel, Evie?" Godric asked.

"I wanted to find the passage," I said, grimacing. "I meant to take a quick look, but I suppose a groom closed the door, not knowing I was inside. Curiosity killed . . . well, almost killed me."

Godric sat down on the bed and wrapped his arms around me, his face buried in my hair. "Don't risk your life like that again. Please."

I turned my head to kiss his cheek.

"It's time for a bath," Tess said. "You're filthy, Evie, and that's a fact. These sheets will have to be boiled, because his lordship hopped in to warm you without removing his boots, and he was nearly as dirty as you."

The immaculate gentleman whose cravat was always perfectly starched? Godric was covered in grime and dust from head to foot.

"You came through the passage?" I asked, starting to figure it out.

"He saved your life," Tess said, her voice cracking. "His lordship and that pig of yours." She took a breath and visibly turned herself back into a perfect femme de chambre. "Sir Godric, your valet is waiting for you."

"Actually, Evie says a spectral Hecuba saved her. Thank God for that ghost," Godric said. He leaned down and dropped a kiss on my cheek—as though it were nothing, a careless gesture after years of marriage.

My head was foggy, but one sentence floated through, bright as any star: *He kissed me.*

Wait, seriously: He *kissed* me.

"Tess, could you give us a moment?" I asked.

“What—” he began as the door closed behind Tess, but with what little strength I had, I reached up, grabbed his cravat, and drew his mouth down to mine.

Warmth spread from where our lips touched and lit me up inside.

When he eased away, we simply gazed at each other.

“What—” he began again, but I cut him off.

“You may not kiss me—*kiss* me, Godric—and then leave. I was fine before I met you. I was fine with boring teas, and even more boring hymns, and my dreadfully boring prune of a husband, but you may not come in here and kiss me as if we’ve been kissing our entire lives and then depart without a word.”

I snickered at his bewilderment and kept going.

“Have some respect for the almost dead and our first kiss. Don’t act as if it was nothing and then leave.”

His lips parted, those maddeningly kissable lips, in surprise, confusion, I don’t know, and then he leaned down and gently, as if worried I would break, lifted my chin and gave me another sweet, longer kiss, one that sapped the minuscule amount of mustered energy I had left.

I opened my eyes again to see his face just above mine.

“Better?” he whispered.

I blinked, my eyelashes brushing his cheek.

“Yes. Much. Thank you.”

(Thank you? What was I, a schoolgirl of fifteen?)

“You are most welcome. I appreciate your fiery reprimand. Fair warning: That was our second kiss, but there are many to come.”

Godric backed away, and I let go of his cravat, which I was still inexplicably clutching.

“Do not leave this room without me, Evie.” He tucked the covers under my filthy chin.

“I won’t,” I promised. “You’re smiling.” I extracted my hand from the mountain of blankets so I could touch his lips. “I was afraid that you might never smile again if I died.”

He swallowed hard. “You weren’t wrong. Will you marry me? After the annulment, of course.”

“Wait, Godric,” I said, putting a finger to his lips once more, this time to hush him, “is *that* your proposal?”

“Well—” he began, but I cut him off again.

(In case you haven't noticed, I had found my voice, and I wasn't afraid to use it. *Finally.*)

"I am still married!" I almost bellowed, surprising myself with that outburst. "Unless something happened while I was asleep, you'll have to wait."

Godric gave a bark of laughter, cupped my face in his hands, and leaned in to kiss me again.

"You must stop!" I said, turning my head to the side so he kissed my neck.

"Stop what?"

"Stop kissing me so suddenly!" I squeaked. "I am a lady, Godric, and ladies are prone to fainting spells. For all you know, I have a delicate constitution."

He leaned down until I felt his breath on my neck. "I suppose I'll stop kissing you. After all, I do not want to leave you so speechless that you cannot say 'yes,' now, do I?" he whispered gruffly.

His *eyes*. I had no idea that so much desire and affection could be conveyed with one look. One glance.

"I'll tell Ophelia and Colette that you are awake." But he didn't let me go, and I saw tears glint in his eyes.

"I kept walking because I thought of you," I whispered. "You and Rosie and Ophelia, and my father, too."

A raw sound came from his throat.

After Godric left, Tess helped me hobble to the bath, washed my hair, and brushed my teeth when my fingers trembled too much to hold the toothbrush. I soaked in the bath for over an hour as she added more pans of hot water from the fireplace, until my legs stopped aching. I nodded off with my head on the side of the tub, my hair hanging to the floor as it dried. When I woke up, she bundled me into a warm nightgown and put me back to bed under clean sheets.

I felt much better after another nap. "Is it nighttime?" I asked, pushing myself up to a seated position.

Godric was sitting by the window, reading. He was himself again, dressed in immaculate black with a perfectly starched cravat. "I have food for you." He fetched a plate and sat on the edge of the bed.

I was a married woman, alone with a man not my husband, but who cared? None of that mattered. I had almost died.

(Dramatic, I know, but true.)

He fed me pieces of chicken, triangles of toast and honey, almonds, and lemon tart.

“This is a strange meal,” I observed.

“All your favorite foods.”

That was true. “How on earth did you know?”

A lopsided smile spread across his face. “I watch you, Evie. It’s something of a passion. I had a hard time leaving you to take my bath.”

“My very own barrister in shining armor,” I said, nibbling another piece of toast. “When did you find out that I was missing?”

“I didn’t know for an hour at least,” he said, his eyes stark. “I went to the kitchen to find you, and Miss Wellington gave me Peony’s leash, thinking you were still sleeping. I was confused because you’d called goodbye to me, and when I came back, Tess said you were long gone.”

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my palm. “I imagined Burnsby —” He shook his head. “I burst into his bedchamber, thinking he might have done you harm.”

“You said that Burnsby is not a murderer,” I reminded him.

“I lost my head.” Godric winced. “I woke them up.”

“What did Burnsby say?”

Godric’s mouth tightened. “He suggested that you’d been caught by wolves in the courtyard and bleated something about God’s will.”

“That sounds like him.”

(Didn’t I tell you that Burnsby would count on divine providence to rid him of an unwelcome wife?)

“I tucked Peony under my arm and ran. You couldn’t have left the abbey, because the side door was still locked and bolted. You weren’t with Ophelia or Colette. Grooms and footmen began combing the attics and spare rooms. When I walked through the passage leading from the library, thinking you might have decided to explore, I remembered that you wanted to find the lost passage.”

“Which I did!” I interjected. “Albeit with help.”

He leaned down and kissed my mouth. “Which you did, thank God. The chapel door was bolted, but I decided to check just in case. The moment I opened the door to the chapel, Peony began struggling. I set her down and she dashed straight toward the wall below the alcove, bless her little nose.

When I pushed down on the alcove's base, she ran into the passage, but I went back for a lantern."

"The darkness was so thick that I couldn't find the right brick to open the door." I winced, remembering. "I felt so sad, knowing you would search for me."

"I would have taken this abbey apart," Godric said grimly.

I smiled at him. "I might have given up, but I couldn't leave you."

He started kissing me again, and it took a while before he picked the story back up.

"When I reached you, you were huddled against the kitchen wall, and Peony was curled up against your stomach, nuzzling your face. Luckily, the passage ended next to the bread oven. The warmth kept you alive."

I wiggled my fingers. "I am glad to have all my fingers."

Godric cleared his throat. "May I take you away from this cursed place, Evie?"

"I'm not sure we can call it cursed, since Hecuba saved me."

"So you said." His voice was wry but not disbelieving.

"I had been trying to find the entrance among the berries and vines. At the last minute, I saw a flutter, the edge of a fur-lined cloak, and followed her to the alcove."

"Then I am deeply grateful to Hecuba," Godric said, meaning it. "It's still snowing hard, Evie, but the moment it stops, we are leaving. Fair warning: As long as we're in the abbey, you must never be alone, not for a moment. Accident or no. Not until we're in England."

I wreathed my arms around his neck. "I'll happily leave with you. But meanwhile, tomorrow is Christmas Eve, unless I lost track of time."

"Tonight you shall eat in bed," he ordered.

I nodded, still exhausted. "I'll get up tomorrow."

We discovered that Rousseau's philosophy sent me straight to sleep. I awoke later when Ophelia and Colette came to visit.

"You frightened me!" Ophelia cried, throwing herself onto the bed and snuggling up against my side.

"I'm sorry," I said, smoothing her hair.

Colette seated herself next to Ophelia. "We wanted to find the passage, but not at the cost of your life."

"I'm so sorry I frightened both of you," I said, reaching out to her.

Colette clung tightly to my hand. “Now that you are *not* dead, I have something to say. You and I are friends. I don’t have . . . Well, I have many friends, but none of them are like you. A true friend. When you live in England and I live in France, I shall write to you, and you shall write to me.”

I leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I would love to write to you.”

In the end, the three of us made a tearful agreement to carry on an epistolary conversation for the rest of our lives.

“Godric will write to you as well,” Ophelia said, her tone mischievous. “Won’t you, Godric?”

He had retreated to the window again and was reading. “Write to whom?”

“To Evie!”

His eyes met mine. “When we are not together, I shall write to her.”

The expression in his eyes stole away my breath. Ophelia didn’t notice, but Colette flipped open her fan and giggled.

I turned to Ophelia. “Your mother saved me. She showed me where the passage began.”

“My mother’s ghost?” Ophelia demanded, as skeptical as Godric. “Hecuba? Are you sure?”

Colette’s eyes rounded. “You actually saw a ghost? What did she look like? Was she in a shroud?”

“I saw just an edge of a white cloak, but Ophelia, it was trimmed with fox fur. I didn’t pay attention at first, because I thought I was hallucinating. I’m sure it was your mother.”

Her brow knit. “I’d say that was impossible, but do you remember I told you that I accidentally scared Alice from the library? Burnsby had ordered me to stay in the nursery, and it was a bitterly cold December.”

“How I despise the man,” Colette muttered.

“The very next day, Alice began screaming about a ghost all in white and never entered the library again. I decided she had seen me in the morning when I snuck in to retrieve my book—but she didn’t scream until the afternoon. Perhaps it was actually my mother who frightened her off.”

I tucked her more securely against my side. “I think Hecuba made sure that you could be warm and fed in the library.”

Ophelia gave me a wobbly smile. “After that, she made certain that I had you.”

“So this *is* a haunted abbey,” Colette said, shaking her head. “I’m disappointed that I haven’t met her. I’d coax Lance into taking me to the chapel, but I have a feeling we’d end up with pneumonia and no ghost.”

“Hecuba may appear only when she needs to protect her daughter,” I suggested.

“Or an innocent like yourself,” Colette said.

“If I were Hecuba, I’d be more communicative,” Ophelia said. “I would flutter around the abbey all night, rattling a chain so that everyone knew to come out for a chat.”

“She is not a *common* ghost, available for tricks,” Colette said. “Have you read *Hamlet*?”

“Yes, but I didn’t like it much.”

“No one does. My point is that parental ghosts show up for important events, not just to pass the time.”

“I guess so,” Ophelia said. “But the nursery was lonely after my nanny left. Even a chain-rattling phantom would have been welcome company.”

“Now you know that Hecuba was with you,” I said, squeezing her. “Even when she didn’t show herself. You can believe in her.”

“This has been a wretched day,” Ophelia said, head on my shoulder. “You got lost, and Mima wandered off when her footman was in the privy. She turned up safe and sound in the nursery, turning over the old games.”

“Would you read to me?” I asked, guessing she needed something to do.

I drowsed the evening away, listening as Ophelia read aloud *Hamlet* in honor of parental ghosts. I spent most of Christmas Eve in bed as well. I never get sick, but the chapel’s freezing air felt as if it had sunk into my bones. It wasn’t until noon that I began feeling like myself; I insisted on sitting up to eat luncheon with Godric and Ophelia, albeit in a wrapper rather than proper clothing.

Tess shooed them away after the meal, remarking that my hair would take at least two hours to tame.

“I’ll be in my chamber,” Godric said, lingering at the adjoining door. “Do not walk through the door into the cloister without me, Evie.”

“Her wandering days are over,” Tess announced, waving her hairbrush.

I groaned. “It was an *accident*. I behaved rashly, but I don’t need a guard! I’m not Mima.”

“Either Lance or I will be with you at all times,” Godric said.

I opened my mouth to protest, but he shook his head. “Please. I need to know you are safe.”

I gave in because of the look in his eyes.

Remember the expression with which Lance regarded Colette?

I recognized it.

I recognized it!

Twenty-One

You have no need for this advice, Rosie, but I offer it anyway: Families come in all sizes and shapes. Until now I never understood that the word has little to do with bonds of blood.

December 24

Godric's eyes tightened when I threw off my cloak in the library that evening, revealing an evening gown sewn from midnight blue velvet. The sleeves were fashionably puffed, but they extended to my elbows, and the bodice covered my breasts. My only jewelry was a bracelet of woven gold and pearls, with pearl clasps in my hair.

Burnsby had declared the gown not fashionable enough for his wife, so I rarely wore it. He would despise my scarlet lip color and the way curls fell over my shoulders—like a hoyden, he would say, his thin lips twisting.

Fortunately, he was far away, in the dining room with Sophonisba and a great deal of silver plate.

When Godric kissed my hand in greeting, I felt myself bubbling with happiness. If desire is a foreign language, like French, I am learning its accents. Godric likes this gown; I have no need to bare my chest to gain his attention. The unsaid is palpable.

"Miss Wellington has done a magnificent job bedecking the library," I said, glancing around me.

"The maids have concluded that since Hecuba saved your life, they have nothing to fear. So they helped decorate the chamber for Christmas."

When everyone was assembled for dinner, I seated myself beside Godric, feeling bold and slightly mad. He leaned close and brushed a lock of hair behind my shoulder, muttering something about fire, though the candelabra was far away.

Colette's eyes sparkled as she hid her expression behind her fan.

"Godric is not as prickly as he used to be. He just smiled, which is practically a Christmas miracle," Ophelia observed.

"Ophelia!" I said, shaking out my napkin. "You're embarrassing me."

"You're past embarrassment," she said blithely.

I should summon up good advice. “Marriage is a sacrament,” I said, trying to sound wise. I sounded as false as Burnsby claiming not to have warned me about Sophonisba due to my maidenhood.

She rolled her eyes. “Colette’s, perhaps, but not yours.”

She was right—and wrong. I made those vows, after all, even if my husband hadn’t meant his.

Yet I no sooner caught sight of Godric than my heart began thumping, skipping beats. I had trouble keeping my tranquil expression locked in place.

Mima drifted into the room and stopped short, seeing me. “Are you a ghost?” she asked. “I mean, are you a ghost, too?”

Ophelia slipped her hand into mine.

“Thankfully not,” I said. “You are not spectral, either, Mima.”

“I never said I was. The wives are, the ones who aren’t you.”

The cook had made us a magnificent dinner: roast goose and roast boar, Yorkshire pudding and mince pies.

“If we were home in Paris, we would dance now,” Colette said, when we were finished eating.

“You’d have to roll me around the room like a barrel of ale,” Ophelia said. “I’ve never seen so much food on one table!”

Colette smiled at her. “One couldn’t expect more than four courses in the wilderness, but in Paris, you’ll enjoy far more.”

Once we were playing commerce, I raised an unpleasant subject. “Tomorrow, we gather in the drawing room to light the Yule log with Burnsby and Sophonisba.”

Ophelia wrinkled her nose. “Must we?” she groaned aloud. “We could steal the Yule log and light it here.”

“I am the lady of the abbey,” I said, a good deal more calmly than I had at that first, drunken dinner. “Tomorrow, I shall host a ceremonial Yule log lighting in the drawing room, followed by Christmas dinner. As it is Burnsby’s birthday, Miss Wellington has prepared a special cake for the sweets course.”

“Perhaps Sophonisba won’t join us,” Ophelia suggested. “I know where the keys are kept, in the housekeeper’s study. I could lock her in the abbot’s chamber.”

I shook my head. The final round of the tournament was upon us; I couldn’t win by hiding or sneaking about.

“The abbey is *mine*,” I said, voicing what I’d been thinking in the last week, “at least until you inherit it, Lance.” I threw him an apologetic glance. “The way this household has been treated is abominable. Miss Wellington has never been allowed to offer the customary St. Stephen’s Day meal to the staff, grooms, and gardeners. Expenses for the day after Christmas were to be no more than for a usual meal.”

“Ophelia, have you ever had Christmas dinner?” Lance asked, his voice dropping a full octave.

She rolled her eyes at his expression. “Miss Wellington always gives me a slice of figgy pudding.”

“I apologize again,” Lance said, reaching over and taking her hand.

“We could celebrate Christmas twice a year,” Colette offered. “We have fifteen birthdays to make up for, Lance. We’ll be throwing parties monthly.”

Lance groaned. “You’ve had no birthday celebrations, either?”

A grin spread across his half-sister’s face. “I’ll gladly accept presents year-round, just as our father sings Christmas hymns regardless of the season.”

Ophelia had had a far more challenging childhood than I, and yet she shone with grace and strength. She remained *herself*, whereas I built walls

I pushed the thought away. “I need a favor.”

Colette’s eyes were amused, Lance’s and Ophelia’s interested, Mima’s befuddled. I didn’t glance at Godric, because whenever I’ve looked at him, my mask of serenity deserted me. My feelings were written on my face, and Ophelia had teased me enough for one day.

“Miss Wellington told me that the Yule log has been ceremoniously wrapped in hazel twigs and is ready to be lit,” I explained. “Before that happens, the portrait of Sophonisba Ainsworth, which hangs over the mantelpiece, must be removed.”

“Let’s take it down and burn it on top of the Yule log,” Ophelia suggested.

Godric shook his head. “It’s not so easy.” His voice sounded oddly flat, perhaps due to the hush that came with the snow hissing against the windows and muting the world beyond the abbey walls.

“Why not?” Ophelia demanded. “I can’t imagine anyone thinking it’s a worthwhile piece of art. Alternately, I could stow it in one of the secret passages—or in the attics! No one other than Mima visits them.”

“We could explain its disappearance by claiming that Hecuba’s ghost absconded with it in a fit of rage,” Colette suggested, waving her fingers.

“I was hoping to see it hang in a cow barn,” I said, “but I could accept the attics.”

“The portrait is bolted to the wall,” Lance stated.

“You tried to dispense with it before?” Colette asked, snuggling up next to him. “I am unsurprised. I married you for your excellent taste, among other things.” She tilted her mouth toward his—but Lance didn’t brush a kiss on her lips.

“After Hecuba locked herself in her room and sobbed for two days, the boys tried to cheer her up by removing it,” Mima said suddenly.

She had stared blurrily into space throughout the meal, silent except for a few random sentences. For example, she had informed me that she’d try to find the baby carriage in the attics—despite the fact that Peony was napping to the side of the room in that very pram.

Ever since my rescue, the cook has been giving my piglet special treats to celebrate her miraculous nose; Peony’s stomach was as tight as a drum, and she couldn’t stay awake.

“Burnsby and Sophonisba caught Lance in the act,” Godric said.

Something in his voice made fear curl in my stomach. I took one of his hands under the table and held it fast, my fingers wrapping around his.

“Sophonisba demanded we be punished,” Lance said.

“He beat Lance,” Mima said. “Right there in the drawing room, with a poker. Hecuba refused to leave her room for the whole of the holiday and didn’t learn about it until later.” Her body sagged like a half-full sack of grain, her head drooping to the table.

“A poker?” Horror slammed down my spine. My eyes flew to the scar bisecting Godric’s eyebrow. “You can’t . . . You can’t mean . . . No!”

Colette choked and caught her husband’s cravat, drawing Lance close. “You told me those scars were from a boyhood mishap at Eton!”

Godric gave me a wry smile. “Unfortunately, Lance and I both bear the marks of Burnsby’s parenting.”

“That’s appalling!” I said fiercely. “Why did you ever come back?”

“I am Burnsby’s ward,” he reminded me. “Until Lance and I reached our majority, we had nowhere else to go.”

A tear slid down Colette’s cheek. Lance kissed her mouth before he rose with her in his arms. “At age twelve, my dearest friend, my brother in all

but name, managed to wrestle the poker from my father's hands, which resulted in that rakish scar on his face." He walked from the room, still carrying Colette, without another word.

My lips opened, but no sound came out. I imagined two boys—one with somber eyes and black hair, and the other with laughing eyes and golden hair—trying to make Hecuba stop crying.

There my imagination slammed to a halt.

Perhaps I'd invade Burnsby's room with my poker, rather than waiting for him to accost me again.

"I thought *I* had an awful childhood," Ophelia whispered.

Godric grimaced. "He beat us whenever Sophonisba insisted that we needed correction, but that was the only incident involving a poker, and the last time he touched either of us. He knew that he had gone too far."

"You could have lost an eye!"

"Lance insists that the scar on my face is attractive," he said, in a voice that did not invite further commentary.

"He should be imprisoned!" I snarled.

"Few boys at Eton are unmarked. Whipping is common."

"Revolting," Ophelia said with disgust.

"No wonder most of them grow up to be such bastards," I said.

She blinked at me. "No lady says that word aloud, do they?"

"Don't blurt it out in a ballroom."

"You didn't like it when I talked about 'bloody Burnsby.'"

"From now on, you call him whatever you like," I said. "I had no idea who your father was when I suggested one's parent shouldn't be spoken about discourteously. Burnsby has not earned your respect."

"He's a slug," Ophelia said with evident satisfaction. "A slimy slug."

I was holding Godric's hand so tightly that he was in danger of losing circulation. "I can't live here another minute. Not after hearing this. I *cannot*."

"We will leave as soon as the snow lets up," Godric reminded me. "One or two more days."

"How can we escape if the road is blocked?" I asked, my voice rasping as I clung to his hand. "I could walk, if we have to. Ophelia, you could walk, couldn't you?"

"No," Ophelia said flatly. "The wolves would eat us up."

Godric dusted a kiss on my brow. “No need to walk. I’ve already spoken with Crumpsall. The household has three sleighs for use in emergencies. We shall take them after the storm breaks.”

“Clifford put his will behind the portrait,” Mima said abruptly. “That way no one can destroy it. He’s afraid Lance will do that.”

I felt a sudden, piercing loneliness for my family. If my father had a shilling to his name when he passed away—doubtful—he would split it between myself and Rosie. We were his children. He loved us.

“Why would Burnsby have done that?” Godric said, frowning at her.

She didn’t answer.

“Aunt Mima?” Ophelia asked.

Her head tipped to the other side, and then snapped upright. “What did you say, dear?”

“Why would Burnsby worry about Lance destroying his will?” I asked.

She blinked. “He’s like that, isn’t he?”

“Like what?”

“He’s not a good man. I’ve always known it.”

I met Godric’s eyes, silently acknowledging that he’d used the same words, about the same man.

Mima stood up and ambled toward the door, listing to one side like a ship heeling in the wind. Her footman took down a thick cloak from its hook, wrapped her in it, and escorted her away—hopefully to her bedchamber, not on some midnight perambulation through the attics.

“Mima has grown worse since I arrived,” Godric said.

“What will she do when I leave? She’ll be alone. She ate supper with me in the nursery, because she despises Sophonisba,” Ophelia said.

“I’ll take her to London,” I decided. “Perhaps a doctor there could help. If not, at least I can keep her safe.”

Godric began smiling, the bleak expression gone from his eyes. “You’ll try to save Mima, too? You never told me exactly how you came to adopt Peony.”

I blinked at the change of subject. “How is that relevant?”

“Peony was on the way to the butcher’s,” Ophelia said helpfully. “Evie scooped her off the street and saved her life.”

“You try to save everyone,” he said. “Be they your sister or a stray piglet.”

The way he was smiling at me was shockingly intimate. I shifted in my seat.

“You plan to move to Burnsby’s London townhouse?” he asked.

I nodded.

“A townhouse with a madwoman in the attic and a piglet in the kitchen belongs in a novel.”

“Don’t forget the virgin bride,” Ophelia said impudently.

“Ophelia!” I said, giving her a true scowl.

She ignored it. “Burnsby will be too afraid of Evie to come to London.”

“Afraid of me?” I echoed.

Ophelia nodded. “They told me in the kitchens that Sophonisba tried to have Peony stewed, but Burnsby didn’t back her up—and he *always* backs her up. You don’t see it, but when you pass him in the courtyard, he flinches at your expression.”

“Homicidal,” Godric agreed. “I say that as a prosecutor familiar with murderous expressions.”

“So I needn’t move to France,” Ophelia said. “I could live in London with you and Peony and Aunt Mima.”

“I would love that,” I said, smiling at her.

“After all, I need to be mothered,” Ophelia added, clasping her hands in a dramatic, imploring expression. “Hecuba *gave* me to you. I’m an orphan, like Peony. I need to be saved.”

“You needn’t convince me,” I said, drawing her close. She put her head on my shoulder. “Even had I never wandered into the chapel, I’d have happily mothered you.”

“What about Godric?”

“I don’t need a mother.” His eyes told me that he needed a wife.

A lover.

Me.

“Godric already lives in London,” I said. “He will pay us visits.”

He gave me that amused look that doesn’t reach his lips but is no less genuine for it.

“We’ll summon him whenever we want a man to chaperone us to the theater. Shakespeare every week. Twice a week.”

His expression changed to something like apprehension.

Ophelia raised her head, eyes shining. “That sounds like so much fun!”

“I will—if you wish—introduce you to society.”

“Burnsby always said that no man would want me,” Ophelia said.

When Godric and I gave her incredulous looks, she added, “I’m just saying.”

“They said unkind things about Colette, but she chose Lance over two dukes,” I reminded her.

“Burnsby was wrong, Ophelia,” Godric said, his voice stern. “If your father doesn’t give you a dowry, Lance and Colette will. I’ll double it, and you’ll be the wealthiest heiress on the marriage market.”

“Why would you do that?” Ophelia asked, squinting at him.

I flashed her a look. I may have decided to reject the rules of propriety, but expressions of gratitude are simple civility.

“Thank you for offering me a dowry, Godric,” she amended, “but why would you do that? Do I need a huge dowry to lure a man into marriage?”

He was obviously startled by that idea. “Not at all!”

“Lance is Godric’s brother, which makes you his sister,” I said. “The two of you are family. Luckily, I can teach you all the pig-herding skills necessary to find a husband. You’ll have your very own piglet, but the skills apply to London gentlemen as well.”

I had imagined myself avoiding London ballrooms after Rosie’s debut—but I would do it for Ophelia, when her turn came to debut. She had spent far too much time in that freezing nursery eating stale toast, thanks to my rotten husband.

I also felt a debt to her mother not just for saving my life, but for giving me such an original, intelligent daughter.

I would teach Ophelia whatever I could.

And she would teach me how to live in the world without building prison walls around myself.

Twenty-Two

If you ever have the opportunity to pry open a tomb (à la Romeo, the Friar, and practically everyone else in that play), or you need to pry an offensive portrait from the wall, I recommend a useful implement called an iron crow.

Men are pigs,” Ophelia announced. “I don’t want one of my own. I’d prefer bookstores, museums, and the theater to a ballroom.” She stood up, clearly considering the topic concluded. “Let’s unbolt the portrait and fetch the will.”

Godric frowned, but she cut him off before he could speak.

“I’m not afraid of my father. I’m not a twelve-year-old boy; if he tries to punish me, he will be very sorry. See what Colette gave me?” The spike that Colette had intended to use against a wolf was pinned to Ophelia’s bodice.

(Remember what I said about Hamlet? If the prince had accused *my* Ophelia of being a bawd, she would have poked him in the eye and settled the question.)

“You can stab a wolf, but not your father,” I said, laying down the law, the way a mother should.

“Unless you need to for your own safety,” I revised, changing the rule as soon as I made it.

“I cannot be party to destroying a legal document,” Godric stated, laying down his own law.

Ophelia sighed. “You are both obviously not from Burnsby’s bloodline. Luckily, I am. If the man has disinherited Lance, the way Mima said, then the will must be burned. It’s simple.”

“Under the law of primogeniture, which rules England and Scotland, the eldest son inherits all entailed property, which in this case would mean the abbey, the London townhouse, and the Scottish estate, with all its lands. Burnsby cannot disinherit his son,” Godric said.

Ophelia shrugged. “Trust me. He’s found some way to give it to Sophonisba. We should burn that bloody portrait and, if necessary, the will as well.” She crossed her arms, staring down at us.

I let out a soundless sigh, imagining Ophelia once she met the man she wished to marry. I had an uneasy feeling that it would be as hard to dissuade her from someone unacceptable as it would have been to steer me away from Burnsby.

“If there’s no reason to destroy the will, I’ll put it to the side,” she added with a patently false air of innocence.

I stood up. “I want the portrait removed, if only because you and Lance should never see it again, Godric.”

“I’ve sworn to uphold the law,” he reminded us, rising.

“You’re so lucky to know me,” Ophelia told him. “You could wait for us here. Evie and I can figure out how to unbolt a portrait from the wall.”

“In *Romeo and Juliet*, the friar brings along an iron crow to pry open Juliet’s tomb,” I said. “There’s one leaning against the wall next to the buttery, together with the shovels.”

In the end, “bolted to the wall” proved an exaggeration. Ophelia climbed onto a chair, yanked up the bottom of the frame and reported it was nailed to the wall at the top. Godric stepped forward, but I shook my head and picked up the iron crow.

“Removing the portrait feels like something I should do on behalf of my fellow wives.” I slipped the implement between the wall and the bottom of the portrait. After one good wrench and an unladylike grunt, the portrait came away from the wall, toppling into Godric’s hands with a splatter of plaster dust.

“The will is pinned to the back,” Ophelia reported. She plucked off a folded piece of parchment.

“I’ll take that,” Godric said, holding out his hand.

Ophelia reluctantly handed it over. “You’re no fun,” she complained.

He tucked it away in his coat.

“You aren’t reading it?” she cried.

“I’ll give it to Lance. He may wish to remind his father of the laws of primogeniture. No man’s will can overturn the statutes of England.”

“Ophelia, will you please fetch your mother’s portrait?” I asked. “What shall we do with Sophonisba’s?” I asked Godric, after she ran from the room.

He strolled over to me and ran a finger down my cheek. “Dust,” he explained. “Are you tired?”

“No. I don’t have a ladylike constitution,” I explained. “When the whole household came down with influenza, I was fine. My chapel adventure feels as if it happened a week ago.”

Godric kissed me with his lips open, his eyes lidded and suggestive. His mouth was demanding and soft, both at once. I didn’t understand what he was asking for until his tongue slipped between my lips.

That kiss woke a part of me that had been deeply asleep. I let out a sound like a whimper, and then flinched from embarrassment. He didn’t mind. His eyes glowed, and he drew me closer.

“Ophelia might return any moment,” I said, shocked by the thirsty sound of my own voice.

He stepped back, the look in his eyes making me boneless. “Later.” If my voice was thirsty, his was low and gravelly.

“I don’t suppose we could throw that paper in the fire now, while Ophelia’s gone?” I asked, forcing myself to stop thinking about his lips.

Unsurprisingly, Godric shook his head. “If he wishes, Lance may toss it onto the fire in his bedchamber.”

“I could read it before throwing it in the fire,” I suggested.

“That would invite Burnsby’s wrath. You asked me once if Sophonisba had affected my marital choices, remember?”

I nodded.

“My childhood visits to this abbey did affect me. I litigate cases in which wives have faced marital cruelty. Women like Hecuba.”

“You fight for abused women?”

He nodded. “*You* are the reason I came here for Christmas.”

I gaped at him.

“If I merely wished to meet Lance’s bride, I could easily have traveled from London to Paris. I would have done so, eventually—but when I learned Burnsby’s new wife would be visiting the abbey for the first time, I turned my practice over to my associates.”

“You didn’t . . . Why? I’m not—”

“As I told you, I was in the abbey when Burnsby’s second and third wives first visited. There was nothing I could do to help Hecuba; our attempt to destroy the portrait didn’t work. We heard her sobbing every day, all the way through the Christmas holiday. So even when I believed you a fortune-hunting woman taking advantage of an old man—”

I scowled at him, and he broke off with a laugh.

“I was wrong. Very wrong.”

“Not really, but thank you,” I said with dignity.

“My point is that I came to the abbey not to meet Colette, but to see whether I could help you. I just didn’t imagine *you*.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“You, Evie. The way you are.” He ran a finger over my right eyebrow. “Are these truly drawn in charcoal?”

“Darkened,” I answered. “They’re lighter than my hair.”

“They are the only false thing about you,” Godric said, his voice low.

“Don’t be absurd! I am nothing more than a collection of learned behaviors.”

“You are loyal, loving, and true. You make amusing attempts to be proper, but your expressions betray you. I wish I’d seen you in a London ballroom, your eyes flashing with rage as you pretended to simper while reviewing architectural designs in your head.”

My lips curled into a reluctant smile. “It’s not a bad description, but I assure you that no one except Rosie has ever noticed my bad temper.”

“I hate the way you squashed yourself into a ladylike shape, even if it was to help your sister. Loyal *and* loving, Evie. And human.” His lips brushed over mine. “May I?” he whispered.

“Yes,” I breathed, curling my hands around his arms to keep him close. I was trying to adjust to a dizzyingly erotic experience when a voice came from behind us.

“The nursery has an illustrated book about Astley’s Circus,” Ophelia remarked. “You resemble two seals holding up a ball with their noses.”

I would have moved away, except Godric’s arms held me close. “My favorite seal,” he said, kissing my nose.

“A seal?” I asked dazedly.

“A sea creature who can be trained to walk on land,” Ophelia informed me. “Shall we hang this portrait of my mother over the mantelpiece?”

“Absolutely,” I said, and this time Godric let me move away.

I didn’t want to summon Crumpsall at this hour, and moreover, it was better for the household staff if the portrait exchange was achieved behind their backs. Luckily, Hecuba’s portrait was so large that leaning it on the mantelpiece covered the damaged portion of the wall.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Ophelia asked.

Hecuba had been painted in a lace-trimmed brown velvet gown, her hair thickly powdered. She had a sweet mouth and a triangular face. She resembled her daughter but without the strength of character that radiated from Ophelia.

She was a lady who should have been adored by her husband, but at the back of her eyes I saw sorrow.

"You could be sisters," I said, making Ophelia smile.

"I thought the two of you would dispense with Sophonisba's portrait while I was gone, but it seems I have to do everything myself," she remarked. She tucked the plumed monstrosity under her arm and went out the door, flapping her hand. "Happy almost Christmas!"

After the door closed behind her, I groaned, dropping my forehead onto Godric's shoulder. "She saw us kissing. I'm married to her father."

"She was patently not shocked by a mere kiss. She has grown up in this abbey," Godric reminded me.

He was right.

"If anything, it will be healing, as is the affection she sees between Lance and Colette. You and I—"

I shook my head. "Don't, *please*. I'm still married."

"Genevieve, your marriage is unconsummated. It is not legitimate in England or Scotland," Godric said gently.

"I said vows in a chapel," I told him. "Until I'm granted an annulment, I am married, and adultery is wrong."

I could see he was torn.

"I said vows," I repeated. "It's not as if I'm planning to murder Burnsby —"

"I'm glad to hear it," he said, flashing his rare smile.

"But I don't want to commit adultery, either. I vowed to be faithful. My husband said the same, to many women, and blithely lied each time. I cannot lower myself to his level. Do you see what I mean?"

Godric groaned, the sound rumbling in his throat, sending desire chasing down my spine. "I understand, and I appreciate your decision to respect your vows. But," he said, taking my hands in his, bringing them to his lips, "I still wish to kiss you."

He started to kiss each of my fingers, making my heart hammer.

"I—I want . . . I want that, too, Godric." The words tumbled from my mouth in a hushed whisper. "But I worry about your judgeship. What if I'm

notorious after divorce or annulment? You could not marry me.”

He shook his head. “With the backing of the king, your annulment will be virtually unnoticed—a matter for bishops, not lords.”

I wasn’t entirely convinced, but I went willingly when he gathered me into his arms. I fit there as if we were made for the purpose of pleasuring each other (an extraordinarily bawdy idea). Yet he wasn’t looking at me only with desire.

His gaze was tender. I was thinking about that when his head bent to mine, and our tongues met.

By the time he broke away with a groan, my eyes were surely wild and my hair wilder. His hands had tousled the curls that Tess had painstakingly brushed into smooth ringlets.

I didn’t feel like myself; my knees were weak. I managed to say (intelligently), “My goodness.”

Godric’s eyes were lingering on my lips. “So I may kiss you while you’re married to Burnsby?”

“In the evenings,” I clarified. “Not all day long, the way Lance and Colette do.”

“There are other things we could do, if you would like.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but I shook my head. “Ladies kiss gentlemen before marriage,” I explained. “But they don’t do other things . . . whatever they are.”

Godric was grinning, flat-out grinning. Sober, condescending, legal Godric. Barrister to the crown. Et cetera.

He laughed, dropping a kiss on my cheek before gathering me up in his arms again, his body hard and hot against mine. “I could teach you, if you’d be willing. But if you will allow only kisses, Evie, then I will happily kiss you for years.”

I pulled back from where my head rested on his shoulder. “You would kiss me for *years*, if I’m married that long?” I asked, my eyes searching his face.

“For years,” he vowed. “Burnsby can’t live forever. Someday I’ll kiss you at the altar. After you make vows a second time, to me.”

“You mayn’t kiss me where anyone can see us,” I said, laying down another law.

“Evie, darling, that ship has sailed.” That scarred eyebrow of his was in the air again.

"I'll speak to Ophelia."

"Hoping she won't share her clever seal metaphor with Colette? Good luck. May I escort you to your chamber, my lady?" He held out his elbow. At my door, he bowed and kissed my hand, his lips lingering.

"Good night," I said.

"I can't wait until we're married," he said.

"You're putting the cart ahead of the horse," I observed. "My husband is elderly but not decrepit. In light of my marital status, you *can't* ask me to marry you."

He opened his mouth to argue, but I shook my head.

"Tomorrow is Christmas," I told him, backing into my room. He stayed in the doorway, watching me. "Did you glance at Burnsby's will while Ophelia and I were arranging her mother's portrait?"

"Yes." He stepped forward and dropped a kiss on my lips before I could stop him. "Merry Christmas, darling."

Darling?

"Sweet dreams."

(I know you're wondering if we began kissing again. The answer is yes. I would defy any woman to resist the invitation in his eyes.)

I fell asleep without worrying about Burnsby.

(I kept my poker at hand, but wouldn't you?)

Twenty-Three

If you ever have the opportunity to introduce a sophisticated young woman to the story of Mary and Joseph, prepare for skepticism.

December 25

As soon as I woke up, I ran to the window. Snow was sifting down, no longer thick and heavy. With luck, the next morning would bring sunshine, and we'd finally be able to climb onto the sleighs and leave.

Meanwhile, it was Christmas, and hope filled my heart.

Burnsby and I had regularly attended services in the village near his Scottish estate. The monstrous hypocrisy my husband had shown—sitting in the first pew at the village kirk while disrespecting his vows—nagged at me until I pushed the thought away.

I had been wrong about his character. *Very* wrong. Yet Burnsby's calm, kindly demeanor had fooled more people than me. Godric's father, for one, had left his only son in Burnsby's care.

On inquiry, I had discovered that Ophelia had never been to a church service in her life. She understood little about the Bible or Christianity in general. Most of what she knew regarding Christmas came from hymns, which she summed up as a baby, wise men, and a bunch of angels.

"I have a book about Noah's Ark," she reported. "All the animals process up a ramp, two by two, as if they were heading for the altar. The book shows two ants, two giraffes, two elephants—and two bulls with great horns. No cows. That would be the end of roast beef, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted. I had grown up convinced that possessing knowledge of "earthy matters" was ruinous, but Ophelia was my opposite. She had grown up free to be logical.

Determined to teach her that Christmas meant more than Burnsby's birthday, I assembled the six of us in the library after luncheon. Having volunteered to read the story of Jesus's birth, Godric had taken the weighty King James Bible from its stand and was seated by the fire, leafing back and forth through gold-trimmed pages.

Lancelot dropped onto a sofa, Colette beside him. "Shall I help you find the chapter? I doubt English barristers spend a great deal of time reading the Good Book."

Godric shot him a dismissive glance. "Oh, ye of little faith. I'm a lay reader in my parish." He blinked and turned to me. "Is that a problem?"

"Now why on earth would your Sunday traditions pose a problem for Evie?" Colette asked mischievously.

"It's marvelous," I said, meaning it.

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise," Godric read aloud.

I loved the way his deep voice shaped the ancient words.

"When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost."

Ophelia interrupted, her expression vaguely nauseated. "Does 'come together' mean what I think it means?" She was snuggled in a chair with Peony.

"This isn't an appropriate moment to explain, but don't 'come together' with anyone before you're married," Colette said, with a Frenchwoman's brisk practicality.

Godric began reading again.

"Joseph's behavior is somewhat illogical," Ophelia said once Godric had closed the Bible. "He wasn't in the room when the Holy Ghost spoke to Mary, which means he couldn't know about the miracle. Why wasn't he cross when she turned out to be pregnant?"

"Under the circumstances, most men would have jilted Mary," Colette agreed. "He was particularly honorable."

"He kept faith even in illogical circumstances, which was a test of his love for his wife," Lance said.

"Also his faith in God, because certainty requires no faith," Godric said quietly. "Joseph kept faith in God and in Mary."

"Burnsby would have been unbelieving *and* unforgiving," Ophelia said.

"Joseph was a better man than your father," I said, in one of the world's greatest understatements.

"Burnsby would never have entered the stable," Mima put in. "He gave up hunting because he thinks deformities can be caught by proximity to large animals. I am surprised that he allowed you to have a pig, Evie."

"I didn't give him a choice," I replied.

“I am learning a great deal from you about spousal management,” Colette said, giving her husband a little poke.

Ophelia scratched my piglet’s chin and was rewarded with a happy oink. “Maybe Peony’s ancestors were in the stable, wagging their piggy tails when Jesus was born.”

“Mary lost her son,” Mima said, her voice cracking. “Her son was taken.”

Godric rose and replaced the Bible on the stand, walked over to Mima, and held out a hand. “Shall we go to the kitchen and ask for buttered toast?” We had discovered that she was more cognizant surrounded by the bustling cheer of the household staff.

“No, I’ll go for a search, a quick search,” Mima said, jumping up. Over by the door, her footman sprang into action. A few days ago, I saw him chasing her around the quadrangle, a woolen cloak flapping in the wind; this time she allowed herself to be buttoned up before she left.

“Mima has stopped asking if I’m her sister,” I said. “Now she keeps asking if I’m a ghost.”

“I’m still her sister,” Colette said cheerfully.

Ophelia stood up. “Thank you for reading aloud the Bible,” she said to Godric. “The story of Jesus’s birth was thought-provoking, and I have a great deal of respect for Joseph. Since Peony hasn’t had her luncheon, I’ll take her to the kitchen.”

She put the piglet into the baby carriage, tucked a blanket around her, and headed for the door, sticking her head back in to cry, “Peace on earth, and good will to men and women and pigs!”

“A Christmas nap is a time-honored tradition,” Lancelot told Colette, a lazy smile on his face.

Which left Godric and me alone in the library.

I wanted to sink onto his lap and put my arms around his neck. I wouldn’t do anything so dissolute. “What caught your attention in the Bible when you first sat down?” I asked. “I noticed you flipping back and forth between the pages before you began the story.”

“Ophelia’s name is not recorded.”

I scowled. “Is there a quill and ink in the library?”

“I don’t think so, but we can ask Lancelot to amend the entry.”

“I wouldn’t want Ophelia to notice the absence of her name.”

“Even bearing in mind her approval of Joseph, I doubt that she will dive into the Bible. She seems to have spent the last five years curled up in a chair reading secular, if not salacious, novels.”

“I suspect she would be unsurprised.”

Godric rose, caught me up into his arms, and sat down again.

“Goodness,” I whispered, as my legs settled over his thighs.

“I’ve been waiting all morning to hold you,” he said into my hair.

I melted into him, greedy for the feeling of his arms around me. My icy adventure was receding quickly from my mind, but my body still remembered and relished his heat and strength.

He put his chin on my head. “Merry Christmas, darling.”

“Merry Christmas, Godric.” I snuggled against his chest the way Peony liked to snuggle against mine.

His hand slid down my back. “Shall we put on cloaks and take a walk around the cloister?”

I nodded. “Then I must return to my room. Tess and Colette’s maid, Fleur, have staged a friendly competition to see who can create the most impressive ensemble. She warned me that she needs at least five hours to prepare for this evening.”

“Will you be draped in diamonds from head to foot?”

I shrugged. “Colette and I agreed to let ourselves be used like dressmaker’s dolls.”

“Who will judge?”

“They initially planned to task Miss Wellington but rejected that idea, since I am nominally her employer. They considered Lance but discarded him as likely to show bias. Now the maids shall decide between themselves.”

“I, too, am available but biased,” Godric drawled.

I felt myself turning pink.

He bent down and pressed his lips to mine, achingly sweet. “The way you look at me,” he said.

“How?”

“As if I could do anything.”

“Says the man who thinks I might become a mathematician. Tell me about one of your cases,” I said, not wanting to leave the circle of his arms and walk into the cold.

“My first case in the new year will be the prosecution of a lord who beat his wife to death last summer. The butler attests that his mistress ordered the door put on the latch, saying the master would sleep elsewhere. His lordship insists that he arrived home after an evening in White’s to find the door latched, just as he heard his clumsy wife tumble down the stairs.”

“He burst through the door?”

“No, he says he lifted the latch with a knife and found her dead at the bottom of the steps. His servants will testify to his previous violent behavior, but he claims that he tried to save her life after a tragic accident.”

“That’s awful,” I said, shivering.

“I can’t remove the baroness’s children from the household unless he is convicted. I can see they are terrified.”

“She was a baroness?”

“People always think that a title precludes brutality, just as they think that ladies are ignorant and unable to count cards.”

He kissed me, but my mind was turning over the story. “Is the baron a fashionable man?”

“Very. When I interviewed him, he was wearing tight breeches with a short coat that didn’t reach his waist, and a cravat that brushed his earlobes.” Godric wrinkled his nose. “He’s a dandy and not the dignified kind, either.”

“Then where did he get the knife?”

“What?”

“Where did he get the knife to open the latch?” I asked. “In summer, he would not be wearing a greatcoat.”

Godric put his hand in his breeches pocket, drew out a piece of wood, and flipped open a blade. “This is a slip joint or penknife. My father used it for trimming quills, and so do I. Men carry them everywhere.”

“Not dandies. No fashionable man would carry that knife because it would destroy the line of his coat. Burnsby’s silk pantaloons have no pockets. You’d have to ask your baron’s valet, but I’m certain that his master would never carry a knife—unless he knew that the door would be latched against him, and he planned to enter.”

“Bloody hell,” Godric breathed.

“A syllogism,” I said, smiling at his astonishment. “Fashionable garments closely fit the body; your suspect was a dandy; *ergo*, your

suspect's knife reveals that he planned to sneak into the house on the night in question."

"Brilliant," he murmured.

I colored. The gleam in his eyes made me feel unsettled, but when he sank a hand into my hair and captured my mouth, I stopped thinking. An aching sensation burst over my skin and spread throughout my body.

"We should stop," I gasped, after we'd been kissing for what felt like hours.

His groan was the best thing I'd ever heard in my life: low and desperate and breathless, as if it pained him to move away from me.

We emerged into the icy cold just in time to encounter Sophonisba, her ermine cloak trailing on the bricks.

"Happy returns of the day, Miss Ainsworth," Godric said, as calm as if he hadn't set my body on fire with a groan, the one still reverberating in my bones.

She startled, turned toward us, and raised a glove. "Merry Christmas."

I couldn't bring myself to say a word. The woman had demanded that young boys in her care be whipped, even if she hadn't outright demanded the poker. I credited that to my husband; I could imagine Burnsby snatching it up in a rage.

What's more, she had tried to put Peony in the stewpot.

"Will your concert tonight include German or French?" Godric asked.

Sophonisba cast him an unnerved glance. "Lord Burnsby has selected three of his favorite hymns, all in English."

(Inward groan: "A Virgin Unspotted" was sure to make an appearance.)

"You're singing the soprano part, I assume?" Godric said. "As you did when you sang at the Théâtre National de la rue de la Loi?"

"Yes."

"Yet no hymns are sung there," Godric said, smiling the way a wolf might—all teeth.

"I am an opera singer," she said haughtily.

"Were you in Paris in the 1770s?" he asked. "In 1774, perhaps? Your portrait is dated 1776. Batoni is Italian, but you did say that you had performed in Paris before Rome."

"From 1768," she said shortly. With that she scurried off in the direction of Burnsby's chamber.

“Why on earth did you ask those questions?” I asked. “No wonder she described you as a snapping turtle. Snap! Snap! Snap!”

“I wanted to know exactly when she was singing in Paris. She wasn’t performing at the Théâtre National, because it didn’t open until the early ’90s. Burnsby must have met her there in ’74 or ’75.”

“I wonder how he enticed her to return, given she was supposedly a renowned singer?” We turned a corner of the colonnade.

“If she was famous, she wouldn’t claim to have sung at the nonexistent Théâtre National,” Godric pointed out.

“Why did you want to know the year she was in Paris?”

He shrugged. “Just curious. That snow would make a perfect angel.” He nodded toward the quadrangle, which was covered by snow as white as the icing on an expensive fairy cake made with sugar, not honey.

Tess would be displeased if I returned to the room soaked. But I wanted to see that expression on Godric’s face again, the one I saw last time I made an angel.

I toppled backward, creating wings that feathered above my head as I strained every finger to make them as large as possible.

Godric’s eyes laughed at my enthusiasm—until I spread my legs to create my angel’s flowing skirts. Once, twice, a third time, trying to make the skirts wider than humanly possible. Instead of feeling cold and wet, my legs felt aching and tender—because of his expression.

The ruddy streak in his cheeks and the stifled sound in his throat weren’t the result of the wind or chilly air. The sheen in his heavy-lidded, dark green eyes? The way he shifted from one leg to another, his gloved hands clenching as if stopping himself from snatching me up, as if I were a fairy cake?

“Is your angel finished?” he asked, his voice hoarse and broken.

I grinned at him, *shameless*. “One more sweep of her skirts, just to make sure.”

My cheeks were blazing as I arched my back, but I banished embarrassment by watching his face, registering the way he stared at me. The way his breath caught in his throat. The greed and surprised happiness in his face.

The desire flashing between us should have melted the snow, but instead, he reached down and caught my waist, lifting me into the air so that my angel kept every feather. He held me tightly before my feet touched the

ground, so tightly that I felt a stiff shape against my waist. Something like what I'd seen in his breeches, once. Or twice. When I caught him staring at me in the library, for example.

He groaned and set me on my feet so suddenly that my teeth jarred.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he muttered. "Bloody hell."

"You're sorry?"

"A lady might be offended to feel evidence of desire."

"I forgive you," I said, solemn and laughing at once. I leaned in and whispered, "Someday we'll make an angel together." I turned to look at my angel. Her fingers were perfectly feathered, and her skirts fluttered where my boots had turned out.

His expression overwhelmed me: the gratitude and . . . whatever other emotions were there. "I'd better go," I said. And then I waved, as if we'd just met, and dashed to the door of my room.

The moment I walked in, Tess grabbed me, scolded me for getting my mantua wet, and rushed me into a bath scented with almond oil and flecks of gold. "To give your skin luster," she reported.

Clearly the competition would cover every aspect of a femme de chambre's responsibilities.

Tess was drawing her brush through my hair for the hundredth time before I realized that Godric had deliberately distracted me by proposing the snow angel. He hadn't wanted me to ask about Sophonisba's stay in Paris.

Yet I doubted he would raise the subject without a good reason.

Puzzle as I might, I couldn't imagine why it mattered *when* Sophonisba sang opera in Paris.

Twenty-Four

Back to the question of imminent battle: If you are forced to engage in warfare, do not underestimate your enemy. She may keep a potent weapon in reserve.

By the time Crumpsall sounded the gong, signaling that we should make our way to the drawing room for the Christmas concert and lighting of the Yule log, I had been ready for an hour. Fleur had visited my chamber, scrutinizing every aspect of my toilette, after which Tess left to inspect Colette's ensemble. Once we both left, they planned to spend a cozy evening going over every detail before making their judgment.

I draped my mantle over my arm rather than risk disturbing hair that had taken hours to perfect, left my room, and knocked on Ophelia's door. She opened it wearing the green gown, her thick hair piled on top of her head with sparkling pins.

"How beautiful you are!" I exclaimed as she drew me inside. "Are those Colette's favorite slippers?"

Ophelia pointed a toe graced with a cluster of emeralds. "She gave them to me as a Christmas present. Aren't they marvelous?" She glanced over my ensemble. "You're very regal tonight. Do you mean to overawe Sophonisba? I feel intimidated, and I know you!"

Tess had dressed me in a white satin evening gown, cut low in the front and trimmed at the bodice, sleeves, and hem with elaborate silver embroidery. Over it, I wore a sleeveless, raspberry-colored robe that floated behind me. The finishing touch was a silver tiara.

"Are those rubies?" Ophelia asked, touching one of the gems adorning the tiara.

"Carnelians," I told her. "Not precious, but a lovely amber red. The piece belonged to my mother, and is more precious to me than rubies."

She examined me once again. "*The Gallery of Fashion* promises that their portraits are 'faithfully drawn from the real life, in the most fashionable circles.' They would put you on the cover if they saw you now. It's ludicrous that you married my father," she added, flaunting her gift for brutal honesty. "Do you think that he will wear his kilt tonight?"

"No, I believe he had a crimson coat made for his birthday."

“His knees resemble rabbit droppings.” She shot me a sideways glance and sighed. “I won’t mention it. I also won’t tell Sophonisba that she should watch for fashion plates depicting you in her favorite journal, because that wouldn’t be kind.”

“Excellent,” I said, choking back an irresponsible laugh.

“Let’s go,” Ophelia said, dancing on her toes. “I want to be there when Burnsby sees my mother’s portrait on the mantelpiece.”

“Wear your cloak,” I told her, taking it from the hook. “It’s not snowing, but it’s cold.”

“You already sound like a mother,” she laughed, swinging her “ghost” cloak over her shoulders.

In the colonnade, she dashed to Godric’s door and knocked loudly.

When he emerged, I swallowed hard, because he wasn’t in black. *He wasn’t in black*. His coat was made of dark sea-green velvet with ebony buttons. It turned his hair the color of bitter coffee, dark bronze strands gleaming among the black, and brought out the green in his eyes.

“Let’s go!” Ophelia squealed.

She dashed away without noticing the way I had frozen on seeing Godric, or the way his eyes lingered on my lips, or the way he wound his fingers through mine and insisted I put on my mantle, no matter the disarray it caused my curls.

Miss Wellington and the maids had outdone themselves decorating the drawing room. The Yule log, bound in white hazel twigs, was waiting to the side of the hearth, and greenery was strung on every window and across the mantel. The room smelled deliciously like fresh fir and spicy wine, thanks to a kettle of wassail bubbling over the fire.

Hecuba’s portrait hung in the place of honor over the fireplace, decorated by a fir bough woven with red ribbons.

“Hello, Mum,” Ophelia said, waggling her fingers.

I moved to stand beside her. “We’ll take her portrait to London with us, shall we?”

Ophelia gave me a lopsided smile. “I’d love that. She may not have been the most perceptive person, marrying Burnsby and all, but she was still my mother.”

I bumped shoulders with Ophelia. “I was as imperceptive as Hecuba. We all make mistakes.”

Colette and Lance entered the room pink-cheeked and merry. Colette handed her cloak to a footman and dimpled at me. "Shall we decide between ourselves who won the competition?"

She was wearing a pale blue crepe gown that opened in front to reveal a tiered white satin slip. Her puffed sleeves had adorable ruffles running down the shoulders, and her hair was caught up with innumerable spangled stars that matched those edging her skirts.

"You are ravishing," I said frankly. "You have my vote."

"So are you, and you have mine!" she cried.

Godric bowed and kissed her hand. "You are exquisite, Countess, as always."

Colette flipped open a starry fan. "Yes, but what do you think of my dear friend and competitor's ensemble?"

He turned to kiss my hand, the image of a perfect gentleman. The hunger in his eyes burned my skin, and I felt myself starting to blush. "Evie would be beautiful in rags," he said, his voice as certain as if he'd declared the snow white or the sky blue.

"As would my wife," Lancelot said, with the same assurance.

"I can be a neutral judge," Ophelia said, surveying both of us. "Colette wins on the grounds of accessories. Her gloves fit tightly almost to her shoulder, whereas Evie's bunch at the elbows. Her shoes put her over the finish line."

Colette drew up her skirts, revealing slender ankles in pale silk stockings. Her heeled slippers were made of a watered blue silk adorned with stars.

"When you visit Paris, Ophelia, I'll introduce you to my cobbler. He cut these stars from copper and painted them blue to match my gown."

"I love them," Ophelia breathed.

Colette wrinkled her nose. "I would have used aquamarines and crosshatched the silk. If I weren't a lady, I'd design shoes."

"Godric says I should be a mathematician, despite my birth and sex," I said. "Why not ask your cobbler to make shoes after your designs? I would love a pair!"

Ophelia clasped her hands. "All those birthday presents I never received? All I want is a pair of shoes designed by you, Colette!"

"That never occurred to me," Colette said, appearing stunned.

"You could paint the slippers you envision in watercolors," Lance suggested. He turned to the rest of us. "Colette paints remarkable

landscapes.”

“Pooh,” she said, tapping his shoulder with her fan. “They are remarkable only because I have trouble distinguishing blue from green. I’m told that my forests resemble underwater scenes.”

“I learned French to read the work of your country’s brilliant mathematicians,” I told her. “I write letters disputing this or that axiom but never dreamed of mailing them. Now I plan to drop them in the post.”

“I shall write to whomever I wish,” Ophelia said, unsurprisingly. “Did Fleur and Tess agree with my judgment of your accessories?”

“They are still talking. When I left, their discussion was focusing on hair.”

Tess had braided most of my hair, wound it around my head, and fixed it in place with pins topped with silver beads before she began coaxing ringlets to fall down my back, finally topping the whole with my mother’s tiara.

“Mine took hours,” I said, pained.

Godric’s lips twitched. “Did you review architectural drawings in your head?”

“I am memorizing a list of kings of ancient Britain,” I admitted. “I found a book in the library.”

“King Aethelwulf,” Lance said.

“Egbert first, followed by Aethelwulf, Aethelbald, and Aethelbert. Poor Bert only ruled for five years.”

“Why did you bother?” Ophelia asked.

“Evie is easily bored,” Godric said, “and too kind to tell her maid that she doesn’t wish to spend five hours being dressed like a paper doll.”

(Just so you know, I had never told him my secret conviction that I am as stiff and shallow as a paper doll.)

“I think that Evie will appear on the cover of *The Gallery of Fashion* someday,” Ophelia announced.

“I would be unsurprised,” Godric commented, his confidence warming me more than flattery.

“I shall have a bookseller order that issue from London,” Colette said, kissing me again.

Crumpsall had been ladling wassail and appeared with a tray. I accepted a shallow silver cup, happily breathing in steaming red wine spiced with pepper and cinnamon.

Colette raised her cup, saluting the portrait over the mantelpiece. "To Hecuba, restored to her rightful place! I see the familial resemblance," she told Ophelia. "The lady is beautiful, *chérie*, though not as exquisite as you, due to a certain lack of vivacity around the eyes. I suspect the latter is a consequence of marriage, not character."

She glanced about. "Crumpsall, what has become of our entertainment?"

Mima drifted in the door. "We never have entertainment, dear. Not in the abbey. We're too isolated."

"Burnsby and his inamorata are to perform an assortment of Christmas hymns," Colette reported.

Mima turned around and walked straight out the door, followed by her footman. I could sympathize.

"Crumpsall, will you please ascertain if Mima wishes to return for the meal, and if not, serve her Christmas dinner in the library or her chamber, as she prefers?" I asked.

"I shall, my lady. His lordship and Miss Ainsworth are practicing in the music room and will join you shortly."

"I am hoping that Sophonisba will dance as well as sing," Colette said. "After all, she boasted of performing at the Théâtre National, and there the ladies dance, don't they, Lance?"

"Vigorously," her husband murmured.

"My father said their toes fly higher than their heads," Colette confirmed. "I doubt Miss Ainsworth can match that at her age."

When she met my eyes, I was surprised by the depth of fury in them. "She scarred my husband," the Frenchwoman said, answering my silent question. "She will be lucky if a jig is the only thing I demand from her."

"It happened long ago," Lance said, wrapping a hand around his wife's waist and dropping a kiss on her lips.

"If I bore the scars?"

His genial face froze over like a winter pond. "Let's not discuss it."

Since the carolers were nowhere to be seen, we settled comfortably around the fire.

"Is Christmas in France the same as here?" Ophelia asked Colette. "Do you drink sweet wine, for example?" She had sipped the wassail and hastily replaced the cup on the silver tray.

"*Vin chaud*," Colette answered, nodding. "If you don't like the sweetness of wassail, you will hate *vin chaud*. It's made by boiling wine and honey

together.”

“Eons ago, English druids supposedly drank honey, which sounds disgusting,” Ophelia said with a shudder.

“We call that mead,” Colette said. “We, too, had druids in France, Gauls who worshipped in magic groves where—”

At that moment Burnsby and Sophonisba walked in and paused for effect. All of our heads swiveled to the door.

They wore matching garments, the color of blood. Sophonisba wore a headdress adorned not just with a ruby in a gold setting, but four towering ostrich feathers, dyed crimson to match her dress. The infamous ermine cape was fastened to her shoulders and flared behind her.

“What a riveting presentation,” Colette cried. “Have any of you seen the playwright Ben Jonson’s *Christmas, His Masque*? The daughter of ‘Old Christmas’ is called ‘Minced-Pie.’ Her costume resembled Miss Ainsworth’s.”

“I have not,” Burnsby said in an unfriendly fashion.

Colette lowered her voice. “Just so you know, Ophelia, my plumassier considers a headdress embellished with more than two feathers tasteless. Do your best to avoid comparisons between your head and a rhubarb patch.”

“I will never wear feathers, red or otherwise,” Ophelia said. “Not after living here.”

“Ahem,” Burnsby said loudly. He and Sophonisba burst into song.

*A virgin unspotted, the Prophet foretold,
Should bring forth a—*

“—Ouch!”

“Savior” was replaced by Burnsby’s “ouch” because Sophonisba had elbowed him in the side.

“Where’s my portrait, diddly-plum?” she screeched. “How did *that* get there?” She tore her eyes from Hecuba’s image and glared at us . . . at me, in particular.

I gazed back, confident that my face was the very picture of innocence.

“Oh, my goodness!” Ophelia said in a delighted voice. “My mommy’s portrait is hanging above the mantelpiece. It’s a Christmas miracle!”

Burnsby glanced at his daughter, his face granite, eyes narrowed. He must have concluded that she was not to blame, because he turned to me. “What is the meaning of this outrage, Lady Burnsby? What has become of the portrait of Miss Ainsworth that adorned the mantel?”

“I have no idea,” I said with perfect truth.

His eyes flashed from one face to another. When he turned to glare at Crumpsall, I decided to catch his attention again.

“No house can have two mistresses,” I informed him. “My portrait should hang there, but you have unaccountably neglected to commission an image commemorating our blissful union.” I tapped my chin. “I’ll speak to Sir Thomas Lawrence as soon as I return to London. A steal at fifty guineas.”

My husband snorted. “Reynolds is no better than a thief.” While Burnsby spends a great deal of money on clothing (for example, secondhand ermine cloaks), he is wretchedly miserly at heart.

“I could employ a mediocre Italian portraitist at a cost of five guineas, but I must consider your dignity and name,” I retorted.

“You’re displaying your ignorance,” Sophonisba snapped. “Pompeo Batoni is the most sought-after portraitist on the Continent.”

“Really?” Colette remarked. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“You shut your mouth!” Sophonisba said, her eyes remaining focused on me. Her hands clenched into fists. “I can see through you! You think you’re clever, but I despise you!”

“I can live with the disappointment,” I told her.

She didn’t take that well. “To hell with the whole bally lot of you. Especially *you*.”

(Me, obviously.)

“How very rude, after I allowed you to join us for Christmas dinner,” I retorted. “I considered myself very generous not to have evicted the subject of Batoni’s portrait—*yet*.”

Sophonisba stilled. “What’s she talking about, bubbly-boo?” she asked, turning to my husband.

I surmised that Burnsby had, characteristically, neglected to inform his mistress that she needed a new abode by the first of February. He didn’t say anything now, either, just glared at me from beneath beetle brows.

“Burnsby?” I prompted, a genial smile on my face.

Crumpsall departed, leaving the doors slightly ajar, presumably so he could listen from the corridor. I, too, would prefer to appreciate this evening's entertainment from a distance, say, from the back of the theater.

"My papa was right about the vivacity of opéra-ballet dancers," Colette said, cutting into the silence. "Lance, *chéri*, what does 'bally' signify? Some nuances in Miss Ainsworth's vocabulary are escaping me."

"Also, please explicate 'spotted' versus 'unspotted,'" Ophelia put in. "I wouldn't want to make an indelicate assumption."

She needed a good deal of practice before she could match Colette's mischievous use of an innocent expression.

"I suppose you think you're being funny?" Sophonisba's plumes waved back and forth—not rhubarb, but a wheat field struck by a summer storm.

"The monarch dreams of execution," Ophelia remarked, not bothering to lower her voice. "Surely the next line is 'off with her head!'"

"You have until February the first," I informed Sophonisba, taking strength from the warmth of Godric's solid shoulder beside mine.

She stared at me. "I beg your pardon?"

"My husband will explain."

Burnsby finally spoke. "What happened to the paper pinned to the back of Sophie's portrait?" His voice was silky smooth.

Villainous.

"What has the first of February to do with anything, and more to the point, where has my beautiful painting gone?" Sophonisba wailed.

"Don't worry, dearest. I shall recover your likeness and restore it to its accustomed position." Burnsby escorted his mistress to a chair, and she sat down, the back of her hand covering her eyes.

"She copied that gesture from Alice," Ophelia whispered to me. "Alice was forever sinking into a chair with one hand in that odd position."

"Did you mean this paper?" Godric asked, pulling it from his coat. "I have it."

"So *you* stole my portrait!" Sophonisba cried. "How dare you? What have you done with it?"

"Godric and I attempted to remove it once before, don't you remember?" Lance asked. "You'll find it more challenging to order our punishment, now that we are no longer children." His voice was so cutting that Sophonisba's eyes fell.

“Read the paper aloud!” Ophelia cried. “Or we could light the Yule log and toss it on top.”

“I trust you know what you’re doing, Sir Godric,” Burnsby said with an angry titter. “I wouldn’t recommend airing that document in public. You must accept the consequences, should you do so.”

“A wise woman told me that family secrets are better aired,” Godric said, glancing at me.

“I presume you’re attempting to disinherit me by means of an illegal will, Burnsby?” Lance asked with patent indifference. “Godric assures me that you cannot succeed.”

“It is not a will,” Godric said.

Sophonisba dropped her hand from her face. “As my darling Bunny said, you have brought this on yourselves. I would have remained silent, for his sake.”

The smile on her face—directed at me—suggested that she had kept a major weapon in reserve.

“I suppose you will do as your conscience decrees, Sir Godric,” Burnsby said, seating himself beside Sophonisba and planting his cane. “You have always indulged in ungentlemanly bullheadedness.”

He rubbed one arm, wincing, before he reached over and took a silver cup from the tray Crumpsall left behind. “May I offer you a Christmas collation, Sophie? The butler seems unaccountably missing yet again. I shall consider discharging him on the grounds of poor service.”

Sophonisba accepted the cup. “Yes, do sack him. I don’t like his insolent expression, nor the housekeeper’s, either. Sack them both.” Considering that subject closed, she turned back to me. “I would have let you live in peace.”

“Implying that you *didn’t* do the same for my predecessors?” I retorted. “All the gossip about Burnsby’s three wives didn’t take a homicidal mistress into account, but if you feel up to it, Sir Godric can record your confession.”

Honestly, I don’t know what had gotten into me. I’d never been so insouciant before, and it wasn’t an attractive trait, though Colette buried her face in Lance’s shoulder, trying to suppress a fit of giggles.

Next to me, Godric moved restlessly. I reached out and put a hand on his knee, enjoying the way that my husband’s eyes followed the movement.

“Lady Burnsby!” he said, fury turning his cheeks red. “And you, Sir Godric! I cannot believe my eyes, nor countenance such foul behavior from a man who grew up in my household, under my protection.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Sir Godric hasn’t exhibited foulness, but after exposing young boys to an insalubrious environment, what did you expect? Your so-called protection led to his scarred face. I’m merely following your adulterous lead in spreading my wings.”

“Nothing could excuse your execrable behavior,” he retorted, with the utter conviction that hypocritical men frequently display.

“Didn’t you tell me that you were hoping for a spare to your heir? With luck, I can give you just that.”

“You’re a she-devil.” Burnsby snorted, curling his right hand into a fist—which made him drop his cane. It fell against the table; three full cups of wassail collided with a silvery note, and red wine splashed in all directions.

Godric’s cravat took the brunt of it, turning from pristine to polka-dotted. He took out a handkerchief and wiped wine from his chin.

I patted his chest in a dramatic show of unladylike behavior that made Ophelia choke with laughter. “Alas, Sir Godric, your exquisite coat is soiled! Lord Burnsby, you must offer your deepest apologies.”

Burnsby muttered something that definitely wasn’t an apology, because it referenced my “slutty ways.”

“She’s having you on, buggy-boo,” Sophonisba said. “She’s not bedding Godric. Can you see she’s as virginal as when you married her?”

I smoothed my white satin skirts. “Unspotted I was, and unspotted I remain—for the moment.” I gave my livid husband a significant look. “I have so much to share with the House of Lords.”

“Virginal but *never* boring,” Godric said in my ear, making my heart soar.

“My ermine!” Sophonisba shrieked, suddenly noticing that it, too, had been stained with wine. She stared at me like an angry chicken, the kind with feathers spouting from the top of its head.

Burnsby made a clucking sound. “Not to worry, dumpling. Years ago, I dropped a glass of burgundy on a white horse, with no lasting ill effects. If need be, we’ll send your cloak to the stables and let the grooms clean it.”

“My beautiful shoes,” Ophelia said mournfully. “I hope silk can be washed.” She extended an emerald-adorned, splattered slipper.

“Where did you get those shoes?” Burnsby demanded.

“I gave them to her,” Colette responded. “I do love a cluster of emeralds, even those fit only for shoes.” She slid her eyes to Sophonisba’s pale ruby. “It’s so hard to find stones worth the price these days.”

Lance leaned closer to his wife and kissed her cheek, saying something quietly.

“My ruby is perfection,” Sophonisba declared. Then she added, with a triumphant air, “As Bunny said, the sheet of paper behind my portrait is not a will.”

She paused until our eyes returned to her.

“Please do go on, Miss Ainsworth,” Colette said. “We are on tenterhooks. I do hope it’s a page torn from a diary. Or perhaps a secret letter.”

I smiled at her, because Colette was as au courant as I am with the latest fashions in fiction.

“Godric holds a page copied from the local parish register, detailing the marriage of Clifford Clifton Burnsby to . . .”

Sophonisba paused for dramatic effect.

“Susanna Brattle.”

Twenty-Five

If you ever find yourself catapulted into the pages of a novel, try to ensure the plot includes a protective phantom and not a vengeful mistress.

I managed not to gape, but it was a close call. My mind was reeling, trying to work out my husband's marital history.

Was I Burnsby's *fifth* wife?

Lance broke the silence. "Only one more wife to go, Burnsby, and you'll be in competition with King Henry the Eighth. Has anyone run into Susanna Brattle haunting the library?"

"No, because Susanna Brattle would be *me*," Sophonisba said, tossing her head so her plumes danced.

"My dearest wife," Burnsby said, smiling as he reached out and patted her knee.

We all gasped in unison.

I felt as if a great wind blew through me and scoured my brain as I stared at the two of them. My heart was thudding. Only one conclusion filtered through the chaos in my mind:

If Burnsby was married to Sophonisba, *he wasn't married to me*.

"Congratulations to the not-so-newly-married couple," Colette remarked. "When were the two of you espoused, if you don't mind my asking?"

"In 1774," Sophonisba said with the toothy grin of a shark. "I would never have returned from France under other circumstances. That would be before he married *you*," she hissed at me, in case I hadn't noticed we were well into the nineteenth century.

"Evie, dear, I believe this is when you burst into applause," Colette said. "You're free. Another Lady Burnsby supersedes your reluctant claim to the title."

"Not just Evie's claim; 1774 is also before Burnsby supposedly married Hecuba and Alice," Lance remarked. He wasn't as languid as he had been a minute earlier. "I do have some curiosity about whether that ceremony superseded my mother's, since it was performed in the year I was born."

Burnsby snorted. "You're legitimate enough. After your mother died in childbirth, I moved abroad. I fell in love with Sophie the first time I saw her

singing in Paris and instantly determined to make her my wife.”

“How romantic,” Colette said sarcastically. “Just like a play in which the strumpet with a heart of gold wins the squire’s heart.”

I frowned. Burnsby would scoff if we sat through such a melodrama, decrying the heroine as a shameless hussy. I found it hard to believe that love had led him to suspend the acute distaste he exhibited for fallen women—but his fond looks appeared self-evident.

“Was the ceremony kept secret because your father would not approve?” I asked.

“Bunny’s father was a coldhearted man,” Sophonisba said by way of answer.

“Lance may be legitimate, but I am not,” Ophelia cried, her voice rising as she stared at her father. “Is that why you left me in the abbey, in company with *her*?”

“With my wife?” her father snapped. “Aye, and what else could I do with you? I told you time and again you were a tainted branch of the family tree. Did you never guess the truth? Every governess I dragged up here did.”

“I loathe you,” Ophelia said, with passion.

“Do you think I care?”

His only daughter raised her chin, a tear shining on her cheek. “I understood the family tree was diseased, but I didn’t know the extent of *rot* that had taken hold!”

I wrapped my arms around her.

“I don’t want to be a bastard,” she said, her voice cracking as she put her head on my shoulder. “No one will marry me.”

Her father smirked.

“Oh, darling, no one will care,” Colette remarked. “Not in light of your beauty *and* a dowry as big as Kensington Palace.”

Burnsby cackled. That’s the right word: *cackled*. “What dowry? Why do you think I kept her at home? I wouldn’t slur the lineage of an honorable man by pretending she is better than she is. There’ll be no dowry.”

“The dowry I’ll give her,” Colette said, her mouth curling into one of the most condescending smiles I’d ever seen. “Surely you haven’t ignored the signs that your son married an heiress? Shoes adorned with emeralds are not in the ordinary style.”

He gaped at her, momentarily silenced.

“It’s so sweet, Burnsby, that you are able to afford a mousehole to hide your wife,” I said, “because you’re too poor to afford a decent house for her and *so ashamed of Lady Burnsby that you hid her in the mountains.*”

His mouth flapped as he tried to summon a defensible response. “I didn’t — That wasn’t—”

“Why don’t we ask the lady herself?” I turned to Sophonisba. “Why have you spent your married life buried in the Highlands, content with being visited once a year while your husband swanned around England pretending to marry three much younger women in a row?”

She stared me right in the eyes, chin high. “I’m not good enough to be Lady Burnsby in public, am I? I’d have held Bunny back amid the rest of them aristocrats, made it so they didn’t respect him in the House of Lords. He needed a woman of his own stature, or he’d have lost face. They might have stopped him from making important laws.”

My heart twinged with sympathy. She loved him.

“Is that what he told you?” Godric asked, disgusted. “Burnsby has never had a drop of influence in the House of Lords. He’s a buffoon, and every man with a brain in his head knows it.”

“Your father didn’t agree,” Burnsby snarled, eyes squinty, oozing rage. “I am highly regarded in society. As a man who works for his wage, you wouldn’t understand.”

Lance laughed. “Don’t you ever read the newspapers, Burnsby? Godric is his uncle’s sole heir and will inherit his title and a fortune equal to my wife’s. He works because he *chooses* to, because he thinks a man’s life should have meaning and value.”

“I also inherited my father’s estates,” Godric said. “Had he been alive when you scarred me, you would have met him on a field of honor—and died there, I hardly need add.”

Burnsby’s mouth rounded open and closed, fishlike, unable to counter Godric’s calm assertion.

I intervened. “When I asked you, Burnsby, why you married me rather than Sophonisba Ainsworth, you told me that you couldn’t marry a woman like her. I remember your precise words. ‘*Adoration* is not an emotion experienced by gentlemen, and never for a woman of that type.’”

I glanced at Sophonisba. “Sorry.”

She glared at me, jaw set.

“But the fact is that you couldn’t legally marry Hecuba, or Alice, or me, no matter what you think your name deserved. Yet you allowed a minister to marry us. I’m not remembering the ceremony precisely, but he charged us both ‘*as ye shall answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed*’ to reveal any impediments to our union. What in God’s name were you thinking?” I shouted, losing all semblance of calm.

Burnsby’s face was flushed. “Why shouldn’t I have you? You weren’t forced to marry me. Like my other wives, you *chose* me. In fact, you were the worst of them. You were slaving for it. For God’s sake, you sent me a message and demanded I buy a special license.”

“After you bribed me by offering my sister a dowry,” I said hotly.

“It’s not my fault that you’re a gold-digging harlot. I treated you better than you deserved!”

“He’s a hollow man,” Colette said, contempt dripping from her voice. “The sort who thinks a young, beautiful woman on his arm will make him attractive, because he has no allure of his own.”

Godric kept his gaze on Burnsby. “Perhaps you believed that as a peer, you could do whatever you wished with impunity. After all, you’d stowed your real wife so far up in Scotland that no one knew she existed. Moreover, it appears that you bullied the lady into thinking that she wasn’t *truly* a wife.”

“I always knew I was his wife. I have his heart, and that is all that matters,” Sophonisba said stoutly.

(Absurdly.)

“I never cease to be amazed by the forgiving nature of the female sex,” Godric said. “You didn’t mind that your husband was sharking around England, sleeping with nubile young women, giving them diamonds, and regularly escorting them to the opera?”

Her right eye began twitching.

“I suspect Lady Burnsby wasn’t given a choice in the matter,” I said, surprising myself.

“Undoubtedly not. Her husband had been taught from the cradle that everything he wanted could and should be awarded to him,” Godric said. His voice reverberated with anger. We were witnessing the outraged prosecutor whom Mima described seeing in court.

“Why not marry again, if he felt like it?” Godric demanded. “Why not take advantage of innocence and desperation, selecting younger and younger women to marry? His wife knew the truth but felt unable to demand her rights.”

“I never imagined I’d feel sorry for you,” Ophelia said to Sophonisba.

Sophonisba rebutted that pity with fury. “I am Lady Burnsby! Why should I care about fools deluded enough to imagine they could catch my husband’s heart?” She twitched the puddle of ermine at her feet. “I disregarded the hussies he entertained. He and I have always understood that I am the most important person in the world to him.”

“You poor woman,” Colette said. “If you hadn’t been responsible for scarring my husband, I would feel compassion for you.” She nestled back against Lance’s shoulder. “As it is, I don’t.”

Sophonisba’s expression left no doubt that she didn’t give a damn.

Godric cleared his throat. “Thankfully, this development means that Genevieve won’t have to give evidence in the House of Lords regarding Burnsby’s impotency.”

“Oh, good,” I said.

(Yes, I was thinking that I could marry Godric without endangering his career.)

“The felony known as bigamy is much easier to prove.”

I gasped. His words cut across the room like a gunshot.

Felony?

Sophonisba squinted, as if legalities had never occurred to her.

Burnsby’s face sagged. *He* had known precisely what laws he had broken.

(And . . . there went my hope of an unblemished reputation. The press would be fascinated by a bigamous wife.)

“Had you forgotten the marriage decree that rules England *and* Scotland?” Godric asked Burnsby, his voice even more threatening for its calm. “Bigamy is a capital offense, never mind an offense to God and your soul.”

He turned to Lancelot. “His lands and estate will be forfeit to the Crown and will pass to you immediately, before his death.”

A lazy smile curled Lance’s lips. “I don’t believe my wife and I will have time to visit you in the Tower, Burnsby. We should probably say goodbye

tonight, as I understand the snow has stopped. We will leave tomorrow at first light.”

“We can sell this benighted abbey,” Colette said with a shudder. “Perhaps we should donate it back to the church.”

Burnsby launched into a stream of cursing that surprised me, even after all that I had learned about him since we arrived.

Ophelia had begun weeping. I drew her thin shoulders against me and rocked her back and forth.

“I can’t believe he’s my fa-father,” she said, under the cover of his shouting. “I don’t want to be related to a felon.”

“I’ll adopt you, and we’ll move to France.” I paused. “After all, Ophelia, no one knows that you exist.”

“What do you mean?” She raised her face, and I blotted her tears.

“You are not recorded in *Debrett’s*, or even in the family Bible. I can adopt you without admitting a connection to your appalling father.”

“Or Lance and I can adopt you,” Colette offered. “You can choose between darling Evie and your brother.”

“Th-Thank you,” Ophelia said.

“This is all the drama I can stomach for one night,” Colette stated. She turned to Sophonisba. “I’m sure you’d prefer to host Christmas dinner, light the Yule log, and all the rest of it without a fake wife glaring at you. Especially since this time next year you’ll be visiting your husband in the Tower, if they allow marital callers. We shall leave the dining room to you.”

“I told you my father was dissolute, darling, but I’m afraid that I underestimated the extent of his depravity,” Lance said to Colette.

“We won’t share this with my father,” his wife advised. “*Mon père* is not a forgiving man. He has many close contacts in the English government, and I’m afraid that he might contrive to have Burnsby dispatched.”

“You can’t mean that!” Sophonisba squeaked.

Colette’s smile was as bright as the diamonds in her hair. “Certainly, I do. My father could easily arrange to have Lord Burnsby tossed out of the Tower into the moat. I suspect it happens all the time.”

“In fact, the action of throwing someone out the window is known as defenestration,” Godric said.

Colette shrugged. “A word just for throwing someone out the window? The English language never ceases to amaze.”

“Fine!” Burnsby screamed. “You forced me to it. Sir Godric, read aloud that bloody parish register.”

I frowned. What was the point of that?

Godric drew the paper from his breast pocket and opened it, reading: “*A Record of Declaration of Present Intent. Married twenty-fourth June, 1774, Clifford Burnsby in the parish of Lochvaben to Susanna Brattle lately from Lochrutton, both out of this parish, as witnessed by Margaret Dowdy.*”

“Is this an exact copy of the parish register for your marriage, Lady Burnsby?” Godric asked. “In other words, does it accurately record your wedding, as witnessed by one Margaret Dowdy?”

She scowled at him. “Yes, and don’t think you can get around my marriage, because you can’t! Our witness is still alive.”

“I see,” Godric said. “Lord Burnsby?”

Ignoring him, Burnsby turned to his wife. “My seventieth birthday has been tainted by vulgarity and disrespect. I would prefer to eat in my chambers.” He struggled to stand. Stooped over his cane, his cravat wine-stained and jacket askew, he seemed more like ninety than seventy.

“If you wish, Bunny,” Sophonisba said, rising as well. “Except it’s your birthday! Now that everyone knows I’m Lady Burnsby, I could sit at the other end of the table.”

“The table is all yours,” I said. “Sit where you will.”

Burnsby shot me a vicious glare and shook his head. “No.”

“You aren’t worried about these silly charges, are you, sugar pie?” Sophonisba asked. “Everyone knows that lords never go to jail. Now the world will finally know you’re mine, and we can travel to Paris.”

“Lords do face punishment for their crimes,” Godric said dispassionately.

“Perhaps if I were the only extra wife,” I said, “Burnsby could plead advanced age, swearing that senility made him forget his earlier marriage vow. But if I understand the situation correctly, he married three women, Hecuba, Alice, and me, after Sophonisba. Three sets of false vows, over thirty years? That is not senility.”

Godric cleared his throat. He had his eyes fixed on my husband. “Burnsby, before you retire to bed, surely you have something to say?” He tapped the piece of paper he held against his knee.

“I feel one of my headaches coming on,” Burnsby said. “We can revisit these questions tomorrow.”

“Whatever you want, boo-boo,” Sophonisba said. “We shall celebrate your birthday then.” She swept me a triumphant glance. “Now that the truth is out, things will be *very* different in the abbey, I promise you that.”

She was the very image of a lady who has won a tournament, and the prize was even more vile than I had imagined.

“*Burnsby*,” Godric said, a warning in his voice. “I do understand that the truth is better heard in private than from me, but I assure you that I will share it on the morrow, if you do not.”

“What is he talking about?” Sophonisba asked. “Bunny, is there something you need to tell me?”

I could see Burnsby’s jaw working as he suppressed whatever he wanted to say in reply. Instead of answering, he stomped toward the door.

Sophonisba caught up the train of her stained ermine cloak and ran after him.

Ophelia picked up my glass of wassail and drained it. “That was appalling,” she said, her voice husky from crying. “Why did my father ask you to read aloud from the parish register, Godric? We already knew the gist.”

He waited to answer until the sound of Sophonisba’s voice had faded away down the corridor.

“They are not legally married, and he knows it.”

Twenty-Six

Forget all the stupid rules governing polite behavior that I taught you. Immediately.

Goodness!" I squeaked.

"Merde!" gasped Colette.

Lance didn't bat an eyelash. "Unsurprising."

"Burnsby tricked Sophonisba Ainsworth into thinking they were married," Godric stated. "However, the record names only one witness to their marriage, not two, which invalidates the ceremony. A priest is not considered a legal witness."

"What a cruel thing to do," I breathed. "Yet it makes sense. I couldn't imagine Burnsby marrying a fallen woman, no matter how much he loved her. What's more, he told me that his father wouldn't allow it."

"I would guess that Burnsby arranged the deceptive ritual to placate Sophonisba, bribing the priest to record it in the parish register. I've seen the ploy before, and the marriage is invalid whether recorded or no."

He turned to me. "I'm afraid you're still married."

And to Ophelia, "You are not illegitimate."

My stomach turned upside down, and I came close to vomiting spiced wine all over the carpet.

"What a dreadful thing to have done," Ophelia whispered hoarsely. "Sophonisba was so happy to be acknowledged as the lady of the abbey, and now she'll find out that he has been lying to her all along?"

"No sympathy," Colette stated. But her eyes betrayed her.

"Why didn't you tell us immediately that the marriage was invalid?" I asked Godric. I felt like a wrung-out kitchen rag. For a blissful few seconds, I'd been free to marry—but now I was back in the same morass again. I still needed an annulment.

"I wasn't certain that the record copied on this paper accurately reflected the ceremony. Sophonisba might have remarked that her father had also been a witness, for example. Most importantly, I had to know if Burnsby had tricked her deliberately—and the only way to find out was to threaten him with bigamy."

“I refuse to feel sorry for her,” Colette said, still trying to convince herself.

We all felt a twinge, in my opinion.

“I might have aired the truth, but for Ainsworth’s sake, I gave Burnsby the opportunity to confess in privacy,” Godric added. “If he holds his tongue, I will tell her tomorrow. She has to know the truth.”

Something occurred to me.

Had Godric informed me about the evidence suggesting I was unmarried, I would have welcomed him into my bed last night, nervous or no.

Our eyes met, and he gave me a rueful nod. I would have given him everything, believing I was free. My eyes blurred with tears that had nothing to do with my marital status and everything to do with the honorable backbone of the man holding my hand.

“I suppose it won’t change Sophonisba’s life either way,” Colette said. “Even if they were married, and he acknowledged her as his wife, he wouldn’t have taken her to Paris. Did you see his face when she proposed it?”

“Do not feel sorry for her,” Godric ordered me. “I can read your face, Evie.”

“She behaved despicably toward you and Lance, even if Burnsby’s cruelty was regrettable. And she planned to *cook* Peony! No, I was thinking of something else.”

“What?”

“I almost had it,” I rasped.

“What?”

“*Freedom.*”

After that, Ophelia declared herself too demoralized to eat dinner. I felt the same way, so Godric and I walked her around the colonnade to her bedroom door.

“I shall ring for figgy pudding and hot chocolate,” Ophelia said, kissing me on the cheek before darting at Godric and kissing him as well. “Next Christmas will be better, won’t it?”

He leaned forward and kissed her in return. “I promise it will be.”

Her somber face lightened. One would be hard-pressed to disbelieve Godric when he spoke with that deep surety.

“Ask me in?” he requested when we arrived at my door.

I peered at him through a fog of exhaustion before I nodded and led the way. Tess jumped from a chair, dropping *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* to the floor.

She dropped a curtsy. "Many happy returns of the day, Sir Godric."

"The same to you. May I offer congratulations on my lady's magnificent toilette?" he asked.

My lady?

He was ignoring my marital status.

Tess smiled. "I have an excellent canvas, Sir Godric. Evie, Mr. Crumpsall asked me to return to your chamber in case you had need of me."

Her expression suggested that the butler had overheard enough to suspect that I might retreat from the tournament, vanquished and in tears.

"Crumpsall is a treasure," Godric said, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Will you please ask him to send a small Christmas meal for two to my chamber, Tess?"

He was *claiming* me. There was no other word for it. He was letting the household know, in every way except direct speech, that someday I would be his wife.

I rested my head against his arm.

"Yes, sir," Tess said, throwing me an impudent glance from under her lashes.

Godric snuggled me against his side, his arm around my shoulders.

"Oh, and please let Miss Wellington know that mulled wine spilled in the drawing room," I said.

She nodded. "May I help you remove your outer garments before I leave?"

"I can do that," Godric said.

She curtsied again. "Sir." I saw the twinkle in her eyes; she liked him.

"I had only just begun to believe that I had not made the mistake of a lifetime, and now I have to accept that I never left my marital prison in the first place," I said mournfully, after the door closed behind my maid.

Godric began unbuttoning my mantle. "I shall use the circumstances to expedite your annulment plea."

"But at the moment, I'm still married. And can you imagine the scandal if any details slip out? It would affect your appointment as chancellor."

"I'm not worried. Besides, it was never a certainty." He slipped the mantle off my shoulders and hung it up on a hook. Then he swung off his

greatcoat and hung it up as well, which gave me a chance to examine his green coat from the rear. It was cut so skillfully that one didn't notice the vents on either side, but I knew what the tailor was disguising from admiring eyes of women like me.

"Would you be offended if I removed my stained cravat?" he asked, turning to face me. "The reek of spiced wine is overpowering."

"Your cravat protected my gown," I said, nodding. "Tess would have been devastated had I returned with spotted white satin."

"My valet is a pragmatic fellow who won't flinch. He accepts that dark clothing disguises London's coal smoke—and that I shall never leave the house without a penknife, whether it destroys the line of my coat or no."

He untied and unwound the crumpled fabric that wrapped around his neck, finally stripping it off and tossing it over a chair. Unsurprisingly, his throat was not a white, slender gentleman's throat. It was golden brown and corded with muscle.

The room suddenly felt very warm, especially after Godric turned and saw my expression. His face changed, his lids sinking low, his gaze not tense, but taut.

(I know a gaze can't be *taut*; that's the word that came to mind.)

I snatched up a fan from my dressing table, flipped it open, and began waving it before my face, since any ability to disguise my feelings was long gone. A stranger could have read my expression.

Unquestionably, Godric could.

How embarrassing. I flapped the fan so hard that ringlets billowed around my face.

A hand caught the fan and gently closed it. "Evie."

I gulped. "Yes?"

"Would you like me to leave? I didn't inquire whether you felt comfortable joining me for dinner in my chamber, indeed, whether you *wished* to join me. Crumpsall can serve you a meal here, or we could join the others, now that Ophelia has retired for the night."

I shook my head, because the last thing I wanted was for Colette to see me in the grip of such an unladylike emotion.

"Evie," Godric said, his voice warm and heavy, like liquid velvet.

(That sounded like a line from a dreadful novel. Worse than *The Monk*. Worse than a book in which the hero has taut eyes.)

Clichéd or not, his voice felt as if it caressed my skin.

“Fair warning, Evie: By next Christmas you will not be married to Burnsby.” His face had taken on that marble look again, as though he were a statue placed at the Hall of Justice to terrify evildoers.

“I know,” I croaked. “Will it take an entire year?”

“I trust not. I should like you to marry me as soon as possible.”

“I don’t know if I can ever trust my instincts again,” I confessed, eyeing Godric the way I had when we first met.

(Yes, I was trying to make him smile.)

“Should I offer arguments on my own behalf?” he asked, his lips curling as he stepped closer.

“No,” I said. And then, “Maybe. Why did I choose such a vile man the first time?”

He bent down and ran his knuckle gently down my cheek. “Your instincts are mostly sound, and so are mine.”

My stomach knotted at the tone of his voice, but in a wonderful way.

He caught up my hand, picked me up, and sat down. I found myself sideways in his lap, my back tucked against one of his arms, his legs forming my seat cushion.

“My instincts tell me that you’ve had a traumatic evening.” Godric kissed my forehead.

I leaned happily against his chest. “No need to rely on your intuition, since you were in the room.”

“A husband’s instincts—let’s pretend that I am said husband—would suggest that he lift his wife’s spirits.”

My heart began hammering in my chest. “Oh, right.” My body was overwrought with sensation. When Godric’s legs flexed, muscle rolled beneath my satin skirts. In his world, a husband would clearly kiss his wife into a better mood.

“May I?”

I could feel his breath on my cheek. I gave in to my basest impulses, looped my left arm around his neck, and leaned toward his face, the way I’d seen Colette lean toward Lance countless times.

Godric reacted precisely as Lance did. His eyes widened, and his tongue entered my mouth. When described like that, kissing sounds like a dreadful experience, particularly for someone like me, who avoids being touched. I have often declined to waltz because the dance was so intimate.

But Godric's mouth was the best thing that I had ever tasted: Better than chocolate, better than cake, better than shortbread. Better than butter.

He put one hand on the back of my neck, and whenever I drew away to take a breath, I found him drinking me in, his lips parted, desperate to kiss me again, a thirsty, surprised expression in his eyes.

I leaned closer, and this time *I* licked into his mouth, which made him groan low in his throat.

I don't know how long we kissed. It felt like forever, hundreds of kisses piled on top of one another, but at the same time, one long kiss. I found myself moving closer until my breasts rubbed against his chest.

Our kisses grew more frantic. Ravenous. Feverish. Pretty soon one of my hands was clenched in his hair, and the fingers of the other were clutching his shoulder, as if he might try to get away.

"Evie," he said minutes or hours later, voice deep and gravelly.

"We should stop, shouldn't we?" I gasped. My legs felt warm and achy, rather than stiff as a clothes-peg.

If anyone saw us, they would judge me the slut my husband called me. That idea was like an earthworm emerging from the muck after rainfall. Trying to squish it made things worse.

I stopped feeling deliciously hot and brave and desirous and felt—

Ugh.

Still, when Godric drew away, my arms twitched as if to bring him back to me.

"Did I go too far?"

"I kissed you," I told him, proud and miserable at the same time. "I wanted to kiss you. I still want to kiss you."

I watched his eyes lighten. "You do?"

I nodded, because I refused to lie to him. I might humiliate myself—I *was* humiliating myself—but I refused to lie. I had lied too often.

"Are you hungry?" Godric asked. "Crumpsall set up the table in my room."

"Not for food," I whispered, the words wrenched from the deepest part of my soul.

Godric dragged his lips across mine, making me shiver. "What shall I do with you, darling Evie?"

"Nothing," I said instinctively. I didn't want a man to tell me what to do, whether it meant wearing a gown of his choice, or traveling to the

Highlands on his say-so, or giving away my “vulgar” pet.

“I meant it metaphorically,” Godric amended. “Let’s turn the question around. What would you do with me, if you could?”

I was already blushing, but that question may have turned me purple. “If I weren’t Lady Burnsby? If I were unmarried, and sitting in your lap in my bedchamber, with a feast and a glass of wine next door?”

Laughter rumbled in his chest. “Yes.”

“I’m not sure,” I said, the truth spilling out. “I suppose your intentions would be the most important thing.”

“You know my intentions.” That was true.

Godric Everley was determined to marry me, just as soon as I was free of Burnsby.

“Do you trust me?” he asked. “I would understand if you didn’t, since your experience of men comes from Burnsby.”

My lips twitched into a smile, and I kissed his absurdly erotic neck. “I may have to throw wine over your cravats regularly,” I whispered. Finally: “Yes, I trust you.”

“Then let’s go to my room and eat Christmas dinner,” Godric said, rising with me in his arms. He strode over to the hanging covering the door between our rooms. I held it aside and he walked through, nearly tripping over a chaise longue positioned on the other side.

He muttered a curse and set me abruptly on my feet.

My first impression was that his chamber was larger than mine, presumably because it had been Burnsby’s before he took over the abbot’s chamber. The wardrobe was decorated with gilded doves (gaudy and in bad taste, just like Burnsby).

The bed was enormous and took up half of the room, as if a royal barge had floated through the window and lodged in the corner. Even draped in brocaded fabric depicting sheep and cattle, it had a stately air.

“Did you notice the canopy?” Godric asked.

My mouth fell open. The canopy came to a point topped with a gilded star.

“The star that led the wise men to Jerusalem,” Godric said, his voice resonant with enjoyment. How could I have imagined that he didn’t understand irony?

“I suspected Burnsby considered himself an offshoot of the divine family, but it seems he really considered himself another Christ child.” My eyes

widened. “The drapes depict cattle and sheep! That bed *is* the stable!”

Godric nodded. “I assume that Burnsby was conceived in the abbey.”

I turned in a circle. “Why is the chaise longue positioned next to the door to my room? It belongs by the fire.”

“I’ve been sleeping there.”

The chaise was narrow and far too short for a man of Godric’s height. “You’ve been avoiding the star-topped stable? Why?”

He grimaced. “What if I couldn’t get to you in time, or if the hangings muffled your call for help?”

“Oh, Godric,” I said, reaching up and winding my fingers through his tousled hair. “I’m so grateful.”

“I will always protect you, Evie.” The words shimmered through my body like port wine. The best port wine. He wasn’t boasting or trying to finagle my approval. He was just vowing.

“Were you able to sleep on that uncomfortable couch?”

He shrugged, his eyes shadowed and exhausted. “There will be plenty of time to sleep after we have left the abbey.”

“I’ll push a chair before my door and be perfectly safe. You are not spending another night on that absurd piece of furniture.”

“Actually, it did occur to me that you could sleep here, in the stable, and I could retire to your bed.”

“If that would allow you to sleep, I agree.” I grinned. “Tess will be surprised when she wakes me with tea!”

I seated myself at a small table below a crystal chandelier studded with wax candles, from which dangled a ball of greenery dotted with oranges and apples.

“Is that a kissing bough?” I asked, taken aback. Who did the household think Godric would be kissing—in his bedchamber?

The answer was obvious.

“This morning Miss Wellington inquired about my intentions,” he said, amused. “She proclaimed that your father would wish her to inquire, ‘in light of my courtship of his daughter.’”

My mouth fell open. “She *what*?”

“The household adores you,” Godric said, pouring wine. “Surely you’ve noticed the footman trailing us around the abbey?”

I nodded.

“Not only are they guarding your pig from the stewpot, but since they suspect Burnsby of homicidal tendencies, they have been guarding you as well.”

“Goodness.” I frowned, hearing myself. “That’s such an innocuous, boring interjection considering we’re talking of homicide.”

“It’s very Evie. You save words like *bastard* for the right moment. Learning that your staff adores you is not a reason to curse.” He raised his glass. “Merry Christmas.”

I resisted the temptation to toast to “us.” There was no us yet, despite the kissing bough and Godric’s best intentions.

Given that the cook must have abruptly divided Christmas dinner into three or four parts and delivered them to separate rooms, she had done the household proud. Covered bowls revealed everything from goose to roasted chestnuts and Brussels sprouts. The fireplace had been set up with little saucepans of hissing gravy, and rum sauce to pour over our portion of plum pudding. When the time came, Godric set it alight, and the flames flickered around the room like a benediction, creating a warm space just for the two of us.

And as we ate, we talked, Godric’s eyes gleaming. Every time I disagreed with him—his understanding of currency would be scorned by any self-respecting mathematician—the desire in his expression deepened, seasoned by a dash of irritation.

Candlelight made his thick lashes trace shadows on his cheekbones, especially when he scowled, admitting a fair point. No man had ever respected my opinions—although, to be fair, I’d never shared them.

I had been married to Burnsby for approximately twenty-four hours before I recognized that my opinion, especially if based on fact, was unwelcome.

Now I explained the flaw in the formula that governs currency exchanges—a conclusion published in a radical newspaper disregarded by the government. Burnsby would have found it paralyzingly boring, but Godric’s eyes remained bright and engaged. What’s more, he promised to share the article in question with Benjamin Winthrop, the governor of the Bank of England.

After we had both eaten too much figgy pudding, Godric moved to an upholstered chair and held out his arms. I walked across the room, my heart pounding, a smile that I could not banish curving my lips.

When I reached him, I braced my hands on his armchair and bent until our eyes were at equal height. “Was there something I could do for you, Sir Godric?”

“Yes,” he said, one word, deep with longing as he drew me into his lap.

My skirts were generous enough that I sank down with my knees on either side of his hips. I glanced down at our bodies and turned crimson, but Godric distracted me by kissing my collarbone. *Licking* it.

(Is that normal? I know nothing of bed play.)

“Your collarbone is so delicate that I’m amazed it hasn’t snapped as you walk about,” he murmured.

“Ladies are coddled,” I told him, finding it hard to come up with words because I was caught by the idea that I wouldn’t mind licking Godric’s neck.

“How can such a slender neck support all that hair *and* a tiara?” he murmured. He tossed the headpiece on the table, all the while his tongue kept painting polka dots on my neck. My skin scalded everywhere his tongue and fingers brushed.

“Your skin tastes like honey, almond blossom honey.”

“Almond oil,” I said.

“I love your chin,” he said conversationally. “Many women’s chins are sharp, like the points of a compass—have you noticed?”

As I shook my head, more ringlets fell down my back. Without the tiara, Tess’s magnificent construction was unraveling.

Godric drew me closer, until my thighs were snug against his body. “Your chin is delightfully square. When you press your lips together and stare at me while making a mathematical point, I have trouble concentrating because I want to kiss your chin. Or bite it.”

I gasped—or perhaps giggled. I tried to disguise my trembling legs by clenching my thighs; his eyes darkened when my legs clamped along his sides.

“The curve of your bottom lip is like the bottom half of the moon. Sometimes I marvel over your mouth until I lose track of the dining room conversation.”

“Your lips are beautiful as well,” I whispered, tracing his mouth with a finger.

“Yours plump after kissing me. You never pout, but *they* pout because—” My tongue curled against his and stole his words.

We kissed until my body felt molten and liquid between my legs. He licked a bead of sweat off my forehead, and instead of being embarrassed, I told him about feeling like the Christmas pudding steaming in its pot.

“When you lifted me from the snowbank. When you said . . .” I faltered.

“When I said that I wanted to make a snow angel with you,” Godric said, his eyes as greedy as his voice. “I want to embrace you on a mattress of snow, lying on your body while you spread your legs.”

I’d stopped trying to disguise my trembling legs and fingers.

“Perhaps we can do that someday,” I whispered, shocked by the hunger in my own voice.

“What about a field of flowers, Evie? May I lie on top of you in a field, even though I’m bigger and heavier than you?”

Outdoors? Did people lie together outdoors?

“Yes, yes, they do,” he said, because apparently I had asked that aloud. “They do. We will, once we’re married, Evie.”

His voice *yearned*, as if he was talking about more than making love in a bed of flowers. “You’ll be mine, and I’ll be yours. Sometimes we’ll go for a walk in the country—did I tell you I have an estate in Buckinghamshire?—but we won’t be able to wait to return home. We’ll lie down in a bed of wildflowers, and you’ll ask me to kiss your breasts. I see your nipples brushing your gown sometimes, as if they were longing for my tongue.”

I was so tangled up with embarrassment and agonizing desire that I couldn’t reply. His voice was desperate, but I was still married to someone else.

And he was *Godric*. A barrister who would be a judge. A warrior in the courtroom. A man who often dressed all in black, which was inexplicably more attractive than any other color, at least when he wore it.

His eyes were narrowed to slits, and his hair was tumbled by my hands. His voice had changed, too—thick and hot, tender but strained. He didn’t sound sensible or judgmental.

I knew instinctively that no other woman had seen his face like this. “I adore you,” I whispered.

More than anything, I wanted him to touch me below my neck. I kept squeezing my thighs and pushing down against his legs, but he kept his hands away, not even caressing my back.

“I’ve adored you since an hour after we met,” he told me.

“So untrue!” I crowed—but he managed to convince me.

“We should go to bed,” I whispered, sometime later. The candles were guttering and nearly out. “Someone must take this food away and wash the floor because of the rats, and they’ll want to be in bed themselves.”

Godric tugged the bell cord that rang in the servants’ quarters. “Crumpsall will send a footman.”

Before anyone could arrive, I returned to my bedroom and rang for Tess. After the sounds of Godric’s room being cleaned faded away, we exchanged rooms. Without speaking about it, we agreed not to kiss or touch while wearing night clothing. We whispered good night and retired.

I was deeply asleep, my arms wound around a pillow that smelled comfortingly like Godric. I scarcely registered it when my bedchamber door (next door, you remember) slammed open, and Tess squealed, “Evie, wake up!”

Twenty-Seven

If you ever find yourself attending a deathbed, as most of us will, I pray that it is not that of someone you love and treasure, lost too early.

December 26

Godric (sleeping in my bed) answered her, his voice a low rumble. My eyelids drooped again. Dawn light was creeping around the curtains, but it was too early to rise.

“What are you doing in my mistress’s bed?” Tess demanded in the other room.

“There was a rat in Evie’s chamber,” Godric replied.

My maid squealed. “Rats, ghosts, and a corpse. This abbey gets worse and worse.”

The words rattled around my head. A corpse? I sat up.

“Who is dead?” Godric inquired, his voice unruffled.

“The master! Evie’s husband! Lord Burnsby!”

(I dimly recognized that my gasp was worthy of a fictional heroine. Not the time to insist on the point, but life imitated fiction. Burnsby dead? It was too convenient to be true.)

Tess shoved open the door between our rooms. “Evie, wake up! Lord Burnsby is dead!”

“How could he be dead?”

(Not my finest moment, but I was dumbfounded.)

“Do you have any idea how his lordship died?” Godric asked, following her into the room.

“Crumpsall said it must have been his heart, because he’s blue around the lips and has spots in his eyes,” Tess reported. “Ainsworth summoned Crumpsall, and he informed the new Lord Burnsby and sent me to fetch you.”

“I needn’t feel grief?” My voice was uncertain. What kind of wife’s heart leaps on hearing of her husband’s passing?

“Grief would be ludicrous, after the way he treated you,” Godric said.

“You needn’t go into mourning, because you never married him,” Tess burst out. “They said last night that you never were his wife. Ainsworth’s maid says that her mistress married him years ago.”

Crumpsall must have deserted his listening post when Burnsby announced that he planned to dine in his room—which meant no one in the household knew that Sophonisba’s marriage had been a fraud.

“Burnsby’s marriage to Miss Ainsworth was invalid,” I told Tess. “He used it to convince her to return from Europe with him.”

Tess’s eyes widened. “My aunt was taken in by a tinker who stole all her money before he told her the ceremony was a fraud.”

“An unfortunately common deception,” Godric said.

“I don’t feel sorry for Ainsworth,” Tess said. “Mr. Crumpsall said that she urged the late master to fire him and Miss Wellington.”

“Sophonisba Ainsworth did not warn three successive women whom she believed to have been deceived into false marriages by her husband,” Godric pointed out. “In reality, all of them, including her, were being used by a greedy man with no moral compass.”

“He was evil,” Tess said, with conviction.

“Hopefully that evil man confessed to his false marriage rites last night,” Godric said dryly. “I shall be forced to give Ainsworth unhappy news, if not.”

Tess grabbed my hand and led me into my room. “This abbey is cursed. Thank God, the snow is melting and we can finally escape.”

“Actually, we can’t leave immediately,” Godric said. “Lance and Colette will need our help.”

“We can talk about that later,” I said numbly. As Burnsby’s widow, I had to visit his deathbed.

Tess curtsied in Godric’s direction. “If you’ll forgive me, my lord.” Then she dropped civility and said, “Don’t you be following us directly to Burnsby’s bedchamber, or people will draw the wrong conclusion.”

He disappeared, closing the door, and she yanked my nightgown over my head. “No need for a corset,” she muttered. “Thank goodness you have that black traveling gown.”

“I’m not certain that I will wear mourning for Burnsby,” I said.

“You’ll put on mourning to see his body,” Tess declared. “It wouldn’t be decent otherwise. You’re his wife. Ainsworth thinks she’s his wife, but you’re his real wife.”

“All right,” I said. But when I was dressed, and she gave me a black-edged handkerchief to carry, I placed it on the table. “I won’t find myself in tears, Tess.”

“Just for decency’s sake?” she coaxed.

“No.”

Giving up, Tess escorted me through the second garden to a pair of large doors at the far side: the abbot’s chamber, now my husband’s death chamber.

When we reached the door, she gave me a gentle push. “It wouldn’t be decent for me to go farther,” she hissed. “Crumpsall wouldn’t like it.”

Thankfully, Sophonisba was nowhere to be seen. Burnsby lay in a bed to one side, his hands crossed at his waist, a white nightcap covering his hair. I forced myself to walk over and say farewell.

He did have a purplish tinge around his lips and under his closed eyes, but his expression was tranquil. Hopefully he hadn’t experienced pain or fear. I disliked him, but I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

Rather than a widow’s grief, a wash of relief came over me, one so profound that I felt momentarily dizzy.

Lance, Godric, and Crumpsall were standing on the far side of the chamber; they seemed to be discussing Sophonisba’s sham wedding. As I turned from the bed, Lance came toward me and took my hands. “I know this is a shock, Evie, no matter your differences with Lord Burnsby.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said, and, being a virtuoso at lying, I almost sounded sincere.

Godric bowed before me. “My condolences.”

(In case you’re wondering, he didn’t sound sincere *at all*.)

Crumpsall advanced with the stunned expression of a man who had believed until two minutes ago that I had been deceived into a bigamous marriage. He bowed. “Lady Burnsby, I offer the household’s condolences.”

“Did Miss Ainsworth say whether he suffered?” I asked, still trying to summon up appropriate feelings.

“She was distressed and not entirely coherent,” Crumpsall replied.

(Did I feel empathy for Sophonisba’s distress? No, I did not.)

“We shall place my father in the mausoleum next to my grandparents,” Lance said.

“Here in the abbey, we don’t hold a vigil,” Crumpsall said, “but we do read a prayer for the dead over the body. Sir Godric has offered to do that

service for his lordship, if you wish, Lady Burnsby.”

“Yes, thank you. I would like to inform Ophelia myself, but not until she wakes. Perhaps she would like to say goodbye to her father.”

The butler nodded. “If it is acceptable to you, my lady, the late Lord Burnsby’s valet will now prepare his lordship for burial and dress him in a winding sheet.”

“You have a coffin?” I asked. And, at Crumpsall’s nod, “Please drape a length of Burnsby tartan over the coffin. My late husband loved his mother’s design.” I turned to go, but my eyes caught on a white sheet hanging on the wall.

“We cover mirrors in the Highlands, to prevent the ghost from being misled as it tries to leave the house,” the butler explained.

(Ghost? *Ghost!* Seeing my husband’s ghost would be a touch overwrought, even for the novels I love.)

Godric walked me to the breakfast room. Halfway around the colonnade, he looked down at me. “We won’t talk about it now, Evie, but I shall be asking you to marry me in a day or two.”

I couldn’t help smiling, but I didn’t answer. Could it be this simple? My husband died, just when I fell in love with someone else, just when I needed to be free?

In the late morning, we gathered in the drawing room, with Crumpsall and Miss Wellington joining us as representatives of the household. Grooms carried in the coffin draped in tartan and placed it on chairs in the middle of the room.

Lance, Mima, Ophelia, and myself stared at it dry-eyed, whereas Sophonisba couldn’t stop sobbing. I was somewhat surprised, since according to Godric, Burnsby had indeed confessed to deceiving her about their marriage. Yet grief is complicated, and they were together for years.

“Who is in that coffin?” Mima inquired, though we had told her many times.

“Lord Burnsby,” I responded.

“The old one or the new one?”

“The last one,” Lance said with finality. “I shall use my French title, Count Marmont, and so shall my heir.”

“The last one,” Mima said, and laughed with what seemed to be genuine amusement.

Ophelia held my hand tightly as Godric read aloud a simple prayer expressing the hope that Burnsby would wake in heaven. I couldn't focus on the "sting of death," even as accustomed as I was to wishing that I felt the right emotions. This time, I didn't. I felt no sting, and I didn't care.

Following a moment of silence, Lance opened the drawing room door. The grooms reentered the room, picked up the coffin, and carried it away. Sophonisba followed, weeping into a black handkerchief.

Miss Wellington said to Colette, "With your permission, Lady Burnsby, we will now turn the chairs that supported the coffin upside down."

Colette looked questioningly at me, but I'd never heard of the custom.

"So that his ghost can't sit on them," Miss Wellington added. "If we break the custom, I'm afraid that the maids will refuse to clean this room in the future."

"You may do as you wish," Colette said. "Perhaps we should retire to the library for luncheon. I can't say that I feel like braving the dining room table."

The day crawled by in hushed conversations. Lance and Godric went through Burnsby's desk, finding a will locked in a drawer.

"I told you that the will is behind a portrait," Mima said crossly.

We all looked at one another. The abbey walls were almost all swathed in woolen tapestries and therefore bare of portraits.

"Alice's portrait is hanging in the dining room," Ophelia said. She ran off but returned to report that the back was free of paper.

Lance shrugged. "Godric will act as my solicitor and read Burnsby's will tomorrow."

Throughout the afternoon Ophelia repeatedly dissolved into tears, insisting each time that she didn't miss her father. "He wouldn't cry if I had died," she pointed out, with some justification. "I'm better off without him."

But I could tell her heart didn't believe it.

As she snuggled against me, her thin body shaking with sobs, I found myself thinking about my father. Next time I saw Sir William, I would embarrass him by saying that I loved him. Gentlewomen rarely express strong emotion, but I've learned that telling the truth means more than merely avoiding lies.

In the early evening, Colette returned to the library after speaking to Lance and the household staff. "We shall leave the day after tomorrow," she

said with evident relief. "The snow appears likely to hold off."

"What about Mima?" I asked.

"Lance plans to ask her whether she would prefer to accompany you and Ophelia to London or stay here in the Highlands. While I'd love to wash my hands of the abbey, that poor soul may wish to live out her life here."

"She will keep searching," Ophelia said, her voice scratchy. "If we took Mima to London, she might wander off and try to find her baby in the streets."

That was a daunting idea.

Back in my chamber, I found Tess wrapping my gowns in white cotton and placing them in a trunk.

"Shall I open the curtains?" I asked. "It's very dim."

"No," Tess replied. "We're not opening any curtains facing that cemetery. Just think if we were to catch sight of Burnsby walking through the wall of one of those tombs! Stomping across the courtyard with his cane, so transparent that you could see bricks right through his middle!"

I couldn't help laughing.

Tess threw me a mischievous look. "I told the second housemaid that she'd likely see him in that awful kilt, carrying his exploded heart in that furry bag of his."

"Tess!"

"She nearly fainted," Tess said. "Just think, Evie. His body is out in that cemetery, helter-skelter, without a priest laying down a blessing to stay his ghost. People in the kitchen are saying that the only safe place is the library, because of his wives haunting the room and warding him off."

"If Burnsby finds his way inside the abbey, Hecuba might have a few final words she'd like to say to him," I agreed.

But would I? No.

I'd said everything I wanted to say to this novelist's villain, dead or alive.

Twenty-Eight

It hardly needs to be said, but once you accept the existence of one ghost, a second becomes virtually routine.

I was ready for supper—still dressed in the black traveling gown, but with my hair elegantly arranged atop my head—when Godric knocked on our adjoining door.

“Good evening, Evie, Tess. May I escort you to the dining room, Evie?”

“Good evening, Sir Godric.” Tess bobbed a curtsy, straightened, and put her hands on her hips. “I’m glad to see you. The story of Lord Burnsby’s false marriage ceremony will spread far beyond the Highlands. It’s too good not to be shared.”

“I agree with you.”

“I’d give it a day or two, but you have something you have to do, your lordship,” Tess said.

Godric gave her one of his rare smiles. “I would prefer to do that very thing tomorrow morning.”

“In a haunted, accursed abbey?” Tess demanded.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, turning from the glass where I was adjusting my cravat (the fashion suited me, so I’d decided to continue wearing them). “Also, the abbey isn’t cursed. Hecuba saved my life, remember?”

“Marriage,” Godric said, coming forward and taking my hands.

Tess flashed a smile and disappeared.

“Marriage?” I gasped. “Here? I thought you said you were planning to ask me—now you’re going to *marry* me? I mean, if I say yes?”

“I am, if you agree. Here, in the presence of our friends.”

“But the scandal . . . There’s no stopping gossip,” I said hollowly.

He nodded. “Half the abbey still believes that you were never married to Burnsby, and before long, half of England will think the same. I’m sorry, darling, but there’s no containing such a fascinating story.”

“If you marry me, what will happen to your judgeship, Godric?”

“I don’t give a damn,” he said, taking my hands up to his lips and kissing one, then the other. “All I want is you.”

I couldn't help it; I melted inside. Was it really this simple? Was the nightmare over, the novel's happy ending in sight?

"Well, if you really want to," I said foolishly, before I added, "Yes, Godric Everley. I will marry you."

(Kissing ensued. Yes, he *did* really want to.)

By the time we entered the dining room, everyone was already seated. I would have placed Colette at my end of the table (as the new Lady Burnsby), but instead she was seated beside Lance. I blinked, thinking that perhaps France was more informal than England.

"I have decided this abbey is exempt from civilization and its rules," Colette said, reading my mind. "I insisted on being seated next to my husband in case a vengeful ghost wafts his way into the room."

"I'll protect you," Lance said, rich amusement in his voice.

"Darling, I was thinking the opposite," Colette told him. "The ghost, after all, might be enraged to see you sitting in his seat, without a kilt, what's more."

"Will Mima join us tonight?" Godric asked, escorting me to a seat beside Ophelia and then taking his place opposite.

Lance shook his head. "She became agitated at the idea of leaving the abbey and exhausted herself weaving through the attics until her footman lured her downstairs. She will eat her supper in bed."

"This feels like a house of mourning without a cause for grief," Colette said.

"You aren't sad that Burnsby died, are you?" Ophelia asked me.

"No. I married him thinking that he was a kind man, but I was wrong."

"When I marry, I want someone like Joseph."

"Someone with an unshakable faith in you, as strong as Joseph's in Mary?" Godric asked.

"And mine in him. We should know each other well enough to have that faith," Ophelia said.

Godric smiled at me. "This seems like an opportune moment to say that Evie has agreed to marry me tomorrow morning."

"Without a priest?" Colette asked, startled.

"A priest is not needed in Scotland," Lance told her. "A couple merely has to declare their intentions in front of witnesses."

"*Two* witnesses," I put in, thinking of Sophonisba.

I was snug in bed later that night, when the image of Burnsby's ghost popped back into my head.

(I had returned to my bed, and Godric was in his, since the danger had died along with my husband.)

I managed to calm myself down by realizing that Burnsby was likely strutting up to the gates of heaven. Whether they'd let him in was another question.

I woke with a start a few hours later. The wind was howling around the abbey, and for a moment I heard—

It couldn't be.

"Godric!" I cried before I could stop myself.

I heard him rise, and a moment later he appeared at the bottom of my bed. "What is it, darling? Are you all right?"

"Burnsby's ghost," I croaked, sitting up. "I heard a scrap of song on the wind, that 'spotted virgin' hymn. I don't have my poker, but it wouldn't do any good against a ghost, would it?"

"No," Godric said wryly. "I don't think you're in danger of meeting your late husband. To tell the truth, I have trouble believing in Hecuba's ghost."

"Well, I *do* believe in Hecuba, so logic suggests that Burnsby might well be haunting the abbey. I don't want to sound irrational, but I feel like throwing on furs and escaping out the side door."

"You're due a few irrational fears, love."

Love?

So casually spoken, as if it was a simple fact.

A smile curled one side of Godric's mouth. "I might add that while I have no faith in ghosts, I have faith in you."

"Oh," I said, all my fear draining away. "You have faith in me?"

He nodded. "More than I have in myself." His voice had darkened, lowered. "You look deliciously rumpled and sleepy, Evie."

I suddenly noticed that he was wearing nothing but a pair of breeches. The fire had burned low, but the contours of his chest and shoulders were fascinating. His eyes burned into mine. "It's past midnight, which means this is our wedding day."

"It is," I breathed. I uncurled the fingers clutching my bedcover. They were no longer trembling with fear.

"Perhaps Colette is right about suspension of civilized rules in this abbey." Godric moved so he could sit down on the bed. "Yet your first

marriage made a mockery of marital vows, Evie.”

“That’s true.”

“When you vow to be faithful to me, and we consummate our marriage, it will be fresh and new for both of us.” His eyes were wild and happy.

Mine? I felt a pang of misgiving. I didn’t want to disappoint him. I couldn’t help thinking that I’d never managed to feel the right thing at the right time.

“Have faith in me?” It was a question, as well as a gentle command.

I smiled because I *did* have that. I just didn’t have faith in myself.

Sometime later I woke from a bad dream in which Burnsby was tunelessly singing something about Bethlehem. I sat up again, looking around my room. Early-morning light peeked around the curtains Tess had pinned shut.

It was the most vivid dream of my life. Burnsby had stood beside my bed, his face peevish and stubborn, his lower lip bulging. In my sleep, I had been desperately searching my bed for my poker when he turned and melted into the wall.

Melted into the wall?

I stared at the tapestry opposite my bed, a pedestrian depiction of lumpy sheep grazing in a faded pasture. I had dreamed of a ghost disappearing into that part of the wall, which didn’t mean there was a passage there.

But what if there was a passage?

Curiosity gripped me. After all, no one knew how many corridors linked various rooms in the abbey. Why not this one?

“You’re awake, and it’s our wedding day,” Godric said, walking through the open door between our rooms. His voice was rich with happiness. His hair was wet, and a white shirt hung over his breeches.

The sight struck me dumb for a moment. In a matter of hours, he would be my husband. He would walk about like that, half-clothed, every morning.

“I can see that you need tea,” he said, pulling the cord. “I am showing enormous restraint not embracing you, Evie. You look particularly enticing in that nightgown.”

I glanced down at my woolen nightgown and cleared my throat. “I had the most extraordinary dream, Godric.”

“About me?”

“About Burnsby.”

“I suppose that’s natural,” he conceded, coming over to sit beside me. He reached out and pushed my braid behind my shoulder. “Would it be disgraceful to say I don’t remember ever anticipating a day as eagerly as this?”

I smiled, infected by his exuberance. “Will you please pat the wall across from my bed, Godric?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“To see if a hidden alcove might open the door to a corridor,” I explained. “A secret passageway.”

He kissed my nose. “You dreamed it?”

I nodded.

That corner of his mouth curled up again, but he stood and patted the wall. “No alcove,” he reported.

“Try more to the right,” I said, trying to remember exactly where the ghost had disappeared. I would have climbed from the bed and investigated myself, but my feet were bare. No gentleman should see a lady’s bare ankles or feet—even if we were marrying in a matter of hours.

“No alcove,” Godric said. He frowned. “Though I do feel an elaborate frame.”

I disregarded my bare toes and hopped out of bed. “Let’s tear down the tapestry.”

“No need. There’s a split to the right.” He yanked one side open and reached inside, making the musty fabric billow.

He lifted out a large gilt-framed portrait and leaned it against the wall. It depicted a woman, her features obscured by a layer of dust.

“It must be one of Burnsby’s ancestors,” Godric said. “I wonder if he even knew it was here. This would have been his mother’s room.”

I picked up a washcloth and started wiping off dust. “What a pretty eggshell-blue gown. My mother had a gown like this, a *robe à l’anglaise*.”

“This must be Burnsby’s first wife,” Godric said. “She’s too young to be his mother.”

I wet the cloth and carefully patted the lady’s face. “Not his first wife, but *Mima*,” I exclaimed. The lady had Mima’s curls, her peaked eyebrows, and her eyes, perfectly matched by the blue dress.

“You might be right,” Godric said, frowning. “Her hair was already white?”

“Powdered,” I said. “What if Mima was Burnsby’s mother’s illegitimate daughter? That would explain her portrait being concealed behind a tapestry in the lady of the household’s bedchamber.”

“It sounds possible,” Godric agreed, wiping black streaks from his hands.

“I’ll give it to Miss Wellington and ask her to clean it properly,” I decided.

“Someone is coming,” Godric said, disappearing back into his chamber and closing the door just as Tess arrived with a tea tray.

“Good morning, Evie,” she chirped. “For the wedding, your white morning gown, don’t you think?”

I blinked at her, my head reeling. I was always discombobulated before drinking tea, but in the last day I’d bounded from widow to bride so quickly that I could scarcely distinguish between black and white.

“I’m guessing Sir Godric respected your wedding lines.”

I felt myself turning pink. Then, quietly, “He did.”

“Virgin wife.” She cocked her head, eyes dancing. “Virgin widow, virgin bride again.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes.”

Tess beamed at me. “You’ll be in white from head to foot. Your late husband may have been evil to the bone, but you’re a good girl, Evie. I wouldn’t have stayed with you if you hadn’t been. Not given the way Burnsby behaved.”

“You didn’t know he was—”

“Burnsby was a pincher,” Tess stated. “The day after I was hired, he tried to squeeze my breasts, but girls from the East End don’t take that sort of thing, and so I told him. I kept it to myself, since I scarcely knew you, and besides, after that he stayed away.”

I groaned. “I was such a fool.”

“He was a disgusting old goat, but you believed the best of him, and it made him behave better around you. Everyone in the village said so. I shall return to that house to pack your garments,” she said, as fierce as an eagle. “I have a thing or two to say to all of them! *If* they are still in employment by then. I mean to tell Countess Marmont just how poorly the servants treated you and surely the other wives as well.”

I opened my mouth, but she cut me off with a fierce “No. They let three young ladies be blindsided by walking into this den of iniquity. You’ll

explain it away by saying they kept silent for the sake of their wages, because you are too softhearted for your own good.”

“I am not softhearted,” I told her, startled. “If anything, I lack ladylike sensibility altogether.”

She wrinkled her nose at that. “‘Sensibility’ isn’t the same thing as kindness; any child can tell you that. What’s that dirty old painting doing here?”

“We found a portrait of Mima,” I told her. “Wasn’t she pretty?”

“Who can tell under all that grime?” Tess said. “Footmen should be along with your bath, and I’ll have them take it away.”

“Here’s a cheerful subject,” she said sometime later, rinsing my hair. “They’re saying downstairs that Sir Godric is rich as can be, with estates all over England.”

I had my hands over my face to protect my eyes from suds, but I parted them to look up at her. “I’d marry Godric if he was penniless.”

“We all know that. Mr. Crumpsall said at dinner last night that it was a proper treat to watch two good people fall in love. I shouldn’t say this to you, innocent as the day you were born, but someone is bound to tell you. Burnsby passed away after straining his heart.”

I nodded. “I had noticed that he became breathless after a single flight of stairs.”

“During rumpy-pumpy,” Tess said.

I frowned. “What’s that?”

“He exerted himself in what Ainsworth called ‘birthday rumpy-pumpy,’” she said matter-of-factly. “Hold on. I have another basin ready to rinse the last of the soap from your hair.”

I leaned back, stunned. I was shocked that Sophonisba had bedded him after being told the truth about their supposed wedding. If it had been me, I’d have locked myself in the room and made him sleep in the cloister.

But then . . . was a mistress allowed such autonomy?

That question tasted bitter on my tongue.

Twenty-Nine

This is not a rule, merely an observation: Your sister (me) is the only lady in the whole of the British Isles who married with a pig in attendance. Just saying.

December 27

I emerged from my room three hours later, bathed and dressed in a white woolen gown. Crumpsall was waiting to escort me.

“My lady, your fiancé awaits you in the library.”

Godric and Ophelia were seated together on one couch, with Lance and Colette opposite them. Mima was over by the window, gazing out at the cemetery with a dreamy expression. As I entered, everyone rose to their feet. Notably, no one was dressed in black.

Godric walked over and took my hand, smiling at me before he turned to the others. “We are happy to marry among our dearest friends, and even more so, before Ophelia, whom we consider our cherished daughter.”

She had bounced back from yesterday’s sadness and beamed at him.

At *us*.

“So romantic!” Mima yelped. Like everyone else, she appeared entirely unmoved by Burnsby’s death.

The household began slipping through the doors and lining the library walls: Crumpsall and Miss Wellington; Fleur and Tess; Archie with Peony on her leash; the cook, the housemaids, and the footmen. No one was wearing black armbands. Likely the butler was taking revenge for Burnsby’s flippant threat to sack him after all his years of service.

Godric caught both my hands in his. “Shall we marry, Evie?”

I nodded, certainty in my bones.

Lance opened the *Book of Common Prayer*, his eyes twinkling. “In Scotland these words can be read by anyone, even a sinner like myself.”

“I can think of no one better,” Godric said. “As you said yesterday, we are brothers in all but name.”

Lance’s smile broadened as he turned to the prayer book. “Godric, my brother: Wilt thou love Evie, comfort her, honor, and keep her, in sickness

and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will,” Godric said, his voice as sure as my heartbeat, his hands tightening on mine.

Colette leaned against her husband’s shoulder and read, “Genevieve, my dear friend: Wilt thou love Godric, comfort him, honor, and keep him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”

My smile bloomed like something long overdue—a promise kept, a heart entrusted. “I will.”

“I pledge to love you, Genevieve, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,” Godric said.

I swallowed around a great lump in my throat. “I pledge to love you, Godric, in sickness and in health, for better, for worse . . .” I paused, forgetting the rest.

Ophelia piped up. “For richer, for poorer.”

I held out my hand, and Ophelia jumped from her chair and joined us.

“For richer, for poorer,” I said to Godric. “Always and forever.”

Everyone in the room burst into applause and cheers. I heard Archie piping, “Hip, hip, hooray!” and Tess shouting, “Huzzah!”

Godric said in a low voice, “I love you, Evie.”

My breath caught.

Those words, which I had only heard spoken by Rosie, stilled my heart for a moment.

As if through liquid amber, the words sank in:

He *loved* me.

Me.

Staunch, polite-to-a-fault, boring Evie.

He loved me, not in spite of my faults, but because of them.

Before I could answer, Godric gathered me into his arms, and I kissed him with everything I had. My insides melted as his tongue brushed mine, his arms tightening as our kiss deepened.

Behind us, the household chorused congratulations before traipsing out the door.

Lance cleared his throat. “I suggest that we postpone the reading of the will until after our evening meal.”

“Excellent,” Colette exclaimed. “Ophelia, let’s play checkers. I’m certain to win one of these days.”

“No, you won’t,” Ophelia replied, sighing. “Is that it? Are Godric and Evie married now?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling at her from the shelter of Godric’s arms.

“So, you’re Lady Godric?”

“Lady Everley,” my husband said with quiet force. He dropped a kiss on my lips. “Can you bear another surprise, darling?”

“I’ve become inured to shock this holiday.”

“Do you remember Lance mentioning that I am my uncle’s heir and will inherit his title?”

“I do. ‘For richer or poorer,’” I reminded Godric, reaching up to touch his cheek. “Titled or untitled. I would marry you even if you were as poor as a church mouse.”

“I do appreciate that I wasn’t chosen for my title,” he said, his eyes dancing with laughter. “Don’t you want to know my uncle’s title, darling? The title I will inherit and you will share?”

I nodded, not giving a damn.

“Viscount Everley.” He laughed. “You did say that you would have turned down Burnsby for a viscount.”

Thirty

Rome wasn't built in one day. For the sake of my self-esteem, let's leave it there.

*B*efore I could say a word, Godric—my husband!—scooped me up and left the room to the sound of Colette's laughter.

I was not entirely ignorant of what was to come. In my very first season, the Honorable Miss Margery Pentwhistle had shared everything her mother had told her about the wedding night.

Godric didn't seem to have read the same advice manual as Lady Pentwhistle. For one thing, it wasn't nighttime.

"It's broad daylight," I pointed out.

My husband carried me down the colonnade, my white skirts spilling over his arm. "We shall not consummate our marriage now, Evie. I'll help you change into something warmer, and then we'll play."

Play?

I was still thinking about the way his deep voice rumbled over my body when he kicked my bedroom door shut and set me on my feet.

"Would you like me to ring for tea?"

"No, thank you," I answered, refusing that beverage for the first time in my life. I was feeling wretchedly nervous. I didn't have a script. For all my disdain of civilized behavior, I would have preferred to know what was expected of me.

Godric began plucking pins from my hair. "I'm sorry we have to return to the library for the reading of that bloody will, but I could imagine Burnsby trying to do something illegal with his property."

His fingers whispered over my hair as he dropped pearl-topped pins into a silver bowl on my dressing table.

I should have been feeling romantic and passionate. Instead, I felt edgy and nervous. My heart was beating as fast as a cat's.

"May I remove the charcoal on your brows?" Godric asked.

I nodded, and he gently rubbed one eyebrow free of charcoal and tackled the second. "Moonshine," he said a moment later, satisfied.

Which started me thinking that if he wanted me to stop darkening my brows, I would refuse. Meanwhile, his fingers were flying through my

buttons. He eased my white gown over my head and would have tossed it to the side, except I caught it.

“You can’t throw my garments to the floor. It takes work to wash and press them.”

“You’re under Tess’s thumb,” Godric said, one side of his mouth crooking up as he began to unlace my corset.

I toed off my slippers. I felt a little nauseated. The oil lamps were lit (Tess having pinned the curtains tightly shut), and the room seemed brighter than ever before. White sheets glared from the corner of my eye. All my senses were heightened, and Godric’s peppery smell made my head swim.

My fingers were trembling. Was I supposed to be doing something? Touching him, perhaps?

When only my chemise remained, Godric hesitated. “May I?”

I nodded, clipped. “We’re consummating. Let’s consummate.”

“That’s one way to put it.” I heard amusement in his voice. “I thought that you would prefer to wait for the night, Evie.”

I had no idea what I would prefer—other than being one hundred miles away, perhaps in a different country. It wasn’t that I didn’t love Godric, because I *did*.

But I was embarrassingly, hopelessly unprepared.

Before I knew it, I was standing before him wearing nothing but my stockings. I glanced down. My chest was bare. I had never allowed any man to grope my breasts, obviously. But Godric was different, because I had married him.

He had the right to grope.

My stockings were silk, with flowers woven up the sides, and fastened with ribbons around the largest parts of my thighs. Was I supposed to untie the ribbons myself and put the stockings to the side?

My heart was thumping out of rhythm.

“You are exquisite,” Godric breathed, his voice gruff and not at all gentlemanly. He took off his boots and began shedding his clothing.

I felt as stoic and immobile as a china doll, unable to make my lips curl into a smile. “Do you need my help disrobing?” I asked.

“No—” he said, and stopped. “Would you like to undress me?”

I stepped forward, feeling extraordinarily naked. “I dislike cravats,” I said, once I had his untied and unwrapped. I was close enough that my breasts brushed his coat, making my nipples twinge with sensation.

Godric's fists were curled at his sides. Perhaps our bodies weren't supposed to touch until both of us were unclothed. I edged away and began unbuttoning his waistcoat. All the time I was stealing glances at his body from under my lashes.

I felt odd. Slippery between my legs and tight everywhere else. Being naked, I should have been cold, but instead I felt overheated.

His shirt tied behind his neck and came off easily. Godric's chest was ridged with muscle, thick and powerful. I paused, glancing up at him. "May I?"

"Yes," he said. He stood before me, looking as rigid as I felt. The idea that we were in the same state was comforting.

I touched his chest delicately, as if he were red-hot, as if his skin might burn my fingertips. He sucked in his breath when I flattened my palms, discovering that muscles are hard, as if carved from stone.

(An aside: No part of my body resembles his chest. I am soft all over.)

I was reaching for his breeches when a groan broke from his throat. I froze, my hands on his waist.

"Give me a moment."

"I apologize," I said, shaken. "Am I doing it wrong?"

"Oh, God no," he replied. "Might we move to the bed?"

I nodded.

(Frankly, I felt like saying no, but what was the point? The bed *was* the point of this entire exercise.)

"What are you thinking about?" Godric asked, his eyes focused on my face.

A snippet of *Macbeth* was going through my head, something like, *If it were done, 'twere well it was done quickly*. Macbeth, talking about cutting off the king's head.

Not a maidenhead. (Ha.)

It wasn't a romantic line, and I shouldn't be thinking about puns or regicide.

"Ah, nothing," I gulped.

He picked me up and placed me on my back on the bed, my legs hanging off the side. Then he leaned over me, bracing his hands beside my shoulders. "I have a strong feeling that you're fibbing."

"I was thinking about Macbeth," I admitted, rattled into confession.

He looked surprised. "I haven't read that play in years."

“I love your brows,” I said, daring to touch him there. “If this were a play, that dashing scar would make you the villain.”

“I love your eyebrows, too, because charcoal made me understand you put on a shell to hide yourself from the world. I’d had only glimpses of the real you before that.”

I raised a (pale) eyebrow.

“You giggled in the chapel when we first met,” Godric offered.

I couldn’t remember what had amused me. “You do know that applying charcoal to one’s brows is an unexceptional cosmetic aid, employed by most ladies in polite society?”

“You’re a snail, Evie. Protecting yourself with ladylike behavior and charcoal.”

He was enjoying himself. I didn’t bother to argue. Besides, he was right, even if he reached that conclusion through strange means.

“I shall continue to use charcoal, no matter what you think,” I told him.

Godric smiled down at me. “Your moonlit brows will be a secret known only to me and your maid.” Then he added, as if it was inconsequential, “I would never tell you how to dress yourself, Evie.”

What skittered through my memory then were all the times when Burnsby had done exactly that. The day after we married, he remarked that my gown “didn’t show my charms” and sent me to change it. Actually, it began on the way to our wedding, when Burnsby told me that my lip color was “too red for a lady of my breeding” and offered me a handkerchief to wipe it off. I remember my father scowling, but I wanted to please my would-be husband.

“Is it time to consummate?” I asked.

I felt more naked than ever, because my stockings didn’t do anything to shield my middle, and he was looming over me, his weight braced on his arms. My legs were clamped together, and I did not feel like spreading them—but I would.

When I had to.

He blinked. “Not quite, darling.”

“We virgins know very little,” I admitted.

The only advice I could bring to mind came from Miss Pentwhistle, whose mother had told her that a lady should lie still and count from one hundred backward with her eyes closed, and then it would be over.

It didn’t feel like sufficient advice for this moment.

It didn't explain Godric's wish to "play."

If I were brave enough, I would touch his shoulder, because it was thick, and powerful, and enticing—and so unlike my own. I just wasn't sure if that was allowable. He hadn't touched mine.

"I hope to be making love to you for forty years," Godric remarked, his eyes soft.

I bobbed my head, trying to look welcoming. Feigning eagerness was beyond my acting skills. "Should I close my eyes now?" Macbeth's edict went through my head again.

"Close your eyes?"

I opened them. "Miss Pentwhistle told me that a lady in my position closes her eyes and counts backward from one hundred."

Godric smiled ruefully, straightened, and moved to sit down next to me. "Miss Pentwhistle was wrong."

I sat up. His breeches were tented in the front, so she hadn't been wrong about male anatomy.

"What would you do if you had never been informed about ladylike behavior?" Godric asked.

I couldn't imagine that state. My nanny's favorite admonishment—essentially the only sentence I had retained from my early childhood—was that young ladies were to be seen and not heard.

That spoke volumes for a proper lady's right to advocate for her own desires: She wasn't meant to have any.

Godric put a hand on my leg. I stared down at his fingers, so much larger than mine. They spanned the whole of my kneecap. "Our bedroom is a place where we needn't pay any attention to propriety. Whatever you and I want to do together is proper, whatever that may be. There are no rules."

I would describe his voice as *yearning*.

"Do you mind my touch?"

"Not at all," I said. It was almost true, but I failed to sound convincing, even to my own ears.

(This was a disaster. What he wanted and what I wanted were eons apart, since what I wanted was to be less embarrassed and preferably elsewhere, wearing garments. Layers and layers of garments.)

Godric stood up and removed his breeches. Somewhat to my relief, he was wearing cotton drawers underneath. He sat down again, his leg aligned with mine.

“Would you like me to grope you?” I asked. I felt red creeping up my throat. “I didn’t phrase that very romantically.”

“I would indeed like you to grope me,” he said, smiling.

“It’s not the right word,” I argued, not moving my hands.

“It’s not a ladylike word,” he agreed. “Why don’t I demonstrate?” We both watched as he ran a hand up my leg until it rounded—*groped*—the curve of my inner thigh, close to the heart of me. He plucked the ribbon of my stocking and slid it down my leg.

“Goodness,” I whispered, when both stockings were gone, and his hand was curled high around my thigh once again.

“You don’t mind?”

I shook my head.

“As part of the groping, I might move my thumb.”

Which he did, touching me where no one, other than myself, had ever touched me before.

“You’re pleated and slick and beautiful,” Godric crooned, his thumb touching me again.

Unnerving feeling sizzled down my spine.

“I might take that look in your eyes when I grope you as an invitation,” he said, nudging my legs farther apart.

I felt as if I couldn’t get air into my lungs.

“You are free to grope me, since husbands and wives do that to each other in equal measure,” he suggested.

I knew I should shake foolish advice (like Miss Pentwhistle’s), but it wasn’t easy to suddenly transform from a lady into a . . .

Groper? Whatever.

While I was thinking that, my husband stood up and then dropped to his knees. The next thing I knew, he pushed my legs apart and swiped his tongue slowly up my cunny.

Cunny!

(I was shocked that I even conceived of such a rude word in reference to my body. Clothes-pegs don’t have cunnies, obviously.)

The thought slid away as quickly as it had come, because a pulse started between my legs that had never been there before. I fell back on my elbows and squirmed against his lips—inelegantly, I might add.

Godric started talking about how good I tasted, how wet I was, how soft and sleek.

“We should do it now,” I said, desperate to regain control. I was certain that I shouldn’t be feeling like this, open and wanting and desperate. My body was betraying me.

We should get it over with before I embarrassed myself.

“Do you want me now?” Godric asked, a very unwelcome question.

Part of me definitely didn’t want part of him to push inside me.

“Evie?” His voice was deep as he nudged my legs even farther apart, glancing up at me with a little half smile. “I’m not done licking you.”

A thick finger slid into me. I instinctively arched, which pushed that digit farther inside. My body didn’t feel as if it was mine. Not the docile body that I washed, the paper doll that Tess dressed, the body that shrank from a man’s touch.

This body was wild, wet, and eager, desire singing in its veins. I made a helpless sound. A humiliating sound.

(The urge to run from the room was getting stronger, but I refused to succumb to fear. Also, on a practical level, it was cold outside, and there was nowhere to go.)

Godric crooked his fingers—when had one finger become two?—and I instinctively tightened around them. Presence instead of absence felt so good that I caught his wrist, holding him in place, though I couldn’t believe that I’d done such a brazen thing.

He showed no wish to move. Instead, he leaned closer and licked me again. When he didn’t stop licking, a whimper broke from my lips. I was caught in a snowstorm: white waves of pleasure whipping across my body, buffeting me this way and that.

His tongue lapped at me until pulses of feeling began spiraling up my body, and my cunny clenched around his fingers again and again. I screamed. *Screamed*. When he pulled back, I was gasping his name over and over, and my eyes were screwed shut. Instinctively.

So at least I did that right.

When I opened them, Godric was standing by the bed, wrenching down his drawers. His private part, his cock, was dark red, thick, and swollen. A chill ran over my skin, and all pleasure evaporated.

It was time.

I drew in a breath, edged back on the bed, and widened my legs. This was just garden-variety marital consummation, I told myself. Nothing to worry about.

Never mind what Miss Pentwhistle said about pain. Her mother had apparently recommended horse riding as a means of preparing for the discomfort. I knew how to ride, obviously. But had I ridden *enough*? They should include that proviso in advice books. They should tell young girls to ride horses every chance they get, galloping for miles and miles.

Fear spilled down my spine, but I forced my lips to curl as I closed my eyes. "I'm ready." My eyes popped open. Politeness! "Thank you for that. It was most enjoyable."

Godric cursed under his breath and came down over me, his elbows beside my head. "May I kiss you?" He looked faintly uncertain.

My hands felt too big for my wrists, but I quickly wound them around his neck. Likely the women he'd bedded had been experts in that art. I managed a genuine smile before our lips met.

Usually when we kissed, my legs felt boneless and weak after a minute or two, a thumping pulse beating through my body. This time when he drew back, I just felt dazed, to be honest. And a trifle impatient.

"You're not with me," Godric said, stopping. "This isn't working." He moved to lie on his side next to me.

I turned my head and gaped at him, conscious of a humiliated pang. "Am I doing it wrong?"

Of course I was doing it wrong. Someone like me, a boring paper doll, would fail. I was lying flat when I should be doing something. Anything.

"I can do better." I faltered, thinking that it was too late for him to change his mind and marry someone else. "You can teach me." Tears stung my eyes as humiliation squirmed up my legs. "I can be better," I managed.

"Evie, *no*," he said hoarsely. "I didn't say that right. You did everything right, love."

A disgusting rumor I'd heard (and discounted) years ago returned to my mind. "I didn't fondle your balls or take your cock in my mouth or tell you that I . . ." My voice faltered, because honestly, I *couldn't* say those words aloud. I drew my legs together and turned on my side facing him. I had never felt more naked.

He shook his head. "You are abruptly knowledgeable, Evie. Was that also from Miss Pentwhistle?"

One of his hands began caressing my thigh in circles, reassuring circles.

"No, a different conversation years ago that I'd forgotten. I can figure out what I should be doing," I said, reminding myself that I am teachable. Look

how well I'd learned to mimic ladylike emotions, the ones I didn't have. "There must be books."

"You are perfect," he told me. "Perfect. It's just that I've never made love to a virgin."

"There's nothing different about me other than ignorance," I said defensively. I was lying. I knew I wasn't lively and sensual, like Colette. I tugged at the sheet, caught under his body. "Excuse me."

When Godric moved, I yanked up the sheet and curled tightly around the embarrassing ache between my legs. I also jerked my gaze away from his cock, because it was standing apart from his belly, shining and red.

(I can't tell you my assessment, because that would be disloyal to my husband, but let's just say I felt no admiration.)

Godric sat up and helped me tuck the sheet around my body, which I found (illogically) irritating.

"We won't consummate our marriage until you feel comfortable, Evie."

"Not until tonight?"

"Not until you ask for it and *mean* it." He ran a finger down my cheek. "No closing your eyes and counting. Making love should be a joy."

I gulped.

"Not that I've ever done it."

My eyes widened.

"I have fucked," he said, emphasizing that horrid word. "But I've never made love. I didn't appreciate the difference before. Making love has no rules, Evie. It's all emotion. Emotion in action."

That made absolutely no sense to me, but then I've never considered myself emotional. Still, I nodded. "So we won't consummate our marriage tonight?" I clarified.

(Remember that wash of relief I felt, standing beside Burnsby's corpse? Would it be blasphemous to say that I felt just as relieved?)

"Not for weeks. Until you want it as much as I do. Definitely not in this haunted abbey."

Tension seeped from my body. I loved Godric, but the idea of inserting part of *him* into part of *me* wasn't appealing.

(Though I did like his fingers. Hmm.)

"The act sounds arduous," I offered, my voice absurdly prim. I took a stab at sounding more sophisticated. "Perhaps better without ghosts and rats lurking about."

His mouth curled into a lopsided smile; I reached out and traced his bottom lip with a finger. “Your lips look so firm in daily life, but they’re quite lush and full. I don’t suppose you’ve ever considered wearing lip color?”

(Yes, I knew he hadn’t and never would. I was eager to change the subject.)

“No,” he said, rumbling with laughter. “Even Lance—with all his peacocking—doesn’t paint his face, thank God.”

I giggled from pure relief. “Before I married Burnsby, I didn’t notice his lip color. I never looked at him very closely. I had no idea that he wore rouge until we argued in the parlor.”

Godric nodded. “You saw him as a comforting presence rather than a real man.”

“I was plagued by nerves every moment I spent in a ballroom, except when I was dancing with Burnsby,” I confessed. “I would pay him no attention, and it was almost like having a little nap. I felt refreshed, because he demanded nothing of me.”

“He also paid no attention to you, but I do. Fair warning, it’s too late to escape.” His eyes gleamed with happiness. “You’re mine.”

Wonder, happiness, a deep sense of rightness sank into my skin.

I took a deep breath. “Perhaps we don’t know each other well enough yet to join our bodies,” I suggested, feeling terribly awkward as I admitted that. Women did this with strangers all the time. And I was in love with him!

“I understand,” Godric said, one hand slipping behind my neck.

He did. I could see it in his eyes.

“How could a man possibly visit a lady of the evening?” I asked, sharing the thought. “How could you do something so intimate with a stranger?”

“Lust is inexplicable but powerful. May I touch you over the sheet?” Godric asked, watching me closely.

I tried to read his expression, but his eyes were so dark and deep that I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. When I nodded, he put his other hand on my hip and rubbed little circles while he told me about his estate in Buckinghamshire. He’d put in the newest water closets, which my late husband had rejected as too expensive when I asked for them; a chamber pot had been good enough for Burnsby’s grandfather and good enough for me.

I began relaxing, the muscles in my legs melting into the sheets. I don't remember much after that, until Tess was bending over me, gently waking me. "The will's being read in an hour, Evie. I have a bath waiting for you."

I sat up, naked as the day I was born.

Her eyes met mine and narrowed. "Still innocent, aren't you?"

"I wasn't ready for something so intimate," I said with a twinge of shame.

Tess bellowed with laughter.

Thirty-One

Women aren't allowed to make wills, as our property legally belongs to our husbands—an obvious injustice. Yet wills can be a vehicle for cruelty. Maybe we're better off saying our farewells in person, without the temptation to abandon our principles.

We shall read the will immediately,” Lance said, when Godric and I walked into the library after supper. “I don’t want to risk the newlyweds returning to bed.”

“That’s not entirely fair,” Ophelia said. She was snuggled on the couch, Peony on her lap. “You and Colette also—”

I sat down and squeezed her hand. “Don’t be impolite.”

She frowned fiercely. “But—”

“Embarrassing people isn’t kind.” I was sticking to my two rules—be kind, don’t lie—which meant teaching them to Ophelia. She was my daughter. *Our* daughter.

“It is not customary for minor children to attend a reading of a will,” Godric said. “Ophelia, may I ask you to return to your room, please?”

“Why? Did Burnsby write something about me?”

Godric held up a folded piece of paper, sealed with red wax and signed over in Burnsby’s sprawling signature. “I have no idea what is in the document, as your father’s London solicitors would have prepared this will. Still, I think it would be best if you left the reading to the adults.”

“*I am* an adult,” Ophelia said.

“For your own sake, you and Peony should ring for tea and read a novel,” I said.

“My own sake?” Her chin jutted into the air.

“Our father was a peevish and unkind man,” Lance said, strolling over and tweaking one of her curls. “If you wish to see the document when you come of age, I will gladly share it.”

Ophelia got to her feet. “It’s absurd to protect me after years of living in the abbey.” She pushed Peony’s carriage from the room, sighing loudly.

Crumpsall bowed. “Lady Burnsby, would you like me to serve tea?”

“Yes,” Colette replied, nodding. “Would you please inform the household that I prefer to be addressed as Lady Marmont? I find my husband’s title

more appealing than the one he inherited. ‘Burnsby’ so easily slips to ‘buffoon.’”

“A fair point,” Lance said. “Crumpsall, please fetch Aunt Mima and Miss Ainsworth, along with the tea tray.”

Lance was not grieving; his face was buoyant. Why should he grieve for a father who had sent him away at birth, treated him despicably, and scarred him with a poker? Though I was fond of Mima, no one could describe her as a steady presence, suited to raising a lively boy, let alone two. Yet Burnsby had regularly dispatched the boys to the abbey during their vacations, rather than to one of his other houses.

The butler bowed again and withdrew.

“Would you prefer to retire to our chamber?” Lance asked Colette. “You needn’t stay. We have no need of my late father’s money, his title, or his property. Whatever he wrote in his will is irrelevant to our future.”

“I shan’t leave you,” she said, kissing his cheek. “The estate is yours by right, and if your father tried to give away your inheritance, we shall fight for it.”

I was more and more convinced that Lance wasn’t merely *relieved* by his father’s demise. I’d describe him as joyous.

“By the way, I talked to Trundle out in the stables,” Lance said, turning to Godric. “As long as the snow holds off tonight, we have sufficient horses for three sleighs. Once we reach the nearest inn, we can hire carriages to take us back to civilization. Crumpsall will keep the abbey ticking over until I return.”

“Haunted abbeys should be confined to novels,” Colette said with a dramatic flourish of her fan. “I shall never return to this hellish stone vault.”

“Sometimes I almost forget you are French,” her husband said affectionately.

Colette ignored that. “I suppose that Lance must keep his estates in England, if only for the sake of our son, should we have one.”

Something in her face caught my attention. “*Colette!*”

She twinkled at me. “Last night I was repulsed by champagne, and this morning I couldn’t touch my crumpet, which my maid considers an infallible sign.”

No wonder Lance was so happy! I jumped up to hug her. “You will be a wonderful mother.”

“My very best congratulations,” Godric said, rising and giving Lance one of those manly blows that signal attachment.

“I don’t mean to desert you by returning to France,” Colette said to me, “but I could only be comfortable in my own house and country. I’m sure that England’s doctors are well enough, but I shall ask the accoucheur who attended my own mama to live with us for the last few months of my confinement. When the time comes for you to give birth, perhaps you will travel to Paris as well?”

My stomach flipped, thinking of a baby with tumbling black curls and gray-green eyes.

Godric drew me down on the couch and kissed my ear. “I will be at your side, no matter the continent you choose, Evie.” I felt myself turning pink. Since we hadn’t yet consummated our union, babies seemed a long way off.

“Excellent!” Colette clapped. “When you find yourself with child, Evie, please do move to my house so that I can guard over you. Your sister and Ophelia must cross the Channel as well.”

Thankfully, the embarrassing subject was truncated by the butler carrying a tea tray, followed by Mima in her striped gown and Sophonisba dressed entirely in black, including a black veil that fell from the crown of her head all the way to her feet.

(I admit to fascination: When did she instruct a seamstress to create this garment? Last year? Five years ago? The abbreviated bodice suggested the design was recent.)

After a round of greetings—during which Mima was confused and Sophonisba haughty—we prepared to listen to the will, for all the world as if the document were entertainment offered by our host, akin to an indifferent performance of Haydn or a discourse on watercolors.

Mima refused to seat herself. “Clifford will surely make himself as disagreeable in death as he was in life,” she observed, taking herself off to the window seat overlooking the cemetery.

Having served tea, Crumpsall bowed and left.

I had one thing to say before we began. “Miss Ainsworth, I am sorry that my late husband was such an unrepentant scoundrel. You were shamefully treated.”

Her lip curled. “You were nothing to him. I was always at his side, always, from the moment he first saw me in Paris.”

I picked up my teacup again.

“Not kind,” Colette observed. “You were at Burnsby’s side, Miss Ainsworth, believing that he was your husband. Weren’t you acquiescing with his purported bigamy? Wouldn’t that have constituted a charge of ‘accessory to a felony’?”

Sophonisba’s face contorted before her mouth curled into a sneer once again.

“You could have reported him to the authorities when he married Hecuba,” Colette continued. “Did that never occur to you?”

Colette was defending me, which I loved. All the same, I was certain that Sophonisba had been as deceived as Hecuba, Alice, and myself.

“I don’t believe that Miss Ainsworth had any idea that the late Lord Burnsby had married Hecuba until he walked into the abbey with his new wife,” I said, watching Sophonisba’s face closely. “Mima said she threw herself into Burnsby’s arms in front of his bride.”

Sophonisba’s chin wobbled and then firmed. “I’d prefer not to revisit the memory.” A tacit way of saying I was correct.

What a bastard Burnsby had been: presumably breaking not only Hecuba’s but Sophonisba’s heart in one blow.

“What did you say to your purported husband after he introduced you to Hecuba?” Colette asked, not a woman who readily dropped a line of questioning.

Sophonisba’s hands had curled into fists. “Lord Burnsby was not a man who welcomed disagreement. Lady Everley would agree, I’m sure.”

Lady Everley.

In the midst of this painful, albeit riveting, experience, I felt a bolt of pure joy. How wonderful not to be a Burnsby. How lovely to be attached to Godric.

I countered with a rhetorical question. “How could Miss Ainsworth have fought back against Burnsby, having neither a powerful family nor friends?”

“True, a fallen woman has no standing,” Colette conceded.

Lance intervened. “Miss Ainsworth, I regret that my father treated you so abominably. Godric, as my solicitor, will you please read aloud the will?”

Godric set down his teacup and moved to stand with his back to the fire, facing all of us. “As you can see,” he said, holding up the will again, “Lord Burnsby signed over the untouched seal of this document on July sixteenth, 1798.”

“That’s a week after Alice died,” Lance observed.

(Alice being Burnsby’s third wife, in case you’ve forgotten. I was the fourth.)

“Lady Everley, can you attest to the signature?” my husband asked.

I nodded. “I took over the household accounts during our marriage. That is Lord Burnsby’s signature.”

The will was astonishingly short.

~ CLIFFORD BURNSBY’S LAST WILL & TESTAMENT ~

JULY 16, IN THE THIRTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF GEORGE III OF
ENGLAND, 1798

In the name of God, Amen. I, Lord Clifford Clifton Burnsby of England and Scotland, in perfect health and memory, God be praised, do make and ordain this my last will and testament in manner and form following, that is to say, first I commend my soul into the hands of God my creator, hoping and assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Savior to be made partaker of life everlasting, and my body to the earth whereof it is made.

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast,” Mima said, from over by the window.

Item. All my entailed properties, I give, devise, and bequeath to my heir, Lancelot Burnsby, whom I ordain and make executor of this my last will and testament.

Colette let out a relieved sigh, but Lance’s expression didn’t change.

Item. I give unto my wife, should I have one at the time of my death, the sum of eight thousand pounds.

Godric looked up. “Lance, my understanding is that Evie’s father, Sir William Sutton, is in possession of a codicil stipulating a more generous jointure.”

“Ten thousand pounds,” I supplemented.

“That’s *my* eight thousand pounds,” Sophonisba snarled. “He promised that sum to me.”

No one responded. What could we say?

Item. All my goods, chattel, leases, plate, jewels, and household stuff whatsoever, after my debts and legacies are paid and my funeral expenses discharged, shall be bequeathed to my heir and the children of his flesh, with the counsel that it is his Christian duty to maintain the household staff in the London townhouse, the Scottish estate, and Burnsby Lodge. I commend to my heir the care of three females living at the time of this will in Burnsby Lodge, Scotland, herein identified and sometimes known as Mima Burnsby, Ophelia Burnsby, and Sophonisba Ainsworth.

Sophonisba drew in a harsh breath, her expression one of black, incredulous rage. My stomach curled into a sympathetic knot; I was unsurprised, considering the contempt Burnsby had always expressed toward fallen women.

I hereby revoke all former wills and publish this to be my last will and testament. In witness whereof I have hereunto put my hand the day and year first above written.

“That’s it?” Sophonisba demanded.

“Yes.” Godric folded the paper. “It appears to have been duly witnessed and registered. The will must pass through probate, but I see no irregularities that would cause difficulty for a judge.”

“Bunny always told me that after he died, I could produce the paper behind the portrait and receive eight thousand pounds,” Sophonisba burst out.

Silence followed. An expression of sympathy would be unwelcome, and I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“As we all know, that was a falsehood,” Godric said, not unkindly. “Your claim to be Burnsby’s current wife would have been investigated and found to be untrue. The fact that he included you by name in his will and commended you to the care of his heir would have substantiated the ruling.”

“Bunny admitted that I had never been his wife.” One tear ran down Sophonisba’s cheek, the more convincing for its singularity. “When I brought up my eight thousand pounds, he promised, *promised*, that he’d made provision in his will despite not being married to me. He promised.”

Another painful silence.

“Yet he left me nothing, after promising that he had left me eight thousand pounds, never mind the fact I wasn’t his wife. That was a lie, another lie!” Her voice flamed with rage. “He left me less than nothing, because he knew that everyone in this blasted abbey detested me. He *knew* that his heir would throw me out!”

With a savage gesture, she reached up and wrenched off her veil.

“That does appear to be the case,” Godric said.

“Bunny was an *ass*!” Sophonisba had started panting, her bosom heaving so much that I feared her bodice might well split at the seams. I drew my shawl to my lap, readily available in the event of sartorial disaster.

“I agree,” I offered.

“My mother told me that, and it was true,” she burst out. “All these years later, I still believed him. I still . . . I still . . .” Tears rolled down her face; she used her veil to blot them.

She still loved him, obviously.

“I was a cretin to have believed him, from that first moment when he promised to marry me and make me a lady.”

Godric handed her a spotless handkerchief.

Everyone was as silent as a school of carp floating in a pond.

“Lord Burnsby shouldn’t have lied. He should have appreciated and rewarded your loyalty,” I said, feeling more awkward by the moment.

Sophonisba didn’t appreciate my support. She shot me a venomous glare and said, “You’re the worst of all four wives.”

“On what grounds?” Colette asked. “I’m sure we all regret that Burnsby was despicable enough to seduce you. Yet if my husband brought me face-to-face with his mistress, that woman would find herself sitting on her arse in the snow directly, particularly if said mistress dared insult me to my face. Evie has shown remarkable forbearance in allowing you to reside under her roof in the last weeks.”

Lance drew his wife closer and kissed her forehead. “I suspect your husband would also be floundering in a snowbank. Thankfully, I have no mistress.”

“I know that,” Colette said. “I’m making a point. I believe Evie is the *best* of Burnsby’s wives. Hecuba and Alice were flattened by his bullying, whereas Evie kept her dignity. She spoke to you civilly, Miss Ainsworth.”

“Burnsby wasn’t kind to any of his wives,” Mima put in, from the window seat.

“She didn’t weep a single tear for her husband,” Sophonisba hissed, nodding at me. “She married again before his body was blessed, while it was still warm.”

“Actually, my father’s body was surely frozen by this morning.” Lance was clearly enjoying himself.

I threw him a reproving glance. “You are correct in your assessment of my emotion, Miss Ainsworth. I honor your grief, but I don’t share it. To my mind, Burnsby was an abusive ruffian in gentleman’s guise, a brute who treated women like chattel. I will never shed a tear for him.”

“Bunny told me how unkind and unfeeling you were toward him. He found you cold, boring, and tedious. He told me that you tried to avoid his seventieth birthday party altogether.” She began heaving with sobs again.

(What she said next sounds absurd, but my account is truthful.)

“He was looking forward to a birthday dingbangle, but he was so fraught that he could scarcely perform.”

Dingbangle? Her voice was muffled by the handkerchief. I turned to my husband with an inquiring look.

Godric’s mouth was so firm that I knew that he was choking back a smile, implying that “dingbangling” was a verb relating to the noun “rumpy-pumpy.” It wasn’t the moment to clarify, but I felt a wave of relief that Ophelia wasn’t in the room.

Hopefully she didn’t already know these arcane terms for sexual congress.

“He— He loved Christmas so mu-mu-much,” Sophonisba bawled.

“Perhaps it’s fitting that he died on the night,” Colette observed.

The conversation wasn’t getting us anywhere. I cleared my throat. “It seems I inherited thousands of pounds, but perhaps—”

Sophonisba’s face had been buried in Godric’s handkerchief, but her head jerked up. “No, you didn’t!” she squealed.

“Burnsby treated you with regrettable dishonesty,” Godric told her patiently. “However, you have no legal claim against his estate.”

“Her wedding is as false as mine!” She pointed at me with a shaking forefinger.

“My marriage was invalid?” I exclaimed, thinking back to my abortive wedding ceremony. “I married Burnsby by special license, and my father served as witness along with the verger.” My eyes widened. “Was the special license a forgery?”

“I doubt it,” Godric said. “You described your father as irate at your decision to marry Burnsby. He would have examined the license.”

I shook my head, remembering the whiskey that my father had downed before I forced him into the carriage to attend my wedding. “He was focused on my jointure and refused to leave the church until Burnsby wrote a codicil to his will, witnessed by himself and the verger, leaving me the larger sum. I don’t think my father paid any attention to the license.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Colette cried. “Déjà vu! We played out this script on Christmas. Evie is Burnsby’s rightful widow.”

“No, she isn’t,” Sophonisba spat. “*She* is!”

Our heads all swung in the direction of her index finger. “Are you saying that *Mima* was also married to Burnsby?” I gasped.

(More like a screech, if I’m honest.)

Thirty-Two

It seems I was never married to Burnsby. Again. I would like to cleverly fashion the discovery into advice, but honestly, how many women experience this confluence of events?

Mima didn't turn at the sound of her own name. She was tapping her fingers on the window seat, as detached as a sphynx watching a sandstorm scour the desert.

"You'll never get a confirmation from that dunce, but yes," Sophonisba said with a smirk. "She's Bunny's first wife."

"That would make Mima my mother," Lance said in a raw voice.

Colette clutched his hand. "I don't believe it."

"The wording 'herein identified' in the will does imply that Mima may have a different legal name. Yet the fact in itself does not confirm that she married Burnsby." Godric walked over, plucked the heavy Bible from the podium, and came to sit beside me.

We all waited as he turned the pages.

"Miss Ainsworth appears to be telling the truth," he said a moment later.

"Really?"

(Was my tone incredulous? Why, yes, it was.)

Godric had found the page titled "Family Record."

"Granville Burnsby married Hattie S. Wray in 1714," I read aloud, adding, "Their son Clifford was born twenty years later, on December twenty-fifth, 1734. Burnsby did always say his parents considered him a miracle."

Everyone but Mima was watching me intently. "Clifford is recorded as marrying Lily Jemima Newell in 1773," I continued. "Lancelot was born a year later, in 1774. No other wives are listed, and neither is Ophelia."

"I looked for Ophelia's name a few days ago," Godric put in. "I didn't pay any attention to the record of Burnsby's first marriage."

"Bunny would never acknowledge a bastard, would he?" Sophonisba said scornfully. "He had respect for his family name. That's why he couldn't have an addled wife. He owed more to his dignity and name. Lady Burnsby couldn't have a head full of cobwebs."

"Was Mima always so impaired?" Colette asked.

“Something happened when she gave birth,” Sophonisba said, throwing Lance an unfriendly look. “Bunny told me that she woke up two days later, unable to move her right side and with the memory of a fruit fly. She still doesn’t remember anything for more than a day. By all rights, he had no wife. It was pure kindness on his part to pay for her care.”

No one responded to this cruel assertion.

“Mima is short for Jemima,” Lance said, looking at Mima gazing out the window, paying no attention to us. “But how can we determine whether Mima is Lily?”

Godric rounded on Sophonisba. “Miss Ainsworth, are you confirming that Burnsby’s first wife is in this room now?”

Sophonisba shrugged. “Her brain isn’t, but the rest of her is.”

“*Mon dieu*,” Colette whispered.

“Mima detests Burnsby,” I said incredulously. “How could she possibly have been married to him and retain no memory of the relationship?” I bit my lip. “She did call him Clifford. She was the only person other than Sophonisba who called him by his given name.”

Sophonisba stared at me, her mouth tight. The rage driving her demand for eight thousand pounds had burned out. As her eyes caught the candlelight, they seemed as flat as pennies, the ones used to keep dead bodies’ eyes shut.

(I know: absurdly fanciful.)

I turned to the one person who could (perhaps) clarify the situation, raising my voice. “Mima, did you ever marry?”

“Oh no, dear. I don’t like men. I’d never do that.”

I frowned, but then: “There’s the portrait!” I exclaimed. “Mima’s portrait.” I turned to Godric. “Tess dispatched it to the kitchen for cleaning.”

Godric nodded and left the room.

“If Mima was Burnsby’s first wife, that means he sent her baby—Lance—away at birth,” I said. “That might explain why she searches the abbey.”

Godric appeared, followed by a footman carrying the large gilt frame, now free of dust and grime. Lance stood and took the painting, dismissing the footman with a jerk of his head.

“Aunt Mima,” he said, bringing it over to her. “Is this your portrait?”

She peered at it. “Why, that’s my favorite dress. I got married in that dress.”

Lance flinched. “Who did you marry, Mima?”

“Oh, I didn’t marry. I’m illegitimate. Who would marry me?”

I felt a bolt of deep anger. Burnsby had taken advantage of his wife’s confused mind to obliterate the memory of her (married) parents, not to mention her own baby.

“Ophelia said that she is more likely to answer narrow questions,” Colette said. “Mima, does that portrait depict Clifford’s first wife?”

Mima peered at it again. “Yes, it does, dear. You know, Clifford pinned his will to the back of it. He said portraits were safe because no one looks behind them.”

Godric shook his head. “The portrait had nothing pinned to the back when we found it.”

Lance rose and went to kneel at Mima’s side. “Mother, I am your son, grown up and not lost.”

She patted his shoulder. “Oh no, Lance, dear. You are Lily’s child. My baby was taken away by my sister, and I never saw him again.”

Now they were so close together, I saw that he had her nose. More than likely, her white curls were once golden, like Lance’s. Colette made a stifled sound.

“Mother,” Lance said, his voice wrenchingly sad. “You *are* Lily.”

Colette rose and went to him, tugging him to his feet and wrapping her arms around his waist.

“You’re all so serious,” Mima remarked. “As if someone had died!” She got up and shambled away without another word. Her footman wrapped her in a cloak, and they disappeared into the twilight.

Lance turned on Sophonisba. “How *dare* you keep my mother hidden from the world, pretending that she was dead? Unknown to *me*, her own son?” Lance’s voice throbbed like that of a Shakespearean actor.

(I hope you’ll forgive the jocose observation; I am very fond of Lance, but drama isn’t in my soul. Lance and Colette are of a different breed in that respect.)

“I had no idea who she was,” Sophonisba spat. “On Christmas night, Bunny told me I wasn’t his wife—I’d never been his wife—because his first wife was still alive. He knew I wouldn’t have come back to England without him promising marriage. He falsified our marriage certificate because he had to.”

“Were you ever known as Lady Burnsby?” I asked.

Her face momentarily crumpled and smoothed out again. "I prefer to be known as the opera singer Sophonisba Ainsworth," she replied, with a flare of her former bravado.

Burnsby had never acknowledged his mistress in public.

"I didn't have to return to England," Sophonisba shrilled. "My voice was celebrated. All Paris lauded my performance of Countess Almaviva in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Bunny had no need to commission my portrait, because Batoni begged to paint me."

That solved another nagging question: I had been surprised that Burnsby commissioned his mistress's likeness, but I had put his uncharacteristic generosity down to adoration. More likely, he had told me the truth (for once) when he claimed never to have loved her. What did he say about her? Burnsby's words resurfaced in my mind: *Such a woman has uses that you could not understand.*

I could understand those "uses," as could other wives of despicable gentlemen engaging in extramarital dingbanging.

"Neither a madwoman nor a mistress was good enough to assume the title of Lady Burnsby," I summarized.

"He dumped my mother in an institution until he returned from Europe, bringing you with him," Lance said to Sophonisba.

"I didn't know my wedding was a fake, did I?" Her fingers clenched into a fist. "He told me that we'd be living in the Highlands with his addled bastard sister, and then he just left me with her!"

"I presume it was too dangerous for Burnsby to leave my mother in an institution once she learned how to speak again," Lance said. "His reputation would have been dented if anyone had discovered that his wife was confined to an asylum."

Sophonisba tossed her head, demonstrating that she had no need of plumes. "I shall move to London."

"You may go wherever you wish," Colette said cordially. "Take your ermine coat and whatever rubbishing jewels Burnsby gave you."

"You leave me no choice but to sell my story!" Sophonisba hissed, her face empurpling.

I slowly registered her words. My former husband had consigned his wife to an asylum, engaged in three bigamous marriages, fathered an illegitimate daughter, and deceived his mistress with a false wedding

certificate. His life had played out in deception, which would be irresistible for curious minds.

I'd give her story a full week on the front page of the *Times*. But the scandal would never fully die out, and even once it had run through the press, one of my favorite novelists was sure to write a roman à clef, replete with ghosts and a haunted abbey.

There went Godric's judgeship. My heart sank. If we hadn't married that morning, his career might have been saved.

What's more, Sophonisba would not hesitate to identify Ophelia as Burnsby's illegitimate daughter. Most, if not all, members of polite society would see her as naught but another rotten limb on a diseased family tree. Ophelia would be unable to debut, no matter how generously we dowered her.

My mouth turned dry. "Godric," I breathed, my fingers curling around his forearm. "I'm so sorry."

Sophonisba's eyes gleamed with satisfaction and rage, her lips curved in a half-moon. "I'll take all of you down," she promised. "The stories I tell will find their way from London to Paris. To the court of Napoleon himself!"

"You would betray your true love by dragging his reputation through the gutter?" Lance asked.

She let out a sharp laugh. "Now *I* am the traitor? My mother wouldn't see me before her death, even after I wrote to tell her that I was now Lady Burnsby. She said—" Sophonisba bit off the sentence.

We could all guess what her mother had said.

She rose abruptly and left the room, leaving the black veil behind her.

"Sophonisba Ainsworth doesn't really want to sell her story," Godric said, looking unperturbed. "She wants money, not infamy."

"Then we'll pay her," Lance said grimly. "She's a selfish, cruel woman, but my father treated her very badly."

I turned my head and brushed my lips against Godric's jaw, because it was there. Waiting to be kissed.

Despite all the chaos—a wretched husband, a jealous mistress, a secret wife, and the constant redefining of who I was and to whom I belonged—Godric was still here. He was still mine. For the first time since I'd arrived at this fateful place, I fully understood who I was, and where I stood.

He glanced down at me, and his eyes drooped. “Evie.” His lips shaped the word, but without sound.

“Bedtime,” Colette said, getting up. “Come along, Count Marmont.”

Thirty-Three

This is a non sequitur, because I'm thinking of mothers and daughters. Our mother died just after your birth, but she already adored you, Rosie. And me. And our father. She hated dying, not from fear of the hereafter, but because she had to leave us.

When Godric and I walked into my bedchamber, I dropped into one of the chairs by the fire, stupefied. “Did you have any idea that Mima was Burnsby’s first wife?”

Godric shook his head. “It didn’t occur to me, or to anyone else. None of his servants had worked for him before 1781, when he and Sophonisba returned from Europe. He must have closed all three houses, fired everyone, and left.”

“Burnsby would have relished saving the money,” I agreed. “That means he hired the current household, including the coachman and butler, with the express intention of hiding Mima and Sophonisba in the abbey. Oh, and once your parents had passed away, you and Lance as well, and then, finally, Ophelia.”

“What an ass,” Godric said.

“I shall feel terribly guilty if scandal ruins your career.”

He shrugged, unbothered. “I have you, and that’s enough. Won’t you sit on my lap, Evie?”

I landed on top of him in a distinctly unladylike fashion.

Godric’s arms wound around me like a wall between the world and its shocks. “Your hair reminds me of skeins of glossy silk. You are all I think about. I don’t give a damn about that judgeship.”

He ran his hands down my face. We kissed until I didn’t have a shred of shame left in me. I took his hand and placed it on my breast, loving his hoarse chuckle.

We both watched as his fingers ran over my nipple, visible under my gown. “Your breasts drive me mad,” he said hoarsely, flattening his palm into a rougher caress.

It felt so good that I had to take a gulp of air before I could collect myself enough to answer calmly. “Oh?”

(Yes, that was all I could think to say.)

His hand slid to my jaw, tipping my face toward his. He kissed me feverishly, as if my mouth were honey. My last coherent thought was the realization that a kiss can be tender and carnal at the same time, blending two emotions that feel as if they belong in different worlds. Loving and sensual. Affectionate and hungry.

His fingers caressed my throat, rounded my breast, and the world faded away. Delight was a song that sprang from the beats of my heart. I writhed under Godric's thumb rubbing over my nipple again and again, until he picked me up and moved to the bed.

My gown came off easily this time, and I didn't mind as much. I sank onto my back, and he came down on his side next to me.

I wasn't capable of thinking very clearly, except for the surety that Godric's husky croon had never been heard in a court of law, and no woman had ever seen this gleam in his eyes, the tremble in his fingertips, the delight on his stern face.

Those expressions? They were *mine*.

After a while he kissed his way down my neck. I startled when he gently tugged my chemise down and drew one of my nipples into his mouth.

It felt *so good*.

Desire was building in waves, racing up from my thighs. Through the haze, one thought came clearly: I had to do more than lie on my back.

"I can't stop kissing you," Godric said. "Your lips are so beautiful, kiss-stung and swollen." His tongue drove into my mouth at the same time one of his hands ran up my leg.

When he pulled back from our kiss and stood, a plaintive sound slipped from my lips before I could stop it.

"Sit up, Evie," he commanded. Then he crouched before me, nudging apart my legs, his eyes fixed on mine. "I want you to watch this time."

"Again?" I asked, incredulous. "You already did it once today."

"It's all I can think about," he said, his voice dropped. "All the time people talked, the animal part of my brain was thinking about how sweet you taste, and the sound of your little cries."

I felt myself turning red. How embarrassing.

"I loved it," he said, reading my expression. "I'm obsessed with it, Evie. With pleasuring you. *Please*," he added.

"You'll have to allow me to do the same to you," I blurted out. "It can't just be one way; it doesn't feel right."

“Once we’ve left the abbey,” he said, smiling, “my body will be yours.”

Somewhere deep inside me, I relaxed. I wasn’t quite ready to put my lips on his person. That part of his person.

“At the moment . . .” His lips followed his hands up the sensitive skin of my thighs, drifting toward the heart of me and then veering away. A few meandering caresses and dusted kisses later, I was mad for something more—more focused, shall we say.

“Godric,” I said warningly.

He raised his head, grinned at me. My chemise was at my waist, and he’d pushed his way between my legs, but he still hadn’t touched me where I wanted. “Yes?”

I cleared my throat. “*Please?*”

“Wives need to be clear about their desires,” he drawled, eyes alight with mock piety.

“Kiss me there,” I commanded, and thankfully he accepted the order. His tongue curled against me, and I let out a yelp. Pleasure bloomed between my legs and then spread through my body like a molten wave.

(Two metaphors for the same feeling. I know! But I don’t have language for the experience.)

Five minutes later, I was draped across the bed like a boneless being. My husband rocked back on his haunches, his eyes shining.

“Again?”

“You must be joking,” I mumbled. “Don’t you want something for yourself?”

He shook his head. “Not now.”

I eyed his breeches; the silk might split at any moment. The sight was so embarrassing that I decided to take him at his word and rolled over so I could hide my face in the pillow.

He rose and sat down on the edge of the bed, his hand stroking down my back. “All right?”

“It’s too much,” I said into the sheet.

“Too much intimacy?” His voice sounded guarded.

“Not too much, just a lot. I’ll get used to it.”

“One does feel vulnerable, making love,” Godric said.

“You said that you’d never made love before,” I pointed out, turning my head so I could see his face. “Just the other thing.”

“I’m making love to you.”

“*To* as opposed to *with*?”

His eyes shifted from tender to confused.

“You are making love *to* me,” I prompted.

“Someday you will make love ‘to’ me, and later still, in England, we will make love ‘with’ each other.”

“Semantics,” I grumbled, my eyes drifting shut. He lay beside me and fell asleep, an arm wrapped around my waist. I felt so safe that I slept soundly all night. If ghosts were singing hymns, I didn’t hear them.

I woke up in the morning to the lovely smell of fresh brewed tea. Godric was sitting in a chair, reading a book.

(Not *Les Liaisons*; after the first few letters, he had put it aside, declaring the characters deplorable. Godric sees enough of that behavior in daily life.)

He wore a linen shirt that stretched over his broad shoulders and made desire simmer low in my stomach. After brushing my teeth and putting on my chemise, I poured myself a cup of tea and sank into the chair opposite him.

He smiled and put away his book.

My mouth fell open. “Not again!”

Thirty-Four

Every day I am more convinced that kindness is a virtue higher than (almost) any other. Our father is kind. As well as inept with money and hopelessly optimistic.

December 28

After a last luncheon, we shall leave this godforsaken abbey forever,” Godric said, sitting down on the bed a half hour later. “Will you please join me in the library when you’re ready?”

Once again, he had wrung sensation from me until I felt utterly boneless. I blinked at him. “Where are you going?”

“Lance and I are going to make plans that will allow him to return to France promptly. But first I’m going to assure Ophelia that no matter her birth, she is ours, and we will care for her.”

I smiled at that: Godric had been a father for only one day, but he was a marvelous parent already. “Once I’m dressed, I’ll tell her the same.”

Sometime later I sank into a bath, holding a cup of tea, watching Tess packing the last of my trunks. “What is everyone saying in the kitchen?” I asked, when I was awake enough to converse.

“That Ainsworth is a murderer,” Tess said. “Didn’t I say it? I always said it.”

“What? No, you didn’t,” I objected.

“Well, I said the abbey was an evil place. She’s been living here. Wickedness has seeped into her bones.”

“That’s absurd,” I said, shaken. “She’s no murderer.”

“Evie, she rogered him *to death!*”

(Another new word, but easily identifiable.)

“That doesn’t fall within the definition of a criminal act,” I pointed out.

Tess snorted. “Then there’s this business about Miss Mima being the dowager Lady Burnsby. Mima said flat out this morning that Burnsby was a fatheaded fool, and she would never have gone near him. She won’t even consider the idea that the new Lord Burnsby might be her son.”

“I suspect it wouldn’t make much difference in Mima’s life if she understood that Lance is her son. She misses her baby, not the grown man

he's become."

"When I was in the kitchen just now, gathering your tea tray, they told her three times that Burnsby had passed away," Tess said. "She can't keep it in her head for more than the flicker of an eyelash. And what's more, she doesn't give a toss when she does hear it."

"I'm not grieving, either," I said.

"The new Lord Burnsby asked, not for the first time, if Mima would care to live with you and Sir Godric in London, but Mima said no, because what if her baby came to find her? And there he was, right in front of her eyes."

We were both silent for a moment. "It's unbearably sad," I said, thinking of Lance's face as he knelt beside his mother. I held out my empty teacup. "May I have some more tea, please?"

"I can't wait to be free of this place," Tess said, fetching the teapot. "Even knowing Mima's unhinged, I can't believe she'd rather live among the wolves and ghosts in this benighted abbey."

"I don't think a London doctor could solve problems as grave as Mima's, problems that stem back to the catastrophic effect of giving birth. And this has been her home for years."

"Lord Everley's valet and I will go ahead of you to the inn," Tess said, changing the subject. "A sleigh scoots down the mountain faster than a carriage, so you'll arrive at the inn in good time for supper. Mr. Crumpsall dispatched a groom yesterday to reserve rooms. It's not as if they'll have many guests at this time of year."

I wouldn't post another letter to my sister from the closest village, because Godric and I planned to travel straight to London. I wanted to tell Rosie everything in person—after introducing her to my new husband. The thought made me glow with happiness.

Two hours later I walked into the library in a traveling gown, prepared to flee the abbey, though not until I fulfilled the obligations mentioned in the will. Even if I had never truly been married to Burnsby, I still felt responsibility for Mima, Ophelia, and (despite myself) Sophonisba. Their care was consigned to Burnsby's heir and his wife. In the world's eyes, the wife would be me—one of the Bigamous Burnsby Wives.

(I sounded like a circus performer. Still, I was grateful not to be a Ghostly Burnsby Wife.)

Ophelia would accompany us to London, frequently visiting her beloved brother and his wife in France. The household that made Mima an apple tart

every day for a month would feed her well. Crumpsall, her footman, and her maid would keep her safe while she searched the attics.

That left Sophonisba.

Godric's face lit up when I entered the library, and he started to his feet. I paused after handing my mantle to a footman, savoring the moment, my heart so happy that I couldn't contain my emotion.

He drew me into his arms without a greeting, his tongue twining around mine, and heat bubbled in my body like the finest champagne. I had a fierce wish to catch his hand and draw him back to my bedroom.

Why on earth hadn't we consummated our marriage? My body trembled against his, and the idea of his weight on top of me sounded wonderful. I longed for the friction of skin roughened with hair against my bare skin.

From behind me, Colette's merry laughter brought us back to sanity. Godric drew away, even as my eyes begged for another kiss.

"Tonight, my darling, darling wife," he breathed in my ear.

He tucked me under his arm, and we walked over to the fireplace to join Colette and Lance.

"I love that gown!" I exclaimed. Colette was wearing a sky-blue traveling dress, albeit with Valenciennes lace at the neck and wrists and a hem adorned with five rows of adorable tiny pleats.

Colette jumped up and kissed my cheeks in the French style. "Now that you are my sister, I shall always greet you with two *bises*," she said with satisfaction. "Your gown is also nice, though perhaps not as bedecked as I prefer."

My gown was tailored from blue Lincolnshire wool, its only adornment a black velvet trim that would disguise the road dust that seeps through carriage doors.

Once we were all seated, Colette said, "What are we to do with Sophonisba Ainsworth? My suggestion is that we toss her into a convenient snowbank."

I opened my mouth.

"Which we will not do," Lance concluded.

"I would give her my eight thousand pounds, except I didn't inherit it." I turned to my husband.

(Perhaps I should have brought this up in private? Obviously, I had much to learn about marriage.)

Godric was not a man to sigh dramatically, but I sensed the ghost of a sigh. "Lance, I suggest we each contribute four thousand pounds to Miss Ainsworth's care and upkeep, thereby fulfilling the terms of Burnsby's will."

"Not fair to you," Lance pointed out. "The will placed the onus of her support on his heir."

"My wife's generosity knows no bounds," Godric said, giving me a wry smile. "Thankfully, neither you nor I are short of funds." He rose and walked over to ring the bell that summoned Crumpsall.

When Sophonisba strode into the room a few minutes later, her ermine cloak trailing behind her, I saw a face locked in resentment, with a shading of grief. Her eyes were not swollen, but I was certain that she had cried all night.

"Good morning," she said, her voice raspy as a seagull's. She seated herself in a straight-backed armchair, arranging her black garments with care. She hadn't removed her cloak; grubby white ermine rumbled around her feet.

I suppose my eyes conveyed sympathy.

Her face contorted with a storm of pure rage, but she quickly recovered herself. "*You*," she said, disgusted.

We waited, but she fell silent.

After a moment, Godric said, "We are willing to pay you eight thousand pounds if you move to France and never speak of your relationship with Burnsby."

"I don't want *her* money," she spat, referring to me.

"I don't have any money," I retorted. "The codicil my father negotiated is invalid because I never actually married Burnsby. And when did I become the devil incarnate? My only fault was allowing myself to be misled and betrayed by the same man who misled and betrayed *you*."

"You never loved him," she said, repeating her charge from the day before.

"No, I did not," I agreed. "Thankfully, because my heart would have been cracked by his callousness."

(As hers had been, but I didn't add that.)

"Hecuba and Alice loved Bunny," Sophonisba said. "They weren't married to him for long, but I could tell they loved him. We had that in common." She proclaimed it with the grandeur of a dethroned queen.

Colette's eyes met mine in clear agreement. We both disliked Sophonisba *ferociously*.

"This offer of support springs from the goodness of Lance's and my wife's hearts," Godric said. "In particular, Lady Everley has chosen to accept responsibility for you, as per Burnsby's will, though she is under neither a moral nor a legal obligation to do so."

"You're doing it because you feel guilty," she hissed at me.

(*Hissed* wasn't the right word. *Hooted* would be more apt. She *hooted* at me, scolding my moral failings.)

"About Burnsby's death? No, I do not."

"You *should* feel guilty!" She tossed her head. "You married an old man without loving him, solely for his money. You are nothing but a mercenary hussy."

That again.

I declined to answer.

"This offer of financial support comes with the proviso that you do not share your story," Godric said. "While living in Paris, you will never describe your life with Burnsby, Mima's existence, or anything to do with his various marriages or offspring thereof. You may well meet English people during your life abroad, but the name 'Burnsby' will not cross your lips."

Lance took over. "I shall establish an account for you at the Banque de France in Paris. You may contact my agent there once a month, and increments will be paid to you over the next decade. Should you break our agreement, the estate will sue you for repayment plus interest, as well as any funds you receive from a newspaper or other source. Should you die before the money is spent, the remainder will return to my estate. Should you outlive the eight thousand pounds, we will continue to give you the same monthly payments as long as you live."

Sophonisba's mouth pursed like a velvet bag with knotted strings, its coins hidden from sight. "I shall take your devil's bargain." She rose to her feet, her ermine cloak sweeping behind her. The household must have declined to clean it; the hem was begrimed as well as wet from snow.

For the first time, I could imagine her dominating a stage in Rome or Paris, singing in ringing tones about death, love, or longing, as per her summary of operatic subjects on our first meeting.

“Nasty, bad-tempered boys you were,” she said bitterly, “and you’ve grown up to be just as ill-mannered as ever.”

“You have made your disdain adamantly clear,” Godric said, his voice leaving no question about his indifference to her opinion.

“Crumpsall has placed your trunks on a sleigh,” Lance said. “A groom will accompany you to Newcastle, paying for your tickets and lodging during the journey. At the port, he will buy you and your maid, if she wishes to accompany you, passage to France. On the first of the month you may inquire at the bank for your stipend.”

“Don’t think I’ll thank you,” she snapped.

“We do not want your gratitude,” I said, meaning it.

Godric’s large hand curled around my shoulder, a point of reference in that chilly room.

“I hope to never see the lot of you again,” she said.

“I doubt we shall inhabit the same arrondissement in Paris,” Colette said. “Goodbye, Miss Ainsworth.”

Sophonisba swept out, a departure marred only when her soggy train caught in the door so she had to reopen it and slam it shut (again).

“Good riddance to all that bosom!” Colette said cheerfully.

I felt depressed, but I tried to match her jest. “If I never hear the word *rumpy-pumpy* again, it will be too soon,” I managed.

(And I never did.)

Thirty-Five

I don't know what to say. I honestly don't.

Our final luncheon in the abbey was the inverse of that first, drunken dinner. For one thing, we now had three Lady Burnsby (if I still counted). Colette replaced me at the foot of the table, and Lance replaced his father at the head. Godric and I were seated side by side, facing Mima and Ophelia.

As the first course was being served, Mima waved her hand. "I don't care for artichoke soup. I'd prefer a piece of apple tart."

Crumpsall promptly placed a slice of apple tart before her, taking it from a row of plates that waited on the sideboard.

"What have you done with her?" Mima asked the table at large, her voice jaunty and inquisitive.

"With whom?" Colette asked.

"The strumpet."

"Sophonisba? She—"

"She usually sits next to him," Mima interrupted, nodding toward the head of the table. "Burnsby isn't . . . Wait. Where is Clifford? Isn't this Christmas?"

"Father passed away from a heart attack," Ophelia said, her voice somewhat weary. The entire household had been repeating it ad infinitum, but Mima couldn't keep the slippery fact in her head.

Miss Wellington said that Mima was forgetting things faster than normal, perhaps because of the emotion caused by Burnsby's passing. That morning, she apparently hadn't known where she was.

"Oh, yes," Mima said now. "I never liked him much."

"He wasn't likable," Ophelia agreed. She patted her arm. "You'll be better off in the abbey without him, Aunt Mima. You needn't eat in the nursery, where it's so cold."

"I shall be better off without *her*," Mima said. "Did I kill her?"

Colette froze, her spoon halfway to her mouth.

"No," Lance replied. "Miss Ainsworth has departed to live in Paris." He turned to Crumpsall. "I shall ring when we desire the next course." The butler bowed and left, closing the door firmly behind him.

“Excellent,” Mima said, picking up her fork to take a bite of apple tart. “Where’s the strumpet gone, then?” she asked a moment later.

“You didn’t kill her,” Ophelia said quickly.

“I didn’t ask *that*,” Mima said, shocked. “I never talk about killing, do I?”

“You do not,” Godric said. “Have you ever killed anyone, Aunt Mima?”

I’d never seen his expression before—though in future years, watching my husband in the court, I would come to recognize that focused intensity.

“Why on earth would you ask such a thing?” She blinked at him over her fork.

“I was merely curious,” he responded.

Mima peered across the table at me. “Are you a ghost?”

I was taken aback, though it wasn’t the first time she’d asked.

“Evie isn’t a ghost, Aunt Mima!” Ophelia cried. “She is as warm as you and I. Have you ever seen a ghost?”

“Thankfully, no. I wouldn’t like to see them, would I? I didn’t like Alice,” Mima said. “Hecuba didn’t like me. They’d be angry at me.”

“Why would they be angry?” Godric asked. Colette’s eyes were as confused as my own.

Mima shrugged. “Are you a ghost?” she asked me again, ignoring Godric.

At the head of the table, Colette said, “I’m coming to sit next to you, Lance. I feel uncomfortably as if I’m walking into the pages of a novel containing vengeful spirits.” She got up and walked to the other end of the table.

“I am not a ghost,” I stated, feeling a wave of thankfulness for that fact.

“Ghosts aren’t vengeful,” Mima said, taking a bite of tart.

I smiled at her. “I, for one, will always be grateful to Hecuba.”

“My mother saved Evie,” Ophelia said proudly. “I believe she frightened off Alice on purpose, so that I could stay warm in the library.”

“I am sorry about Hecuba, but not Alice,” Mima said. “Alice called you a mongrel.”

“Ophelia is *not* a mongrel,” I said, my voice frosty.

“Alice was overly fond of fainting,” Mima commented cheerfully. “It was the death of her, in the end.”

“What do you mean?” Godric inquired.

"I'd better not tell you. Aren't you a barrister?" She smiled, showing yellowed, uneven teeth.

At the head of the table, Colette and Lance were talking quietly about whether Mima should travel with them to France. While I felt she would fare best in a familiar environment, she was Lance's mother. The decision was his.

Godric nodded. "I adjudicate cases for the Crown, criminal cases among the aristocracy."

"I hope you won't arrest me," Mima said.

"There's no reason to arrest Mima," Ophelia said. "She may be daft, but that's not against the—"

Whatever she saw in Godric's face made the sentence break off.

"I have sworn to uphold the law," my husband said. "For example, had I been given evidence that Sophonisba Ainsworth murdered the late Lord Burnsby, I would have been duty bound to arrest her."

"The strumpet didn't murder Clifford," Mima said offhandedly. "She hasn't got it in her, or she would have done it years ago." She squinted at me. "Now *you*, you might have done it, if he'd pushed you to it."

"I hope I would flee the marriage before that exigency," I said.

"That's not always possible." She paused. "I thought you'd be a ghost by now."

"Because you believed Evie had frozen to death?" Godric asked, as if he were inquiring about a preference for tea over coffee.

I once saw a cat's fur stand on end; I was that cat. My skin tightened all over my body.

"Well, yes, dear," Mima said. She frowned. "Perhaps I forgot to do it. Sometimes I do forget my own plans."

My unease turned to horror.

Beside me, Godric's face was relaxed, his expression open as he smiled at Mima. "We all forget plans now and then, no matter how important the objective."

From the head of the table, Lance's eyes were searching his mother's face. Ophelia was staring aghast at her beloved aunt.

"The right moment is hard to find," Mima said. "Hecuba?" She shook her head.

Was she saying that it was hard to plan Hecuba's murder? My heart thudded as I remembered Godric telling me that Mima had nursed Ophelia's

mother.

Mima's faded, peaceful eyes met mine as she forked up more apple tart.

The fragility of my body in the chapel swept over me like a horrid nightmare: the way my blood had slowed in the freezing air, my lungs had rattled, and my mind had drifted away. My desperate, fearful recognition of Rosie's pain, my father's grief, Godric's panic if I couldn't be found.

Godric's heartache.

"What do you mean, Aunt Mima?" Godric was leaning forward. He had a criminal in his grasp. In his face, there was *certainty*.

Not for the first time, I felt the sting of stupidity. I had chosen Burnsby, thinking he was kind—whereas in reality, he had driven his first wife to become a murderer.

No, that wasn't fair. If Mima was a murderer, that had been her choice. The truth jolted me as if an open flame licked my skin. Burnsby's bigamy wasn't responsible for murder; Mima was responsible for her own actions.

My whole being roared with disbelief. Two women's lives had been taken, and Ophelia had grown up without a mother—because of Mima? Mima, the kind woman who first greeted me in the abbey, the first to tell me of Sophonisba's existence, was a murderer who almost killed me?

A sound broke from my throat, half cry and half groan. I doubled over.

"Evie, darling." Godric drew me onto his lap and wrapped his arms around me.

"Bloody hell," Lance whispered from the head of the table.

Mima turned her head like a bird seeing a worm and waggled her finger. "Be careful, Lance. Burnsby doesn't like it when you boys curse." She glanced around the table. "He isn't here this evening."

Ophelia's chair squealed against the floor. She dashed around the table, throwing herself at me and Godric with the recklessness of a small child. Somehow, miraculously, Godric's lap proved large enough for both of us, his arms circling me, my arms circling Ophelia.

I clung to my daughter as if I could protect her from the knowledge that the aunt whom she loved, the aunt who loved her, was a killer. At the head of the table, Colette clutched Lance as if she were trying to shield him from the world's cruelties.

From the knowledge that his mother was a murderer. Perhaps a murderer several times over.

“Aunt Mima killed my mother,” Ophelia whispered, her voice breaking with soul-wrenching sadness.

As she sobbed, everyone’s eyes grew shiny with tears—except for Mima’s.

“Don’t weep for your father, child,” she said to Ophelia. “Clifford wasn’t a good man. I haven’t wept a tear for him, and I never shall. The world is a better place without him in it.”

“I’m not crying for him,” Ophelia said. “I’m crying for my mother, Aunt Mima.”

“No need for that,” Mima said, blinking at her. Her eyes wandered to me. “Aren’t you—”

“I’m not a ghost,” I said, cutting her off. “I shall never *be* a ghost, Mima.”

“There can’t be two of us,” she said, utterly reasonably. “There can never be two Lady Burnsby’s.”

“I’m Lady Everley,” I said, my voice thin.

“That’s right.” Mima’s eyes wandered to Colette.

Lance drew his wife closer, his voice rough and protective. “Aunt Mima, you remember my wife, the Countess Marmont.”

She frowned. “Isn’t she my sister?”

Colette managed a thin grimace, quite unlike her usual honeyed smile. “I am not your sister, Lady Burnsby. I am a French countess.”

“Where has Crumpsall gone?” Mima asked.

Silence followed, and then Lance reached for the bell. “I’ll summon him.”

“You should have some apple tart,” Mima said kindly to Ophelia. “It will make you feel calmer. I know we live in the wilderness, dear, but a lady should never express unruly emotions aloud. You can follow my lead. I keep any number of secrets.”

“Yes, Aunt Mima,” Ophelia said.

She didn’t move.

The sound of Mima’s silverware clinking as she contentedly forked up apple tart filled the room until Crumpsall returned, leading footmen with the second course.

I slapped on my tranquil mask and orchestrated a banal conversation focused on the abbey garden. Mima told us about the asparagus waiting under thick bundles of hay to sprout in spring sunshine.

For the next hour, we enacted polite society, like one of those tedious comedies of manners that have no ghosts, no murderers, no bigamists, just terribly stiff actors.

When the meal was over, Mima set off for a “walk,” invigorated by four plates of apple tart. Presumably Crumpsall summoned the footman responsible for keeping her safe.

I didn’t ask.

After she left the room, Lance dismissed Crumpsall and the footmen before he launched into a string of curses. Venting seemed appropriate, under the circumstances.

Ophelia cleared her throat, and he started. “I apologize!”

“I heard only a few words that I didn’t already know,” Ophelia said. She swallowed hard. “I’m right, aren’t I? Aunt Mima killed my mother.”

“Mima’s confession, if one can call it that, would not hold up in court,” I offered. “Intention is not proof of action.”

“Exactly. We have no direct evidence that Mima was responsible for Hecuba’s death,” Godric said. “Unfortunately, we do have that evidence as regards Evie’s near demise in the chapel.”

“Mima bolted the door to the chapel,” Lance guessed, a grimace crossing his face.

“I interviewed every member of the staff, even the stablemen and those who rarely enter the colonnade. Not only do they deny approaching the door, but virtually all members of the household were within eyesight of one another.”

“*C’est affreux*,” Celeste whispered.

“Crumpsall was overseeing footmen polishing the silver for Christmas dinner, which explained why no one was shoveling the cloister,” Godric continued. “The kitchens were bustling with preparations. Due to lingering trepidation about ghosts in the library, six maids and Miss Wellington were decorating that room together.”

Ophelia began mopping more tears with her napkin; I put my arms back around her thin shoulders.

“I am fine,” she muttered. “No one tried to kill me.”

“Just before the door was bolted, the footman responsible for following Mima left her in the parlor and went to the staff privy, which was occupied,” Godric continued. “He was gone a matter of ten minutes at the most. When he returned, the parlor was empty. He ran to the courtyard.”

“No one was in sight?”

Godric nodded. “He is certain that the door to the chapel was closed. He found Mima in the nursery, glancing over games. Hers was a crime of opportunity.”

“Are you absolutely certain?” Ophelia asked.

“Mima had means and motive,” Godric said. “Sophonisba and Burnsby might have wished ill to Evie, but I myself woke them up that morning. Mima is literally the only person in the abbey unaccounted for and the only person whom I did not interview.”

“But that doesn’t mean she killed my mother,” Ophelia said, the desperation in her voice ringing through the room.

“No,” Godric said kindly. “It doesn’t.”

A sob burst like a hiccup from Ophelia’s lips. “You can’t send Mima to prison. I heard what you said, about being sworn to uphold the law. But Mima is different from other people.”

“My mother is mad,” Lance stated. “She may have killed your mother, Ophelia, and for that I am deeply regretful. And I am so sorry that you suffered such a terrifying ordeal, Evie. Yet I would still argue that Mima is not rational.”

I cleared my throat. “What was Mima like when you first came home from Eton?”

“Addled,” Lance said. “She wasn’t obsessed about a sister or a baby, but she couldn’t remember much, day to day.”

“She would die if she were trapped in prison,” Ophelia said, tears dropping off her chin. “Maybe a footman lied because he was afraid; after all, by closing the chapel door, he nearly killed his mistress.”

“Crumpsall had gathered them together to polish silver,” Godric pointed out.

“Two were in the privy!” she retorted.

“You would make an excellent barrister,” Godric said. “The chef was in the privy, and Mima’s footman was outside, rattling the latch. By the time those two left, the chapel door was already shut.”

“The chef may have bolted the door,” Ophelia cried.

“He went straight back to the kitchens without entering the colonnade,” Godric said.

“Also, my mother confessed,” Lance said, his voice managing to be both sympathetic and uncompromising.

“Among those still living, Evie is the person most injured,” Godric said.

Ophelia sprang to her feet. “Hecuba wouldn’t want it, Evie,” she said desperately. “You can look at my mother’s face in that portrait and know that she wouldn’t want Mima to be sent to prison. None of you know what living in the abbey was like. She’s already been in prison here, for years.”

I took her point, but was it fair to Hecuba and Alice if I didn’t pursue justice? My fellow wives weren’t alive to tell me their wishes.

“Mima and I were in prison together,” Ophelia persisted. She turned to Lance. “You left. You were *able* to leave. She and I weren’t. I can’t excuse Mima for killing my mother or trying to kill Evie, but please don’t send her to prison.”

Be kind echoed in my head, and I pictured Hecuba’s sad eyes.

“I’m proud of you, Ophelia. Your mother would be proud of you, too. I do not wish to pursue a charge of attempted murder,” I said, making up my mind. “Having accepted the charge to care for Mima outlined in Burnsby’s will, I would prefer that she continue to live here, with Crumpsall to look out for her safety.”

I saw relief on Lance’s and Ophelia’s faces.

Godric kissed me. “You will make me a better person,” he said, his voice husky.

“Hopefully I’ll make you more cheerful, but *better*?”

“Ephesians,” he said. “*Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.*”

“I don’t know that verse,” I confessed.

“You had no need to know it, because the suggestion came from your heart.”

My whole life I’d reprimanded myself for not feeling proper ladylike emotions, for all my many faults. Through my husband’s eyes, I saw someone quite different.

“I love you,” I said, the words tumbling from my mouth. “I love you so much, Godric.”

Thirty-Six

Have you ever traveled by sleigh? The experience is wonderful, particularly if you leave behind an ancient abbey, a mausoleum full of bones, and a motley collection of ghosts—not to mention, a woman with murderous intentions.

The abbey sleighs were painted a dark crimson that shone against the dark woods and white snow. Each sleigh was drawn by stamping horses, tossing their heads, shivering under their rugs. Coachmen sat on the front seat, each with a groom holding a long rifle in case wolves made an appearance.

Godric, Ophelia, and I climbed into the first sleigh. We sat down on sheepskin-covered seats and wiggled our toes on hot bricks. A groom tucked thick merino wool rugs over us and then heaped more sheepskins on top.

I have never forgotten that ride in the snow-scented air, the boundless forest stretching away in all directions, the jingle of the horses' harnesses and reins.

Godric's shoulder brushed mine, his left leg snug against my right leg. Under the blue merino rug, one of his hands settled on my knee: an innocuous gesture, meant to offer comfort. As woods whipped by us, warmth spread down my legs from that simple touch. I fancied I could feel each of his fingers through my stockings, chemise, thick traveling gown, and mantua.

The woods were hushed, and the sky seemed to hang low, like great swaths of gray silk, a grand dame's voluminous skirts. As we slid toward the base of the mountain ridge, fir trees became interspersed with sturdy oaks.

"More snow tonight," Godric said in my ear. "We may have to remain in the inn for a few days."

I didn't care where we were, as long as it wasn't the abbey, and he and Ophelia were with me.

There was *nothing* impermissible about his hand; he hadn't touched me anywhere other than my knee. And yet the closer we came to the inn, the more I felt like a kettle on the boil. Our eyes met, his widened, and my heart quickened.

“Evie?” his voice was so quiet it couldn’t be heard over the sound of snow beneath the rails.

I smiled at him because the truth of it was in my heart. This would be the first night of *our* life. In time, Burnsby would be no more than an unpleasant memory, but to the end of my days, Godric would be next to me.

In a sleigh, in a carriage, in bed.

I wasn’t afraid any longer. “Yes, please,” I said, trusting him to know what I was talking about.

Godric wasn’t like Lance, prone to uttering a stream of curses when deeply moved. I saw a flush come up in his cheeks, and his lips shaped a word or two.

His hand tightened. I sat still and savored the way his hand covered my entire kneecap.

Our chamber at the Pickle and Crowdie shone with wax candles. The sheets were sprinkled with almond blossom scent, and the dressing table held a tray with all manner of delicacies, as well as a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

Did I mention that Tess had chosen a lace nightgown that I hadn’t seen in months?

(My maid couldn’t have made it more obvious: I wasn’t to leave the room until my marriage was consummated.)

After that, my memory becomes somewhat spotty.

When Godric lay down naked beside me, I came up on my knees before he could reduce me to a shivering body who took pleasure rather than giving it.

“May I?” I asked, my hands hovering.

“Always,” he said with a driving conviction that settled my nerves. He put his arms behind his head.

“I will learn how,” I assured him.

“We’ll both learn. It’s new for me, too, Evie.”

I trailed a finger down Godric’s neck, blotting a drop of sweat. His whole body quaked as my fingers drifted down his chest. I kissed his lips, his chin, the thick cords of his neck. Wiggling farther down in the bed, I remembered the way he had sucked my nipples, and I ran my tongue over one of his, imitating what he’d done to me.

“You’re doing that?” he said hoarsely. “I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“Mmmm, salty,” I said, loving the way his chest was heaving.

His hands weren't behind his head any longer. "Kiss me, Evie." He lifted me so I skated over his body and my open mouth met his, my legs falling to either side of his hips. Our tongues twisted together in a filthy way (surely the right word).

When I drew away to take a breath, we were both panting. I was very aware of the thick, hard length underneath me.

I gulped and told myself I could do this.

Moving to the side, I ran my hands down to his stomach, exploring the hollows between his muscles, and then down to his—

To that.

It wasn't as ugly as I had initially decided. In its own absurd way, it was .

..

(No, it was ugly, but I didn't need to comment on the fact.)

I couldn't be a lady afraid to name body parts. That was a *cock*. Those were his *balls*.

Drawing my fingers lightly over those parts made my husband groan, teeth clenched, his hips rising. I froze until his hand took mine and showed me how to pleasure him.

I could scarcely believe it. Godric—composed, legal, thoughtful Godric—was sweating, his eyes gleaming slits, his face open and hungry and urgent. He drew me back up his body so that we could kiss again; this time his hands ran everywhere, over the curve of my arse, down between my legs. I felt engulfed with lust.

"I'd like to make love now," I said, my voice louder than I intended.

"We have a lifetime of nights ahead of us."

I smiled—a real smile. "All those nights, too."

Godric eased me onto my back and bent his head, sucking one of my nipples into his mouth. I yelped as my body lit up. Then he rubbed his swollen cock through my folds.

He moved slowly, his eyes searching my expression, perhaps anticipating the stab of agony Miss Pentwhistle described. She was wrong again, because I wasn't struck by blinding pain, merely a feeling of being stuffed like a sausage.

(I know! Not romantic! I held my tongue.)

Godric's eyes crinkled with laughter. "Not painful, but not all that good, either?"

I cleared my throat. “You know how the Christmas pudding is stuffed into a boiling bag?”

His eyes lit with laughter.

“That wasn’t polite,” I said apologetically.

He rocked forward again, sliding farther inside me. “Tell me if you wish to stop. You’re not a plum pudding. You get to choose.” He sounded soothing and logical, but at the same time his voice was thick with pleasure.

“I like it,” I said. It was almost true. I couldn’t tell him the truth, the absolute truth, could I? Besides, the tone of his voice, his *need*, was delicious.

I began taking stock. Godric was braced on his elbows, rocking back and forth. It wasn’t terrible. I liked the expression in his eyes. They were glossy, eager, almost desperate. And he looked affectionate.

I kissed his nose and decided that *affection* wasn’t the right word, because Godric made me feel loved. I slid my hands down his back, feeling the muscles flex as he moved, and thought about how blindingly happy I was whenever he said he loved me.

The rocking situation was slowly improving. My heartbeat had stopped rattling along like a horse on the loose. He was kissing me around my face, which made me feel as if I was stuffed with happiness, instead of his big . . .

Whatever.

Cock.

In fact, it was all beginning to feel rather good. His eyes were still fixed on mine, and the only sound in the room was his rough breathing, along with a squeak from the bed, every time he surged forward.

Abruptly I remembered the way I had clenched on his fingers and tried that—which sent a wave of heat through my legs.

The sound that burst from his lips was more like a grunt than my name. He lowered his head and breathed into my mouth, “Is it better, love? A little better?”

I would have answered—I was thinking about what to say!—when he did something with his hips, like a circle. My body melted around his long, slow slide forward and back. I arched my hips, following him when he moved away.

“Want more?” my husband growled, a thrumming, deep happiness in his voice.

“Yes,” I said, barely managing to sound coherent. “I would, thank you.”

His hand slid under me to the small of my back. He pulled me up, tilted my bottom, and before I got used to the sensation, he drove forward.

I squeaked. His deep eyes gleamed under his eyelashes, and he did it again, and again.

And again.

I started gasping every time he flexed his hips, my hands running over his arms, and then more daringly caressing the heavy slabs of his chest. Pleasure turned to a drug that eddied through my body and stole my composure. I was gasping and pleading by the time he rolled onto his back, bringing me with him. I found myself seated, my breasts in the open air.

Not under the covers. *Not* counting backward from one hundred. Rather than squeezing shut, my eyes widened.

Godric said, "I'm yours, Evie. Do you know that?"

I did. He was mine, and I was his.

"Making love is emotion in action," he reminded me, bumping his hips upward in a way that made me gasp.

Finally I understood: tender *and* carnal, affectionate *and* hungry. All those adjectives locked together like a puzzle, locked together like our two bodies.

"I love you," I whispered.

I leaned forward and kissed him, then reared back, not a paper doll, but a living, sweating, desirous woman. Godric's sooty eyelashes were lowered, but I saw the hungry gleam of his eyes when I tentatively raised myself.

He arched and ground against me as I slid down the whole length of his cock, making me shiver convulsively. I was cautious at first, but was soon sobbing for air, kissing him over and over, smoldering heat running through my body.

Pleasure simmered in my legs when he flipped me over and kissed me again, our bodies as tightly connected as possible.

"I'm going to fuck you now," he said, his voice unguarded. Ungentlemanly.

"Yes," I said, grinning. "Yes, please."

After that I couldn't think about anything other than the heat pounding through my veins, the smell and the taste and the feel of him. The way Godric was above me and *in* me, hard and fierce—and when he drew back and stroked into me again?

I lost all control, my heart hammering until I began twisting under him and crying his name, pressure surging up from my toes and cascading through my body.

“There you are,” Godric said, his raw tone sending another wave of heat through me. “You’re with me, aren’t you?”

“Godric,” I said, my voice a plea and a prayer and a request, all at once. “More.” I felt the moment when he let go, surging, impatient, mindless desire.

And how did I feel? I felt shameless.

Free.

“I love you,” I said, holding tight. The emotion flooded out of me. “I love you, I love you.”

His answer was a wordless groan.

Which was just right.

Thirty-Seven

Paris at Christmas
Four Years Later

*P*regnancy doesn't suit me," I told Colette, feeling surly and rotund.

"Nonsense, I've never seen you more beautiful!" she said, kissing my cheek. From several rooms away, a child's voice rose to a screech. "My piglet! Mine, mine, mine!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake," Colette said, jumping to her feet. "What will I do if my next child is as loud as Aimée? We'll be deaf by the time he or she grows up."

"*Petal est mon petit cochon!*" Aimée shrieked from the depths of the mansion.

"She reminds me of you," I said, smiling up at my dearest friend. "My shoes! Mine!"

Colette laughed and ran away, her feet clad in silk slippers crosshatched and sewn with tiny violets. She too was with child, but at the stage where her waist had an enchanting curve.

In contrast, my stomach jutted before me like the prow of a ship. I had to visit the water closet two or three times an hour. My feet were too swollen to wear any of Countess Marmont's exquisite slippers. And I was hungry all the time. I'd eaten twenty-four oysters at one sitting just a few days ago. *Twenty-four.*

Colette's butler, Monsieur Barbier, opened the drawing room door and permitted my husband and Lance to stroll in unannounced.

Godric's eyes came straight to me; he smiled when he found me just as safe and irritable as when he left me two hours ago.

A small girl dodged around Barbier and ran into the room, a piglet clutched in her arms, its legs dangling, with Ophelia—now a dazzling eighteen-year-old—in hot pursuit.

Barbier shuddered, backed into the entry, and closed the door. He considered himself rather put upon, reigning over a household as chaotic and joyous as that of the Count of Marmont, though I had the shrewd

opinion that he loved being associated with a couple so adored by both royalty and the public.

“Aimée!” Ophelia called. “Please don’t run with Petal in your arms. What if you fall and injure her?”

Colette’s daughter paused to consider that idea and then said, with complete confidence, “Petal likes it when I run, and she wants to see Tante Rosie.” She veered to the right and threw herself (and Petal) at my sister, who put her book aside just in time.

With no regard for her exquisite morning gown, Rosie tucked Aimée into the crook of one arm and Petal into the other. Being a peaceable animal (just like her mama, Peony), Petal gazed amiably around the room. Aimée dropped her head against Rosie’s shoulder and popped her thumb in her mouth.

My sister smiled at me and rubbed her cheek against Aimée’s hair. Four years ago, when I returned from Scotland with a new husband along with tales of ghosts and murder, Rosie had been horrified to think that I’d married an evil man in exchange for her dowry. But I’ve come to realize—and have convinced her—that my decision hadn’t been merely for the dowry, although I told myself it was.

In reality, I had been paralytically bored by dances and musicales, and Burnsby offered an escape. In the last four years, Godric and I have created a home full of math and law books, with a drawing room suited for reading books rather than entertaining callers.

I dipped into polite society when Rosie debuted, but since a young, blue-eyed duke fell in love with her on their second waltz (not the first!), I soon bowed out. Ophelia had finally decided to make her debut next spring, but thankfully, Rosie would do most of the chaperoning.

Now I leaned back against my husband, loving the warmth of his solid body behind mine as Lance recounted an upset in the French courts. The two of them had recently opened the first transcontinental legal concern, the only such group to navigate English and French law. It was also the only legal concern headed by a French count and an English viscount.

(In case you are wondering: Yes! I do like being a viscountess.)

Godric’s fingers curled around my shoulders, and I felt a surge of desire. I tipped my head back and smiled at him. “I thought that you’d be gone all day.”

One of his eyebrows snapped up. "I couldn't stay away. Time for the future *maman* to take a nap?" he asked, a husky note in his voice. "Monsieur Bergeret is most insistent that you rest." Just as Colette had decreed years ago, we had traveled to Paris for my confinement, where her family doctor was close at hand.

I leaned on his arm as we climbed the stairs, feeling like a whale trying to walk on land. "I am larger than Colette ever was," I told him morosely.

"Monsieur Bergeret thinks he hears two heartbeats," Godric reminded me. When we reached the door of our chamber, he picked me up and brought me to the bed, kicking the door shut behind us.

"You're not even panting," I observed.

"I'm very tired," he said, his eyes gleaming. "I must join you for a nap."

He began to tear off his clothing in a manner that would shock his legal colleagues, who consider him a model of icy, albeit impassioned, control. I watched from under my lashes, loving the way his eyes roved over my body, as if all parts of me were delectable, belly included.

"Was any English mail delivered?" I asked, enjoying the sight of his broad chest as he tossed his shirt aside.

Godric's hands stilled on his waistband. "Lance's mother has fallen ill. She may have passed away by now."

I blinked. "Mima?"

"Apparently, she caught pneumonia after opening her window, perhaps in an effort to climb out. Lately, she has been convinced her baby is to be found on the ramparts."

"Ophelia will be saddened by the news," I said. Our daughter still wrote to Mima, though she'd never received a reply.

Godric pulled off his breeches. "The Marquis Guyet bent my ear for half an hour today because his heir is pining for love of Ophelia. She can cheer herself up tomorrow by breaking the heart of yet another gullible Frenchman."

My husband threw himself on the bed, leaned close to me, and stared into my eyes. "How do you feel?"

"Like an elephant," I said. A flush rose in my cheeks as blood raced through my body. Nothing about my size had reduced my thirst for my husband—and I know he could read my desire.

"I'm so lucky to have found you," Godric said, his voice deep and true.

I held out my arms, shameless (and happy). "Come here, husband."

So he did.

Later that night, so did Gillian and Hugh.

In that order.

A Note About Ghosts and Other Literary Flourishes

My father, Robert Bly, was a poet, and my mother, Carol, a short story writer. Our house, down a dirt road outside a town of two thousand in Minnesota, was literary to the core. Every wall was lined with bookshelves containing (mostly) poetry.

Yet all I wanted to read was romance.

That genre—like television, cartoons, and white sugar—was judged likely to infect the body and brain. My parents preferred I read Whitman, not Woodiwiss, so my father laid down the law: for every romance, I read a classic.

Thank goodness for Jane Austen!

I read and reread the set of Austen novels my mother had brought home from college. *Northanger Abbey* was one of my favorites. Yes, *Pride and Prejudice* was more romantic; readers agree, and I've written many a harsh, judgmental Darcy in the years since.

But *Northanger Abbey* is written in a wry, ironic voice that mocks literary pretensions and celebrates (while making fun of) popular novels. The heroine, Catherine, is obsessed with gothics, which Austen seized on to create a metafictional narrative, a way to talk to the reader and tell her story at once. I did my best to learn from her, using Evie's asides.

If *Northanger Abbey* was a direct inspiration for *The Last Lady B*, so were the gothic horrors that fired Catherine's imagination. I highly recommend Rebecca Romney's *Jane Austen's Bookshelf: A Rare Book Collector's Quest to Find the Women Writers Who Shaped a Legend*. Austen was not reading "great literature"; she, too, would have spurned my father's bookshelves.

Another huge influence for *The Last Lady B* was a story by Oscar Wilde. I stole phrases here and there from "The Canterville Ghost," the story of a ghost who discovers, to his horror, that the American family renting his ancestral mansion not only is undaunted by his spectral moaning but offers to oil his rusty chains.

And finally, the last twisty chapters—when marriage certificates and wills upset the characters' knowledge of themselves—stem from reading

Dickens. Along with Austen, a complete set of his novels was crammed into my parents' bookshelves, and I tried to follow his inimitable example in ending many chapters with a surprise.

When one writes a novel that includes a ghost, historical accuracy seems beside the point. But Evie's battle against propriety is real, as is the necessity for a dowry in order to marry a blue-eyed duke. Colette's appearance in *The Last Lady B* is not mere fantasy, à la *Bridgerton's* casting. Black aristocrats navigated both French and English society; my mention of a Black heiress from Saint Kitts growing up in an English boarding school, for example, was taken from William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.

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