

BENEATH
SLEEPY STARS

ELIZABETH
COLE

ALSO BY ELIZABETH COLE

A Heartless Design

A Reckless Soul

A Shameless Angel

The Lady Dauntless

Honor & Roses

Regency Rhapsody Novellas

BENEATH
SLEEPY STARS
ELIZABETH
COLE

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Chapter 1



January 1809

“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF this one?”

Alexander Kenyon, the seventh Duke of Dunmere, braced himself as his uncle pushed a small portrait toward him from across the vast desk of his study.

The miniature portrayed a young woman from the waist up, sitting demurely in front of a woodland scene. The subject was pleasant enough, Alex thought. Ash brown hair framed delicate features, and brown eyes gazed placidly at him. If the artist was honest, she was a slip of a thing.

“Who is she?” Alex asked.

Uncle Herbert checked a small notebook he was holding. “Lady Violet Holloway. Good family, though not nearly so wealthy as in previous generations. Impeccable bloodline, though. By all accounts a perfect lady. Most importantly, the Holloway women are known to be fearsomely good breeders. Twins as often as not.” His uncle nodded significantly.

Alex sighed. Of course. The fact that he was now thirty-four with not a single heir was clearly weighing on his family’s minds. His heirless, childless state was not for lack of trying.

Now Alex needed to marry again. His uncle Herbert Kenyon took on the duty of sorting through potential brides to suggest. It was not an enviable task. There were few eligible ladies who actual-

ly possessed all the qualifications necessary to be considered as the next duchess of Dunmere. The obvious choices—the daughters or sisters of other dukes, and earls, and viscounts—were assessed and discarded one by one. Many were too old or too young. Even more were already promised to others. Several had scandals attached to their names. Of the small number of ladies who somehow managed to cross all those hurdles, none were willing to marry him specifically. They knew better.

Alex's bad luck in brides was now infamous. He'd married no fewer than three times, and each time, his wife had died within the year. Rumors had fanned out among the ton, growing worse over time, hinting he was cursed. Despite his title, Alex was not sought after now. It made finding a willing bride rather challenging.

Other than the inconvenient curse, Alex should have had no trouble finding a wife. Dark haired, tall, well-shaped by constant exercise and work around the estate... He was as handsome as any woman could ask for.

Well, he used to be. Two years previously, he lost his right eye in an incident he would never discuss with any of his family. He wore a patch over the ruins of his eye socket, and tried not to care that his new appearance made his life even more difficult.

Learning how to see with only one eye hadn't take too long, though he still sometimes doubted that he was truly seeing properly. Of course, a portrait wasn't a person, but this little painting was quite pretty.

But the question was not whether he wanted this particular woman, but whether *she* was willing to marry him. He'd do what he must for his family and the future of his line. Now it was up to this unknown woman.

"She'll be amenable to the match?" he asked skeptically.

"I have not spoken with the lady herself yet," Herbert said, "since I wanted to get your approval first. Her guardians assure me that she trusts their judgment, and that she is perfectly accom-

plished in all the ways a lady must be. I imagine they are eager for her to wed, seeing as she's twenty-five."

Alex frowned at the picture. She looked younger than that. His uncle saw the look and interpreted it correctly. "The picture is a little old, but there was none other to be had. She's been more or less out of society for the past few years, tending a close cousin in her last illness, then a period in mourning. She's not had the opportunity to be in the social circle, that's all. I am assured that she is not lacking in any way. If she's too old..."

"No." Alex put the portrait down. "The last thing I want is some nineteen-year-old, novel-obsessed girl."

"So you do think she might suit? You'll at least meet her and consider?" Herbert asked.

"How many other options are left?" Alex retorted.

Herbert closed the notebook. In the dull winter light of the day, his faded blue eyes and grey hair made him appear older than his fifty-five years. "At the moment, she is the only one. I'm willing to find more names if you prefer. Perhaps there's something I've overlooked."

"No, you haven't," Alex said. "You're as methodical as I am. She's the only one left for me to ask, isn't she?" He took another look at the little portrait, at the calm, clear gaze of the lady. It was only paint, and it told him nothing. Only when he met her would he know what sort of person she truly was. Whether she'd flinch at his face, or be scared of the rumors...

"Very well. I'll arrange to meet her."

"Thank you." Herbert gave a sigh of relief. "She's been living near Colchester with family for some years. I'll send a note to her guardians, advising them of developments." He reached for the portrait, but Alex stopped him.

"I'll keep it until a decision is made," he said. But rather than looking at the portrait again, he placed it face down on the desk.

Letters were sent back and forth over the next weeks, primarily between Herbert Kenyon and Judith Peake, who seemed to be the power behind the throne. A date in mid-February was agreed on for a meeting.

Alex directed his valet to pack his bags for a journey to Hawbeck Place, the estate of the Peake family, who took Violet in after her father's death. He dreaded the idea of meeting this young lady so abruptly, but there was little point in doing anything else. She wasn't in London for the Season. She scarcely seemed to leave her family's estate. So a less orchestrated encounter was unlikely. And if he hated her on sight, or if she hated him, well, social visits were only about a quarter hour. A long way to go for a fifteen minute chat. But a marriage would last far longer.

He resigned himself to going. But on the morning before he was to leave, a message arrived at Dunmere Abbey. Alex ripped open the sealed envelope and read the contents.

"What's that?" Herbert asked. He'd come into Alex's study again to discuss the sort of last minute details that always came up when a master left his domain.

"Bad news," Alex muttered, though he felt relief inside.

"Are the Peakes having any difficulty?" Herbert asked anxiously.

"This isn't from them," Alex explained. "I'm afraid I have to go to London immediately."

"What? Do you mean immediately after you visit the Peakes?"

"No. I mean I must go into London this moment. Good thing I'm already packed."

Herbert frowned. "But what of the meeting? We spent weeks arranging the time! Lady Violet will be waiting to see you, and she'll be dis—"

"Disappointed? At not meeting me, a man she doesn't even know?" Alex shook his head. "I doubt that." He held up the letter. "This, however, is imperative."

"You always say that when you dash off to the city. What can

possibly be more important than the continuation of your family name? The lineage of Dunmere?"

The safety of the whole nation, Alex thought. He memorized the brief note, then threw it in the fire. "I have no choice in the matter. Why don't you go to her on my behalf? They're expecting a Kenyon of Dunmere Abbey. You are one. Meet the lady and decide if she'll be suitable."

"Be reasonable, Alex," Herbert protested. "What good is it to her to meet an old man?"

"We're not pretending this is a love match, are we?" Alex straightened his cuff irritably. "She's buying a title, and I'm buying an heir. Or a path to one. I don't want some absurd notion of romance to enter into it. The idea of some flighty, starry-eyed wife in love with love is not going to work. You can evaluate her just as well as I can. Probably better, considering my history," he added, not able to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Alex."

"Just..." Alex shrugged. "I have no time. Do this for me."

"Very well. I will take care of everything," the older man said, turning to go out.

"Uncle," Alex called, stopping him at the doorway. "When you meet her, don't sugarcoat this. Don't hide anything."

"I have no doubt the Peakes are acquainted with your past, just as I looked at her very carefully. The lady must be aware of the situation. Who in England is not? But I do not plan to mention any absurd rumors or insulting names!" Herbert looked annoyed by the whole idea.

Alex nodded once and turned away. Whoever this lady was, she must already know she was being asked to marry the Duke of Death.

Chapter 2

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VIOLET WINCED AS THE CURTAINS on her bed were pushed aside, exposing her little nest to the harsh morning. Her lady's maid stood there with her arms outstretched, making her slight form seem larger than it was.

"Get up, get up, my lady!" Dalby urged. "It's nearly noon!"

"So?" Violet sat up unwillingly. The windows of the room let in a stream of winter sunlight bright enough to make her want to pull a pillow over her face. "You say it as if there's cause for concern. I always sleep late."

In fact, Violet's schedule was so well known to the household that she didn't understand Dalby's excitement. The girl had been her lady's maid for nearly six years, and it wasn't as if anything had changed recently. Violet rose late because she rarely fell asleep before dawn. When one chose stargazing as a hobby, late nights were inevitable.

"Oh, you don't understand, ma'am," Dalby said. "Your aunt will be here any moment and she'll be upset if you're still abed."

"Aunt Judith is coming up here? Why?" Violet slid out of the high bed, her feet going right into the slippers Dalby always laid out for her.

"You need to be dressed as soon as possible," Dalby said. She

seemed out of sorts, her normally tidy brown hair now falling loose under her maid's cap. "Your aunt says a suitor is coming to call this afternoon!"

"I don't have any suitors," Violet pointed out. "So who could possibly be coming to call?"

"The Duke of Dunmere!" a new voice chimed out.

Judith Peake strode into Violet's bedroom with her arms and smile both suspiciously wide. She was the opposite of Violet in both looks and temperament, despite being related to Violet by blood.

"Good morning, Aunt Judith," Violet said.

Judith didn't lose her smile as she said, "Good afternoon, you mean. And it will be a good afternoon, since by the end of it, you will be betrothed to a duke! What a coup, yes?"

"One afternoon makes for a brief courtship," Violet said, nervousness starting to bloom within her. "You're being quite optimistic, don't you think?"

"Oh, I've been arranging the matter for over a month. This is a formality." Judith leveled her gaze at Violet, her eyes cold. "That is, it *will* be a formality so long as you present yourself as a perfect lady!" The false smile returned. "Which of course you will. Sweet, demure, polite. Accomplished—but not to excess. Charming—but not flirtatious. And above all, *alert*."

"Yes, Aunt," Violet said.

Dalby murmured next to her, "Don't worry. I told Cook to brew your coffee extra strong, ma'am."

"Thank you," Violet whispered back.

Judith walked to the wardrobe and flung it open. "Now then, what sort of gown would impress a duke? Dalby, what do you suggest?"

Dalby hurried over to discuss the matter with Judith. Violet reached for the breakfast tray and poured herself some coffee. Of course Violet's preferences would not be considered. Judith

thought Violet was an oddly behaved irritant, and she would no sooner seek Violet's opinion on a matter than she would ask a tea table.

So Violet was draped and primped and styled and adorned under Judith's sharp eye. She wore one of her best gowns, a blue and white striped silk creation that showed off Violet's delicate coloring and further heightened her slim figure. A cropped white jacket covered her arms and the top of the dress. Pearls at her throat and ears completed the ensemble.

"Well done, Dalby," Judith said. "Open your eyes wider, Violet. You must look attentive when the duke arrives."

"And *why* is he arriving?" Violet asked, feeling sharper after her second cup of coffee. "What possible interest could a duke have in me? I'm only the daughter of a second son of a baron. Papa was never even expected to get the title."

"But he did, and of a barony that goes back over five hundred years!" Judith reminded her. "Your blood is as noble as Dunmere's, even if your title is less distinguished. This is a great opportunity. This may come as a surprise to you, but not *every* man in England is a duke."

Violet was aware of that, but she knew better than to say so out loud. "Yes," she said patiently, "but why come at all? Why should a duke go in search of a bride? Surely there are families campaigning for the honor."

Judith sighed in exasperation. "What do you think I've been doing all this time? I keep my ears open, I hear of an opportunity, and I seize it! Marriages are not random occurrences, my dear. They require effort and skill to arrange."

And to endure, Violet thought, again keeping her thoughts silent. She looked out the window over the grounds of the Peake estate. It was not extensive. Over the years, parts had been sold off or rented as the Peake fortunes declined. Roger Peake was wealthy, but not as wealthy as he'd been when Judith married him thirty years

ago, largely because Judith was good at spending her husband's money. However, the main house was large and gracious. Even a duke might be a little impressed.

That afternoon, Violet sat in the parlor with Aunt Judith and Uncle Roger. She held a recent pamphlet on astronomy in her hands—comets were a particular interest—but she was unable to concentrate. Her mind was too busy considering all the possibilities of this potential suitor. If Judith was telling the truth, then he must be serious enough about a match to come to Hawebeck Place and meet Violet in person.

But then why had Judith kept the plan secret till the last minute? Perhaps she thought Violet would object. Or was there something wrong with him? Why choose Violet out of the blue? She was not popular. She had one Season among society, which garnered no proposals, and certainly Violet was not known for her wit. Yes, she was considered fair. But she froze up when asked to speak in front of more than a few people, and it was worse with strangers in the room. Nor was her dowry impressive. No, not even Violet would have chosen Violet for a duchess. So why did this man?

She glanced over at Judith suspiciously. Her aunt had a predilection for fortune telling. Was it possible a coincidence of birthdates or names or something more absurd—like favorite fruits—could have started this mess? What if Judith pressed the issue and made a fool of herself and the family by claiming that Fate decreed the match? Violet shivered. She despised such nonsense, and she hoped the real story was more mundane. If she got up the nerve, she'd ask the duke...assuming he ever arrived.

Uncle Roger was moving nervously about the room. He'd sit for a moment, then get up, then move to the window, then to the fireplace. Then he'd sit again. To Violet's sharp eyes, he looked as though he very much wanted a drink. It was not a difficult guess. Roger Peake found solace in a wine bottle far more frequently than

anywhere else.

For her part, Judith embroidered with stoic resolve, and the clock ticked onward. She sat tall and straight in the chair. She wasn't a beauty, but she was a woman people listened to, especially when she chose to use her charm.

"Of course a duke keeps his own schedule," Judith muttered then, after looking at the clock. She'd made a similar statement every quarter hour.

Violet considered ringing for more coffee, but then looked down at her already trembling hands and thought better of it. Too much coffee made her quite odd. And though she knew nothing of this Duke of Dunmere, she knew a marriage was her best chance to escape her aunt's home. Could she endure much longer with Judith sniping at her and making her feel like a failure every day, in a dozen little ways? Violet had to find a better place.

Then a footman entered. "The Honorable Herbert Kenyon," he announced.

Roger rose immediately, and Judith did too, out of sheer eagerness. Everyone expected the name to be followed by another, more illustrious name, but it wasn't, and only one man entered the room.

He was an older man, dressed simply but well, and everything about his appearance suggested wealth.

"Mr Peake," the gentleman said. "Mrs Peake."

He then bowed in a courtly fashion. "And, of course, Lady Violet," the man greeted her. "I am here on the behalf of my nephew, Alexander Kenyon, Duke of Dunmere. He regrets very much that he could not come in person. At the last moment, he was unavoidably detained."

Judith reacted in her typically dramatic way. "Oh, that is most unfortunate! We have been so looking forward to meeting his grace."

Indeed, the best tea had been prepared, with especially expensive food purchased for the dinner Judith hoped the duke would

remain for. This might be an expensive misfire, Violet thought.

Kenyon gave a little shrug. "Alas, events did not fall out as planned. His presence was demanded in London."

"Well, a duke must have many demands on his time," Judith said, more smoothly now that she recovered from her first shock. She gave a significant look to Violet, who understood she was now to perform.

"My aunt has informed me that you have spoken to my uncle and guardian," she said, not mentioning she was informed only hours ago. "So it is the case that Dunmere has offered for me?"

"Yes, my lady," said Kenyon, "after great consideration."

"Forgive my confusion, sir, but I do not see precisely what consideration was taken. I have never met the duke," Violet said, fearing even this statement would be too bold.

"Violet," Judith said, in a tone that was nearly a hiss.

Kenyon, however, only smiled sadly. "Not romantic, I admit. A proposal by proxy is surely not what young ladies dream of. But the duke is an honorable gentleman and I assure you he has the means to give you a comfortable life." The last part of his phrase had to be a vast understatement. Only a fortune could have made Judith's eyes light up the way they had.

He went on, "The duke did wish to learn more about you, my lady, which is why I am here. Of course, I can also answer what questions you may have."

Violet looked at the older man, who seemed sincere. "I would appreciate that, Mr Kenyon."

After being seated and offered tea and cakes, Kenyon asked her, "Where to begin, my lady? Let us start with something simple. What are your pastimes?"

Violet opened her mouth, intending to explain about her interest in astronomy, when Judith interrupted.

"She is a great reader, Mr Kenyon. Her adorable nose is nearly always in a book."

"Novels?" he asked, with interest. "Radcliffe, perhaps?"

"Certainly not," Judith said with a slightly nervous laugh. "If you're asking if I would permit her to read that horrid stuff, I assure you dear Violet is not so frivolous."

"I asked merely because I saw a few of her titles on the shelf over there, including the last one—*The Italian*?" Kenyon said mildly.

Judith made a half turn in her seat, spied the offending books, and turned back to him with wide eyes. "My goodness. I haven't the slightest idea how those got there. I shall have them disposed of immediately."

"Seems a shame. I quite liked *The Italian*."

Violet hid her smile before Aunt Judith could see it. But Mr Kenyon did, and she caught a tiny answering smile.

Judith recovered quickly enough, and praised Violet's many accomplishments, which was a shock to hear. She didn't exactly lie, Violet had to admit, but she embellished.

"And I do not need to point out that our dear Violet is as lovely as a spring day," Judith was saying. "She takes after her mother."

Her aunt gestured to a portrait to the left of the fireplace. It was of Violet's mother just after her marriage, and the artist did a fine job in capturing the subject's vitality. The soft brown hair was artfully curled and coiffed in the style of the time, but the glow in the woman's cheeks was rich and natural. High cheekbones and a slender nose did much to convey an aristocratic air. Only the mouth, with the pink lips and the slight curl on the side, just short of a smile, hinted she was someone who laughed easily and often. Violet remembered that laugh from very long ago.

Kenyon rose to examine it more closely. "Ah, I think I can see the resemblance." He turned to Violet. "Would you humor an old man, and pose next to the portrait? My eyes are not what they once were."

If so, he must have once possessed the eyes of an eagle. Violet didn't think he missed a thing the whole visit.

Violet joined him at the portrait, and let him compare the image and herself.

"You're older now than she was when this was painted," Kenyon said. "But I imagine you were the mirror image. But no, your mother had blue eyes. You must have your father's eyes."

Violet smiled. "Yes, sir, I do. As well as his interests, which he shared with me through my childhood."

"You must miss them very much," he said softly, looking keenly at her, "for your own eyes to be so glassy now."

Judith joined them, afraid to leave the conversation to Violet. "Can I offer you more tea, Mr Kenyon?"

"No," he said. "But I would like speak to Lady Violet for a few moments. Perhaps a brief turn around the garden. Alone."

Judith's thoughts were plain. She wanted to hear everything, yet she didn't dare annoy the man, who could easily quash all her careful maneuvering. "Why, certainly. If Violet is not too tired."

Violet said, "I would be glad to, Mr Kenyon."

Coats and hats were fetched, and soon they were in the gardens. Although the winter day was brisk, it wasn't too cold, and the fresh air was a pleasure.

When they were out of earshot of Judith, Kenyon said, still in that mild voice, "Avoiding her conversation is reason enough to accept any proposal."

Violet wholeheartedly agreed, but she couldn't let him insult her family, no matter how correct he was. "I am grateful that my aunt and uncle have taken me in," she said. "If not for them, my situation would likely be far less comfortable than it is now."

He nodded. "They should be grateful to have such a well-spoken young lady in their home."

"Was there something in particular you wished to discuss, Mr Kenyon? Something you felt my aunt would not be qualified to answer?"

He gave her a brief smile. "It was evident to me that you were

not aware at all of the arrangements made by your aunt.” He did away with the fiction that Uncle Roger was in any way involved.

“No,” she said. “Of course, she has been attempting to arrange my marriage for some time, and with particular zeal since the death of my cousin, Madeline Peake. I was her companion while she was ill, you see. I fully expected news of a match at some point. Though...” she stopped.

“You also expected to meet the gentleman in person first.”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“I thought so. So I must ask candidly: do you wish to marry the duke? He would hate to think you were forced into it. And he would not be insulted if you were to tell me now, in confidence, that you have doubts.” He saw her expression and hurried on, “Don’t have any fear about your aunt. I would certainly devise a story which leaves you innocent of her wrath.”

“Before I can reply to that,” said Violet. “I wonder if I might ask a few questions about the duke, since he could not be here himself?”

“Please do, but,” here he raised a hand to forestall her, “let me answer your first question before you ask it. All the Kenyon men are incredibly handsome, as my own appearance proves!”

Violet laughed at that, and thought Herbert Kenyon must have been quite dashing in his youth.

“I thank you for the information, sir. But looks are a poor measure of suitability, and I should not like to base a decision on something so fleeting.”

“Wise words, my lady,” Kenyon said, more soberly.

Violet paused, collecting her thoughts. She knew so little of the duke, it was hard to know where to begin.

“He lives close to London?”

“Yes. It’s a beautiful estate in Kent, well cared for and quite sufficient to support the duke and his family. The house, Dunmere Abbey, is quite impressive.”

"And how...old is he?" she asked timidly.

"Thirty-four."

"Thirty-four," she repeated. "May I ask why he has not married before now?"

Kenyon frowned for a split second. "Your family has not told you about the situation at all?"

"Situation? No."

"He has married before," Kenyon said, after a slight hesitation. "He is a widower."

"Does he have a child?"

"No. He does have charge of a ward. Millicent Sherwood is a second cousin, and sixteen years old. But he has no children of his own."

Violet nodded. So Dunmere needed an heir. And Violet had sufficient pedigree to qualify as a suitable wife, though... "Are you certain he does not consider me too old?" she asked.

"He views the prospect of a nineteen year old wife with horror," Mr Kenyon said. "He values competence and good moral character above a pretty face."

"Ah."

"Though, if I may flatter you for a moment, Lady Violet, your face is prettier than the miniature portrait conveyed."

Violet looked down, unused to flattery of any sort. "If your nephew is half so kind as you, I should expect to be quite content. Can you tell me something of his character...his personality, that is?"

"I can tell you I am proud of him," Kenyon began. "He is, of course, very conscious of his lineage and his name. He assumed the title just over five years ago on his father's death. Before that he was Earl of Waring. He has always been most proper in his dealings with people. Though he traveled abroad very frequently until last year or so, he pays attention to his favorite home—that's the Abbey—and has improved it considerably. Not that it was in poor

condition before, but he's a careful steward."

Violet said, "Why did he travel so much? Does he have interests abroad? Uncle Roger spent some of his youth in Antigua, on his family's sugar plantation there."

"Well, his grace does not own land in the new world. His travels mostly took him to Europe, and I am not privy to his reasons. I do know that he was always happy to come home."

"It sounds as if he has all he needs."

"Except a wife to share it with," Kenyon countered. "Owning half the earth would get quite dull if one had to roam it alone."

"I see." Violet wasn't sure she did understand, but she thought that she might begin to. The duke actually sounded rather lonely.

"He is a good man," Kenyon said in conclusion. "And he would treat you honorably, I assure you."

She took a deep breath, considering. Accepting a proposal sight unseen might be mad...but it also might be the best decision she could make to improve her life. "Then I agree to the proposal," Violet said. "I hope I will not disappoint him."

Kenyon told her she had nothing to fear. In fact, he said those very words in such a way that Violet wondered—too late—if there *was* something to fear. Yet how could she ask such a question immediately after agreeing to a marriage?

"I expect to meet the duke before the wedding," she said quickly.

"Naturally! He would not neglect such an important step. It is merely an inconvenience that called him away."

They walked back to the house. At hearing of the successful agreement, Judith was all smiles, and practically doted on Mr Kenyon. Uncle Roger, who looked as if he'd a few glasses of wine while they were out, also added his slightly slurred congratulations.

Kenyon took his leave, again bowing to Violet. Judith could barely wait till the door closed to sigh in relief.

"Ah, that's done. The words are spoken, and we may as well

start packing your trunks, Violet,” her aunt said. “You performed better than I hoped, I do say. Look at you! Soon to be the wife of the Duke of Dunmere. And I’m told he’s a very striking man, despite his injury.”

“Injury?” Violet asked, puzzled.

“Lost his eye. He wears a patch now. Not that it will matter in the dark,” her aunt added crudely.

Violet winced. She had only the slightest notion what Judith’s words actually meant, but the whole tone made her shiver. The eye must have been what Mr Kenyon was referring to when he asked if she knew about the *situation*. Well, she had been honest. Looks mattered little to her. All she wanted was a life far from this house. Whoever this duke was, and no matter why he was so odd in his method of courtship, he was her path out.

* * * *

That evening, the Peakes enjoyed the special supper intended for the duke. It was recast by Judith as a celebratory family meal—mainly celebrating her own success as a matchmaker and business-woman.

“All my hard work and faith rewarded,” she said ecstatically. “Nearly everything occurred just as he said. Oh, I knew it. Once you see the path laid before you, all that remains is to walk down it.”

“Who said?” Violet asked.

Judith glanced at her husband, who was well into a rather full glass of brandy. Then she said, “Just one of my good friends in London, you know. Mr Hanchett always gives me the very best advice.”

“He’s one of your little club,” Violet concluded. Judith had long chased fads relating to the occult, and she was forever trying out new ways to divine the future or the past or other people’s purses. Violet went on, “What was it this time? Cards? Divination by

smoke? Did someone see me married to the duke in dark water by midnight?"

"It is rude to mock another's interests," Judith said, "especially as those interests have helped secure your marriage. If you followed my friends, you would know quite a lot more about the world than you do."

"I am quite content to study the world I see through the lens of my telescope," Violet retorted. "Papa taught me how beautiful the night sky was all on its own. Must you always look for meaning beyond that? Isn't it enough to see the beauty of the world?"

"My little Violet." Judith took a gulp of wine from her own rather full glass. "*You* look, but you do not see. That's the difference between us!"

Not the only one, Violet thought. Aloud, she said, "Please excuse me."

She rose and made her way to her room. She positioned her telescope, put on a heavy robe, and opened the casement window. Cold air rushed in, but Violet didn't care. It was the only way to see properly through the instrument.

Someday she'd have a real observatory. Her father had one built at the old family home, long ago. Violet promised herself that she'd replicate it someday. She renewed that promise whenever she had to suffer in the cold for hours as she worked. Lovely summer nights were one thing, but it took true dedication to stargaze in winter. Yet the sky changed throughout the whole year, and she wanted to understand all of it. So she ignored the icy breeze, and the freezing cold metal of the telescope barrel. She only saw stars, and she talked to herself as she made notes about her study.

The winter sky was absolutely clear, with none of the haze that sometimes rose up in warmer, more humid weather. Now the stars shone steadily, barely winking as she gazed through her scope. The faint tinge of blues or reds marked each star she gazed at, making them as familiar as old friends. And there... She smiled as she set

the viewfinder on the slightly blurry object she was looking for. Its smudged appearance wasn't the fault of the glass. Violet suspected it was the tail of a comet, just beginning to grow more visible as the object neared the sun.

"Please let the next few nights be clear," she whispered. She so wanted to find a comet of her own.

No matter what, she swore, she'd never give up her study of astronomy. This man she was newly betrothed to wouldn't know a thing about the night sky, and he probably wouldn't care. But he couldn't stop Violet from pursuing the one thing that made her happy.

Chapter 3

9

ON THE WAY TO LONDON, Alex was considering the Zodiac.

Not the one in the sky, true, but the one hidden within the power structure of Britain, the one that sent signs all over the country and the world to bring back knowledge others wanted to hide.

Alex arrived at his townhouse in the city with almost no warning, but his household staff were of the highest quality, and they had everything in hand by the time his coach pulled up to the door.

“Your grace,” the butler said with a little bow. “A pleasure to see you back in London. Will you be going out?”

Alex nodded. His time in London was defined by “going out.” Sometimes that meant official functions or social duties, but it was just as often connected to more esoteric work he could tell no one about. “Almost immediately. I’m not sure if I’ll be back for supper, so just tell Cook that some cold food left out will suffice.”

“Yes, sir.”

Not long after, Alex walked through the streets to the Whitby Club. It was a long walk, but he preferred to move at his own pace rather than be driven around in a carriage. He also didn’t like people to connect him to the place too strongly. After all, when one dabbled in espionage, it made sense to be discreet.

In fact, Alex was more than a dabbler in espionage. He’d been a

spy for over ten years, serving as one member of the group called the Zodiac. It was so clandestine that even most people in positions of government deeply concerned with espionage didn't know it existed. There were only twelve agents active at any time, each given a zodiac sign as a code name. Alex's was Cancer.

All the agents took orders from the Astronomer. Almost no one knew who the Astronomer actually was—orders came through Aries, the first sign, a post currently held by a man named Julian Neville. Alex had his theories about the Astronomer's identity, but he also understood that saying those theories out loud was a stupid thing to do.

The agents were selected by a rather unconventional method. Many came from the military, where they had proved themselves to their superiors or otherwise attracted the attention of the Zodiac by some extraordinary feat. But that was certainly not the only path. Alex himself was approached by a well-traveled peer who was quite familiar with politics, yet never took part in them. That man turned out to be Julian's predecessor. It wasn't long after Alex lost his first wife, when Alex was desperate for anything to distract him from the blow. He was deeply frustrated and angry at life, and the Zodiac managed to direct that ire toward a better goal: protecting Britain.

Alex had several qualities useful for espionage. First, he was well born. Commoners deferred to him, peers respected him, and foreign agents thought twice before tangling with him. Second, he was intelligent—Waltham said it was harder than one might think to find both qualities in the same man. Finally, Alex just saw things in a different way than other people did. When he looked at a scene, he noticed far more than what was there. He could guess—very accurately—what happened before, and he could predict what might happen next. After he joined the Zodiac, he became known for being the man to send into the most puzzling situations. Alex would find the missing pieces of the puzzle and see the truth.

For about a decade, Alex relished his role, especially as less and less tied him to his home and his family life. Meanwhile, he embarked on two more marriages, both of which ended with death. He'd certainly learned not to grow too attached to anyone.

But as an agent, where personal connections were a danger, he excelled. He saw other agents come and go, even saw the first sign change hands. Alex never stopped taking assignments.

Until one brought him a little too close to death. Alex must have grown careless. Or he miscalculated. But he ended up in a very dark place, far outnumbered, and with no one to call for aid. He did climb out, leaving several bodies behind. But he also left behind a lot of blood, his eye, and his confidence.

Alex took a long while to recover. He couldn't tell anyone other than the Zodiac what happened, of course. The story of being attacked by a gang while traveling in a city abroad worked just as well, though. No one really wanted to know how his eye was ripped out.

Though still a sign, he could no longer go on just any assignment. Alex's face was now quite distinctive. There were some situations where being a man in an eyepatch didn't seem out of place. The courts of Europe were *not* those places. So Alex accepted more and more tasks that relied solely on his deductive ability. He became, in short, an investigator who worked for spies. He took the assignments given to him and tracked down loose threads, potential scandals, secret embarrassments, and suspicious events.

Tonight he'd get another one. He arrived at the Whitby Club just as the winter sun was setting, and he was grateful to be inside again.

"Dunmere!" a voice called out as he entered the large room of the first floor. "Join me." It was Julian, and his invitation carried an undertone of command.

Alex strolled up to the other man. "Are we making time for small talk?" he asked in a low voice, wearing a smile he didn't feel.

"Do you even know how to make small talk anymore?" Julian asked, his eyebrow raised.

"Come to think of it, no." Alex said. "What happened?" Privately, he mulled over Julian's offhand comment. What did he mean by *anymore*?

But Julian was all business now. "I need you to get to work. There's been a murder."

"A murder," Alex repeated. "Who was the victim?"

"A James Galbraith. Have you heard the name?"

"No. Should I have?"

"Not necessarily. He was a politician, representing a local borough."

"When did the killing happen?"

"Last night," Julian said. "I sent for you as soon as I could. The whole thing is a mess, top to bottom."

"Were there witnesses?" Alex asked.

"None so far. We're working on it."

"I'll investigate myself," Alex said. "Give me the details you have of the victim and the location of death. I'll have a few questions for the local magistrate, as well." Alex watched Julian's expression, noticing the other man's clenched hand. "What else? This isn't something that would attract the attention of the Zodiac, unless there's more to it."

"There is more." Julian handed him a square of paper with two wavy parallel lines on it. "This was found near the body, drawn on the stone pathway—in blood."

Alex recognized it as a zodiac symbol, and felt an immediate chill. "Aquarius. Is this a message?" he wondered out loud. "Something about an old assignment? Something left behind, perhaps?" He imagined how dangerous it could be if some foreign agent started taunting the Zodiac in such a public way. Or if this man, a politician, discovered a secret he should not have. "This also might be a warning," he guessed. "But if it is, who sent it?"

“That is what we would dearly like to find out,” Julian said. His tone was mild as ever, but Alex now understood the agitation underneath. “The local authorities have no idea of this line of questioning, of course. But we *need* to know if there’s a connection. If there is, you are the only man with the knowledge—and, quite frankly, the social standing—to pursue it at the highest levels, should it come to that.”

“And I will.” Once Alex got his hooks into an assignment he didn’t let go until it was completed. That dedication cost him an eye. “Tell me now if you know whether Galbraith was connected to any agent’s work. I’d rather not start cold.”

“If I knew, I’d tell you,” Julian said. “There might be a link, but we haven’t found one yet.”

Alex tested the obvious idea out loud. “It could be a coincidence.”

“It could be,” said Julian. “But coincidences make me extremely suspicious.”

“You’re not alone. I’ll get to work.”

“Thank you for looking into this.”

Alex waved Julian’s comment away. The polite phrase was unnecessary. He was a sign, and Julian was the first sign. He gave the orders. Despite Alex’s higher social rank, in the Zodiac, it was Aries who commanded.

“Let me or Miss Chattan know if you need anything. The Disreputables are available for small jobs,” Julian added, referring to a group of once shady criminals who now often helped the Zodiac.

Alex stood up. “Until I get a better sense of what’s going on, I wouldn’t know what to ask for. I’ll keep you informed.”

“Where are you going?”

“The scene of the crime, naturally.”

“Nothing’s left. The local authorities cleaned everything up. After they mucked it all up, of course.”

Alex gave a little smile. “There’s always *something* to find.”

When Alex reached the scene of the murder, it was indeed scrubbed clean of its worst gore. The blood was gone, and the area was quiet. Alex looked around the street and the buildings nearby. He noted the entrance to the building where Galbraith had his offices. He had apparently been there later than usual.

He checked the few notes Julian provided him, and soon found the spot where the body was discovered. Nothing marked it, but the space was suspiciously clear. No dirt, no leaves... "No blood," he said. If Galbraith was killed here, there would be a stain on the ground where the blood seeped in. But there was nothing. However, Alex did see the faint image of the astronomical symbol for Aquarius. Someone tried to scrub it away, but didn't get it all.

So Galbraith was dragged here, possibly after the symbol was created. Yes, that made sense. The killer left the body nearby but hidden till the space was ready. Then he dragged the body to the spot to be found. But *why*?

"You looking for somethin'?" a voice asked.

Alex glanced up, where an older woman stood watching him. Her clothes hung on her loosely, and her teeth and hair were a fright.

"This is where the body was found," he said.

"Sure enough," the woman said. "Saw the law come running once everyone started shrieking."

"You live around here? Did you know the man who was killed?"

"He didn't invite me up to tea, though he weren't a bad sort," the woman said with a cackle. "But I seen him more than once. Worked over there." She pointed to the building Alex noted earlier.

"You were here the night of the killing. See anyone else?"

"No one I'd remember."

Alex pulled out a coin. "Is your memory improving?"

She reached for it, but he closed his hand around it before she could take it.

She sighed. "I saw...someone. But it won't help you find the killer. Who you with?" she asked suddenly. "Why do you care?"

"You have questions for me?" Alex opened his hand again, just a little. "Answers cost money. Or you can provide the answer, and take the money."

She pursed her lips, whistling softly through her teeth, evidently a habit of hers. "I'll tell you what I saw. But you won't think it's much."

"Go on."

"It was after midnight, but the moon was so bright it might have been day. I was over on the bench," she said, jerking her head toward another building wall. "And I saw this man bending on the ground just here. It looked like he was scratching in the dirt. I thought he'd dropped something and was trying to find it in the dark. Well, I didn't worry too much about it. I was nodding off, to be truthful. But the next thing I knew, someone was screaming. I looked and the man was laying flat on the ground. I hurried up to look, and he was dead. More people were around by then. They could all see he'd been killed. Stabbed right in the heart, he was."

"What did he look like?"

"Older man. White hair, and no beard," she said. "Very tidy. Clothes all neat, except for the blood. And not a very big man. When I first saw him, bending over, I thought he was a big man, and younger. But when I got closer, he wasn't much taller than me."

"You say he had white hair. Did he have a hat?"

"Well, it had fallen off."

"So you saw it by him?"

She frowned. "No. Can't say I did."

"But he was wearing a hat when you first saw him...looking in the dirt? You'd have remarked on it if a gentleman was outdoors without a hat, particularly on a cold night."

"Oh, yes. He was wearing a black hat then."

“Black hat over white hair?”

She paused. “Now that you say it like that, I’m not sure his hair was white after all. It seemed much darker when he had the hat on.”

Alex handed her the coin. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t tell you a thing you didn’t already know.”

“You certainly did. You told me the color of the killer’s hat and hair.”

“No, the dead man’s hat,” she corrected. “I only saw one man.”

“You saw two men,” Alex said. “You saw the killer, a dark-haired man with a hat on, as he painted in blood on the ground. Then you saw the older, white-haired victim, *after* the killer dragged his body out to be found.”

“I saw the murderer?” She put a hand to her mouth.

“You did. Be grateful he didn’t see you.” Alex bid the older woman goodnight and continued on. He poked around the area, searching for where the body could have been hidden. In an alley, he discovered a dark, sticky patch that was almost certainly where James Galbraith lay breathing his last. Alex hoped it was quick.

Armed with this new information, Alex went directly to the offices of the Zodiac. Though it was nearly midnight now, he was certain he’d find someone there. The offices were tucked away in a handsome but bland structure in London, located nowhere near any government offices or seats of power. The Zodiac’s goal was to be ignored completely, and it had succeeded so far. Alex negotiated the many twists and turns, the stairways that never seemed to end up where one expected, and the corridors of unmarked doors. It took determination and patience to find the Zodiac, even when someone knew where to look.

Alex knocked on one door and waited patiently. After a minute, he knocked again, fighting the urge to question his judgment. This *was* the right door, and someone *would* answer it.

Finally, someone did. A woman looked out at him with no trace

of curiosity. “Ah, you’d better come in,” she said.

Inside the office, she offered a warmer greeting. “Good evening, your grace. I thought you’d come by eventually.”

“You’re never surprised, Miss Chattan,” he said. Indeed, Alex had never seen Miss Chattan act anything other than cool and efficient. The woman had worked alongside Aries since he became Aries, and she was likely why the Zodiac ran so smoothly. Her capabilities didn’t seem to extend to her personal appearance, though. Though blessed with pretty eyes and thick ash blonde hair, she was always a little disheveled and never fashionable.

She indicated a chair near her desk. “Julian is not here just at the moment.”

“No matter,” said Alex. “I spoke to him earlier. It’s your assistance I need.”

Miss Chattan sat down and waited for him to do likewise. “Have you found something already?”

“I may have,” Alex said cautiously. “The victim was moved. Which means that it wasn’t a casual killing, but rather planned at least a bit ahead of time.”

“Why do we know that?” Chattan asked, playing the devil’s advocate. “Perhaps a mugger saw that he’d gone too far and killed when he only meant to knock him out. So he moved the body somewhere in a panic.”

Alex shook his head. “There was nothing in the scene to indicate panic. The body was deliberately placed in a spot where it would be *found*. If the killer wanted to keep it hidden, he wouldn’t have moved it from the spot where Galbraith died, which was hidden fairly well. And, of course, the murderer also took time to paint a symbol in blood next to the body. Casual killers don’t do that.”

“They don’t. And they certainly don’t use the symbol of Aquarius.” She was worried about that in exactly the same way as Julian had been.

“Yes.” Alex frowned. “So that’s what I have to go on. I don’t think this was isolated. It makes no sense. Why that victim? Why that time? Why that place? Why a zodiac symbol, unless it’s a message for us?” Alex shifted in his chair. “Right now, all I have is a new question every minute.”

“So what do you want me to find?” Chattan asked, dipping her pen in ink.

“My first thought was that perhaps this wasn’t the first murder. Try to find any mentions of past deaths with similar aspects. Same type of victim, meaning male, and that station or position in government.” He shook his head slowly, thinking. “I’ll use my connections to find out if Galbraith’s home or offices actually were broken into lately. And if anything was taken.”

“Anything else?” she asked.

“No, but while you’re looking, see if there are any other deaths where something was painted in blood—anything, mind,” Alex said. “Not just a symbol. And don’t assume the death will be called a murder. Perhaps some magistrate wrote up a report and called it an accident, just to avoid the work of reporting and dealing with a crime. Find out if there’s been any gossip surrounding symbols written in blood over the past few months.”

Chattan nodded as she wrote. “I’ll send word as soon as I have something. You’re staying in town?”

“For a few days at least. I can’t make any more guesses until I have more facts. But even if this hasn’t happened before, I think it will happen again.”

“Why?”

“There are twelve signs in the zodiac. What if our killer is hoping to use them all?”

Chattan shivered. “Well, with luck, you’ll get to him before he has the chance. It’s lucky you’re available,” she added. Chattan had actually been the one to convince him to stay on as a sign after his injury. *Even with one eye, you’ll still see more than most*, she’d said. *We need*

you.

“Yes, I’ll keep working at it,” he said. “I likely have a wedding to attend soon, but that will only occupy a day or so.”

“At least that will be a more pleasant event. Who is getting married?”

“I am,” he said.

“Oh. And who is the bride?” Chattan did not say *this time*. She let an eloquent pause say it for her.

“I believe her name is Lady Violet Holloway.”

“So you haven’t met her,” Chattan surmised.

“Not yet.”

“You will take the time to meet your bride before you see her in the church, won’t you?” Chattan asked. “A lady likes a mysterious gentleman, but there’s a limit.”

“I’ll consider your advice.”

“Do that, your grace.”

Alex did intend to follow Chattan’s advice...after he learned all he could about James Galbraith’s life and death, which took a few days of intensive work.

Though personally rather wealthy, James Galbraith was a politician who represented some of the poorer parishes in London. By all accounts, he was something of a reformer. He took the side of the exploited and the weak over and over. He railed against landlords who charged high rents for housing in the slums, and he advocated for better treatment of the insane and indigent. His death shocked those Alex spoke to, but only a few suggested it might be motivated by his politics. Most people thought he was the victim of a random, violent drunk...or someone who ought to be put away in Newgate.

“Galbraith was never shy about walking the streets of his parish,” said one man who knew him. “Even at night. Perhaps he should have been.”

As Alex put together all he learned of Galbraith, the killer re-

mained a shadow. The old lady he talked to at first was the only one who seemed to have noticed anything. No one else saw any figure who might match the description of the killer. And what was Alex to do with what he had? A strong, rather young man who wore a black hat and dark clothes? That description fit half of the men in the city.

He went out every day in an attempt to scare up some detail or clue left behind, though memories were fading fast already. But Alex didn't give up.

However, one afternoon, Alex received a letter from Herbert. His uncle reported that the Lady Violet seemed entirely suitable and possessed of a quiet charm. She had agreed to the match, so Herbert declared his mission—the mission Alex had dropped on him—completed. *I await your instructions*, the letter ended. It was a not so subtle reminder that Alex was the only person who could actually conclude this business. Herbert worked very hard to find a suitable bride this time, and he succeeded in spite of Alex's lack of enthusiasm. Now Alex had to accept the reins and actually marry her.

"Quiet charm," Alex said to himself. What did that mean, exactly? Then Chattan's tart advice came back to him. If he wanted to find out, he only had to meet the lady. How difficult could that be?

* * * *

Alex returned from London very late, so he didn't have the chance to speak to Herbert until the next day at breakfast.

Also at the table was his ward, Millicent Sherwood. She was sixteen, and just emerging from the awkward transition of child to adult. Her frame was still decidedly slender, but no longer girlish. Alex suspected that was one of the reasons Millie had taken to wearing black for the past few years—people noticed the unusual color of her gowns, rather than the figure underneath. He was perfectly content for that to be the case, and never objected to her

sartorial quirk. Alex dreaded the idea of suitors courting Millie. He still saw her as a precocious and talkative child. He didn't want to think of her being courted and married, and having children of her own, as she inevitably would.

Someday, Millie would have her pick of suitors. She had a compelling sort of beauty, bright hazel eyes, and a tongue that was often quicker than her better sense. When she did stop to think, she had a clever mind, always keen to learn. At present, she was rather obsessed with poetry and the theater, and was always pestering Alex to bring her the latest plays and new poetry collections from London.

But all that was not at the top of Alex's mind today. He pushed his plate away and focused on Herbert, ready to discuss the results of the older man's visit. "Well?" he asked. "I read your letter, but I'd like a bit more insight. What did you conclude?"

Herbert waved an impatient hand. "What else can I tell you other than what I wrote? I met the lady, I spoke with her privately, and she assured me she agrees to the marriage."

"Of course she would," Millie broke in. "Who turns away a chance to be duchess?" No one told Millie of the situation, but that hadn't stopped her from gleaning nearly all the details about it.

Herbert looked at Millie disapprovingly. "I can discern the difference between a social climber and a sincere agreement."

"Good thing Alex sent you, then," Millie countered.

"Enough, Millie," Alex said. He turned to Herbert. "Go on. What did you think of her? Be honest."

"Honestly? She is a very quiet woman. Obviously of good breeding and morals, despite a less than congenial atmosphere in the home. The aunt is rather overbearing. She, however, was the soul of politeness, and very pretty in the bargain. I think she'll be quite suitable."

Alex nodded curtly. "Then set a date with the Peakes. As early as possible. By the end of the month. We will be married here at

the Abbey, with only close relatives invited. We'll have a dinner for the family afterward."

"By the end of the month? Surely, this event calls for more preparation..." Herbert trailed off when he saw Alex's face.

"I have had quite enough of extravagant weddings. It will be here, with only our families, or it will not take place. I have other things to worry about, and the faster this is finalized, the better for all concerned."

"Of course." Herbert swallowed. "The Peakes will understand."

Alex didn't give a damn if the Peakes understood or not.

"Are you sure you do not want to invite anyone else?" Herbert ventured. "It's expected, and some people will be put out. Your mother—"

"—is in Bath, and quite happy to remain there," Alex said. "She hates to travel. The news alone should be sufficient to entertain her. Those other people have seen me wed three times before. They won't object to missing the fourth."

Millie laughed. "The fourth for *you*, Alex. But the first for this Lady Violet. Oh, well. I suppose gaining the title of duchess will offset the disappointment of the ceremony itself!"

"I'm not particularly concerned about that," he said.

Millie laughed again. "On that point, Alex, no one is confused. You're not concerned with the lady at all."

He was offended for a moment, until he remembered that he'd done precisely nothing to oppose that notion.

Alex knew he should meet with his new bride, but he suddenly found a thousand other items to put his attention to. The matter of the murder was obviously more important than Alex's personal life—even though there was little new information coming to him, and certainly not enough to warrant his complete attention.

He did send a few letters immediately. One he wrote to Lady Violet. That was an excruciating exercise. He wasted many pieces of paper before he produced a missive that didn't sound complete-

ly incoherent or glacially cold or absurdly familiar. What does one say to a total stranger? The final letter was only a page. He expressed an apology that he hadn't met her already, mentioned that he intended to visit her next week, and hoped that she'd be happy at Dunmere Abbey.

He sealed the letter, feeling that it was a poor effort. But it *had* taken most of the morning.

The second letter was far easier to write. He addressed it to Judith Peake and merely asked what day next week would be best to journey to Hawbeck Place.

Finally, he wrote to Chattan, asking why no new information on the murder had been sent.

The days slipped by as he waited for replies.

Chattan's arrived first. It was one line: *Marriage has also been called an excellent mystery*. He sighed in frustration. The message was clear to him. Chattan was hoarding whatever information she found until she decided he should hear it, undistracted by personal matters.

Judith Peake wrote back, filled with regrets. The Peakes would be entirely occupied with preparing for the wedding and marriage. There were people to visit, items to be purchased, and so much to pack. But she was certain that Lady Violet would become well known to him via her letters before their arrival at the Abbey. Lady Violet, she added, was a charming correspondent.

But no letters from Lady Violet arrived, charming or otherwise. He wrote once more to her, but that letter went unanswered, too.

And then the date of the wedding arrived.

Chapter 4



ON A COLD, DRIZZLY DAY at the very end of February, Violet and her guardians arrived at Dunmere Abbey. They should have been there yesterday, but Judith had one minor crisis after another, causing them to delay their departure from Hawebeck Place, and then to waste time along the road, even to the point of staying one more night at an inn than originally expected.

It was maddening, and uncharacteristic of Judith. Was the woman trying to delay them? At least Judith had the sense to pay for a boy to ride ahead, so the duke would know what was happening.

“Don’t worry, Violet,” Judith said. “We’ll get there just in time for the wedding. You won’t miss a thing.”

Except meeting my husband beforehand, Violet wanted to snap. The man hadn’t even bothered to write to her, or answer her own letters, which Violet spent considerable time on, in an effort to introduce herself via her words.

All she got in return was an icy silence.

But what was to be done? She was bound by her promise.

At last they arrived. Judith pressed her face to the rain-spotted glass in an effort to see every inch of the estate. Violet sat back on her seat, watching the few glimpses slide by through the other window. She was not nearly as excited as Judith to see her new home,

since her stomach was tied up in knots at the idea of first seeing her new husband. Everything was happening far faster than she had expected.

“Oh, there is the Abbey itself,” said Judith. “How positively elegant!”

“Half a ruin, I’m sure,” her uncle guessed. “These old places always are.”

“Oh, shush, Roger. The duke is a wealthy man. He understands the need to keep up appearances.”

Violet peeked toward the house. That was a lot of appearance to keep up, she thought. The main house was four stories tall, and multiple wings spread out over the grounds. The countless windows gleamed, even in the dull cloudy day. Beyond the house, she could just see a lake, the surface as grey as the sky. At the far edge of the lake, a strange outline caught her eye. It looked like a ruined tower. The top was ragged, but it was still quite tall. If it was stable, she could set up her telescope there, away from any possible light.

Then the carriage pulled up to the house, followed by a second vehicle that held only trunks and crates—all of Violet’s possessions. An army of footmen immediately went to work unloading it, hurrying to get the items out of the rain. Violet looked over anxiously.

“Be careful of that red wood case!” she called.

A footman looked over at her, the case in his hands. “This one, my lady?”

“Yes. It’s fragile.” She hated to think of someone dropping it, but she couldn’t offer to carry it. Soon-to-be duchesses did not carry their own luggage. “Just be mindful of it. Have it sent to my room.”

“Yes, my lady!” He bobbed his head.

“Come along, Violet.” Judith grabbed her arm. “Fussing over luggage when you’re about to be married. People will think you’re touched in the head.”

Violet turned to see Herbert Kenyon walking toward them. "Welcome!" he called out, smiling in particular at Violet. "We are so glad you have arrived at last."

"We were lucky to make it today," Judith said. "Though travel by coach is horrendous in the best of conditions."

"Good day," Violet said quietly. She looked past him, wondering why the duke wasn't even there to greet them at the door.

"Come in, come in!" Kenyon said, with somewhat forced cheer. "You must want to refresh yourselves after the journey."

The inside of the house was opulent by any standards. Violet quailed at the notion of becoming the chatelaine of such a place, but Judith made a satisfied little cooing sound in her throat. "How charming," she said.

A woman in a grey gown curtsied to Violet. "Good day, my lady. I am Mrs Simpson, the housekeeper. Let me show you all to rooms where you can rest and change for the ceremony. A longer tour will have to wait, as will the introductions of the rest of the staff to the new duchess."

Mrs Simpson did not waste time, but led them up a massive marble staircase at the end of the foyer, and into a newer wing of the house. She first showed the Peakes to a large room and left them in the care of a maid who'd been tailing behind.

Violet kept on as Mrs Simpson advanced down the hall, turned a corner, and kept going all the way to the end. Along the way, they passed portraits and landscapes hung on the walls, and seemingly innumerable little tables holding statues or vases of flowers or other objects of curiosity. The duke certainly did not lack for wealth.

At last, the housekeeper paused.

"These will be your rooms," she said, opening the door. "We call it the blue suite."

"Rooms?" Violet questioned the plural, but as soon as she saw the space, her mouth dropped open in astonishment. Even though the day was grey and rainy, light illuminated the blue silk wall hang-

ings and the oriental carpets laid out everywhere. The bedroom was larger than half her uncle's house, it seemed, and that was besides the other rooms leading off from it. But the most amazing part of the room was the vast set of windows that took up almost one whole wall.

"That view looks out onto the main lawns," the housekeeper said. "You can see as far as the lake."

"It's beautiful."

"There is also a study off this room," Mrs Simpson went on. "And here is a dressing room and wardrobe. Conveniences through here. A closet for additional items out of season."

Violet saw another door opposite the wall with the massive window. "Where does that one go?"

"That connects to the master's suite," Mrs Simpson said.

"Ah." Violet swallowed, not quite prepared to think of the ramifications of that yet.

Then Dalby walked in, followed by a few of the footmen, who were all bearing various trunks. She directed them about, while Violet stood there feeling useless. Apparently, duchesses did not do anything for themselves.

The servant holding her red wood case approached her. "Ma'am? Where would you like this?"

"Over by those windows," Violet said, pointing.

He put it down with obvious care and then bowed to Violet before leaving. At least the servant took her instructions seriously, she thought. That was something.

Judith appeared in Violet's suite not long after, rubbing her hands together. "Well, let's prepare the bride, shall we? Lady Violet needs her wedding gown, Dalby."

"I know where it is, ma'am," said Dalby, as she unlocked a trunk.

Over the next quarter hour, Judith ordered the girl around, directing her to press the gown, and find the matching slippers and

petticoats. Violet stood at the window, but turned when Judith snapped at Dalby for dropping a slipper.

"Dalby knows her duties, Aunt," she said. "Why don't you go to your own room to freshen up before the ceremony?"

Judith sniffed as she left, complaining of Violet's ingratitude for her careful oversight.

Dalby watched her go, then shrugged and continued her work. Even the maid found Judith's behavior appalling, Violet thought. "She's concerned that the ceremony goes well," Violet said out loud.

"She's concerned that it goes at all," Dalby muttered, in a low enough tone that Violet could pretend she didn't hear.

Luckily, Violet's gown had fared well in the trunk. Dalby checked it carefully, but there were no rips or stains. "Good," the maid said. "I worried the rain would leak in."

If it had, the dirty water would have destroyed the lovely white fabric. Dalby draped Violet in the simple, flowing gown. She tied a wide silk ribbon at the high waist, and let the tails of the ribbon trail down the back of the skirt to Violet's feet. The dress had delicate little sleeves, and Dalby handed Violet the long white gloves to cover her arms to nearly where the sleeves began. A strand of modest pearls completed the look.

Dalby was just arranging her hair when a knock came at the door.

As soon as Violet called for whoever it was to come in, a slender, dark-haired girl entered. She was dressed in black, which Violet felt boded ill for the day. Her pale skin and high forehead did much to lighten her appearance, as did her eyes, which were hazel and mischievous. She appeared to be about sixteen. She must be the ward Mr Kenyon talked about.

"I'm Millicent Sherwood, my lady," she introduced herself. "But call me Millie. Everyone does. I'm his grace's cousin. Did he mention me?"

"Mr Kenyon did. I'm afraid that his grace and I have not yet met."

"Yes, but not even in his letters?" the younger girl pressed.

Violet's expression must have revealed that she received none.

Millie rolled her eyes. "He swore he wrote. Oh well, it's too late now. Are you ready? Do you need anything?"

Violet thought about asking for a few years, or a fast horse, but the words died in her throat when she realized that this wedding was real, and she had no time left. She shook her head mutely at the younger girl.

Dalby gave Violet a quick kiss on the cheek. "Off you go, my lady! When I see you again, I'll have to call you your grace!" She beamed at Violet and sent her on her way.

Millicent walked her to the chapel, which was in a much older wing of the vast house.

"Are you nervous?" she was asking, her eyes locked on Violet as though she were an exotic creature of some type. "You don't look scared. You're obviously too smart to heed the rumors."

Violet shook her head. "The eye? I was told. I certainly don't think that a significant issue."

"Not the eye. The *rumors*."

"What rumors?" Violet asked, puzzled.

Millicent stopped short, staring at her. "You don't know?"

"What should I know?" Violet asked, her nervousness growing into real fear.

"No one told you?" Millie went on, her voice growing disbelieving. "Not Uncle Herbert, or your family, or *anyone*?"

"Told me what?" Violet demanded.

"Oh, there's no time. The ceremony will be starting soon. You must come now."

"Told me what?" Violet repeated to the now moving Millicent. She hurried to keep up.

Millie grabbed her arm, saying, "There were some rumors going

round about the duke. They scared some ladies away. Alex will explain everything, I'm sure." Millie's reassurance only had the effect of frightening Violet further.

They reached the old chapel of the abbey, an ancient space of cold stone with somber light spilling in from the stained glass windows. Violet took a quick glimpse in. Candelabra were lit throughout the church, but the light did not seem to penetrate the gloom. There was only a small gathering of guests in the front pews. The rest of the rows were empty. Not the high society wedding gathering she would have expected of a duke.

Uncle Roger stood at the door, waiting to lead her down the aisle to give her away. Violet thought wryly that it was good he was there, since she'd be too paralyzed to walk down the aisle by herself.

"Come on," he muttered worriedly as Millie handed her off. "Your aunt doesn't want the slightest misstep—"

"Give me a minute to take my seat!" Millie ordered.

Violet was passed from Millie to Roger. She wanted to ask him if he knew about those rumors, but she could barely speak now, she was so nervous. Her throat was tight and dry. She would have paid in gold for something cool to drink—and even more to escape this contract.

But it was too late. "The march is starting!" Uncle Roger said.

Music from a violin and flute began the traditional air. She walked in time to the music, feeling her uncle pull at her elbow. He was certainly eager to get the ceremony concluded, to get her safely married off.

Then Violet caught her first clear glimpse of the Duke of Dunmere, standing at the head of the aisle. She inhaled, now even more confused. Why would *he* have trouble finding a bride? To say he was handsome didn't do him justice. He was more impressive than everyone else there, looking as if he was perfectly cut from stone. Dark hair, only hinting at grey, crowned his head. And yes,

he wore a patch over one eye, but that did little to take away from his presence. It actually made him more arresting. A single, dark eye surveyed her as she approached, but she could read no expression in that otherwise perfectly formed face.

He descended one step when they reached the end of the aisle—like a god descending from Olympus, she thought. He took her hand, and if he noticed it was trembling, he said nothing. The couple ascended the step to the altar and faced the priest.

Violet tried to focus on the ceremony, but she was too intensely aware of the man beside her. He looked so cool and above everything, but she could sense the heat of him, almost searing her. She didn't know why he should be so warm, or was she imagining things? She began to feel light-headed.

Don't faint, she told herself. Whatever you do, don't swoon.

The ceremony proceeded quickly, without a long sermon on the virtues of marriage. This was a business arrangement, she realized anew. She was being sold.

The duke repeated the words he was prompted to say, without inflection. She glanced at him, wondering if he even thought about the vows he'd just made.

Then the priest prompted her to say the same words. She did so in a tiny voice, so softly she doubted the guests could hear her.

They were pronounced man and wife. The priest did not suggest that the duke should kiss her, nor did he appear to want to. The duke took her by the arm and presented her to the guests in the pews. They descended and began to accept the congratulations of the families.

She was married, Violet repeated to herself over and over. But she didn't have the slightest idea to whom.

Several guests surrounded her, separating her from her new husband, who was walking toward Millicent. Violet tried to keep the new names and faces straight. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Millicent talking with the duke in a low and urgent manner,

though she could hear nothing of the conversation. The duke certainly didn't look pleased.

Then another guest besieged her, and Violet lost track of the duke.

"Gwendolyn Kenyon. I'm so glad to meet you, my dear. I knew that his grace would find a young lady who wouldn't listen to all those nasty things the gossips say."

"Of course not," Violet murmured encouragingly. At last, someone to tell her what Herbert and Millie had only hinted at, if Violet played her hand carefully. The woman would only tell her if she thought she already knew. "People are so silly, don't you think?"

"Silly is the very word. The Duke of Death, indeed! That's what the ton ladies were calling him, and no wonder they frightened their daughters. He's had bad luck in brides, that's all. It could happen to anyone."

"Henry the Eighth, for example," Violet said before she could stop herself. Inside, she was reeling. The ton called her husband *what?*

"Exactly!" Gwendolyn said. Then she frowned. "Wait, that's not the same at all! Henry wasn't cursed. He just chose to do all those horrible things, even if he was a king."

"And he had six wives, after all. Hardly the same situation," Violet said, hoping the hysteria beginning to creep over her wasn't obvious to anyone watching.

"And Dunmere has only had three, so there. Until you, of course."

Violet couldn't even answer at this point. She was the fourth wife of this man! And no one thought to tell her?

But her rational mind came back with a sharp rejoinder. She should have asked more questions. She was so desperate to escape her uncle and aunt's house that she didn't stop to wonder why a man would accept her for a bride. It figured that only someone called the Duke of Death would find a shrinking violet acceptable.

"Are you all right, my dear?" Gwendolyn asked. "You look a bit pale."

"Some punch, perhaps. I'm a bit parched," Violet said quickly. "It has been quite a day."

Her luck was going from bad to worse. She escaped the house where she'd been living miserably, but only by marrying someone feared by everyone else. Other guests glanced at her as if she were going to drop dead right there.

She sought out Aunt Judith, who looked like a cat with a fresh kill after the successful conclusion of the wedding.

"Congratulations, my dear," Judith said. "You are Her Grace, Lady Alexander, the Duchess of Dunmere now. How does it feel to be a bride?"

"I should congratulate you, Aunt," Violet returned, her throat dry. "You did an excellent job of keeping me in the dark about the details of my new husband. It is not surprising that a man who suffers with the title Duke of Death would have a tiny bit of difficulty in finding a fourth wife."

"All occurs as the stars intend, *your grace*," said Judith airily. "It was a lucrative enough arrangement to be well worth the difficulties I went to to preserve your, ah, open mindedness."

"You mean ignorance," Violet said. "And what could be lucrative? My dowry is modest at best."

"Yes, but it will help keep Hawbeck Place warm for the next few winters."

"The duke is allowing *you* to keep my dowry?" Violet asked.

"Oh, yes. And a small, er, gift in addition. He needs a suitable wife more than cash. Money doesn't buy a name or a lineage."

"It did in this case," Violet said. Had she truly been purchased so baldly? What sort of man needed to do that?

Chapter 5

6

ALEX LET VIOLET WALK IN front of him after the ceremony. No one cared about anything but the bride at this moment...as he knew very well. Guests surrounded the new Lady Alexander, the new duchess of Dunmere, his new wife. She accepted most of the best wishes with a smile and nod, or sometimes a few words spoken so quietly Alex couldn't even hear them.

Before he could quite decide what to do, Millie signaled to him. Her expression was anything but congratulatory, and her black gown looked ominous in the setting of the chapel.

"Alex, she doesn't know," Millie hissed as soon as she got within reach of him.

He frowned at her. "Doesn't know what?"

"About the rumors, or your previous marriages. God knows how, but they've kept it all from her."

"Are you joking?" Alex asked coldly. But something in his gut twisted.

"Of course I'm not joking," she said. "I was as surprised as you are. No wonder she agreed to it all. She didn't know what she was agreeing to."

He wanted to curse. Loudly. But he didn't.

"You have to tell her," Millie went on, "before someone lets a stupid comment slip."

They both turned, seeking out Violet.

"Oh, no," Millie groaned. "It's too late."

"Gwendolyn," Alex said, seeing who had his bride by the arm. He could see the frozen, stunned expression on Violet's face from where he stood.

"She knows," Millie said in despair.

"She knows," Alex agreed. What a mess.

* * * *

The wedding dinner was hideous. No, Alex amended, the dinner was delicious, as always. Rack of lamb, mint sauce, glasshouse vegetables, custards both savory and sweet...something for everyone's taste. If only the food was the sole criterion to judge the success of a meal.

It was the company that was hideous. The guests were obviously aware—on some level—of the divide between Alex and Violet. Though his new wife sat opposite him, she didn't look or act like a wife. She acted like a stranger, because that's exactly what she was.

The conversations around the table rippled uncomfortably, as odd silences broke through the words, and people struggled to find safe topics to discuss.

To make it worse, the Peakes swilled wine down like pigs, growing more querulous and nasty with every course. Mrs Peake, who seemed typical enough before, dropped her mask of the devoted guardian. She clearly considered her job done, and now did not have to treat Violet as a household member at all. Whatever tensions had been lurking between the two ladies before, they surged upward with every sip of wine Mrs Peake took.

After one comment from the older lady, Alex shot Herbert a look, not needing words to convey his thoughts. Herbert should have looked a lot more closely at the whole family of his potential

match. There had to be a reason that Violet wasn't married before now—and they seemed to have found it.

Herbert knew exactly what Alex was thinking, but only offered a shrug in response, as if to say, if you want something done right, do it yourself. Alex frowned, annoyed that the other man was pointing out Alex's mistake.

And then, of course, there was Millicent. She viewed the whole dinner with a different perspective than anyone else. She was amused at the awkwardness, and often giggled to herself during the silences, making them even more awkward. When she saw Alex and Herbert's silent exchange, she laughed out loud, bringing all conversation to a halt.

"What are you laughing at, young lady?" Mrs Peake asked her, drunk and irritated and vaguely aware that she was part of the joke.

Millie only smiled at her. "Life, ma'am. I'm laughing at life."

The arrival of the next course helped smooth over that exchange, and provided a welcome distraction.

Through it all, Violet sat in silent mortification, so still she seemed to be willing herself to fade out of existence. Contrarily, her unnatural stillness made Alex look at her more frequently, trying to divine any of her thoughts.

His musing was interrupted by Mrs Peake's next words. "It was destined to be, so why should I question the wisdom of the stars?" she was saying. "The future belongs to those brave enough to grasp the serpent unflinching. That's why I made the match for you, Violet."

"It wasn't because of the stars," Violet said, her quiet voice nevertheless cutting through the whole table. "It was the money, according to you yourself, Aunt."

"You ill-mannered child!" Mrs Peake said spitefully. "You don't know a thing about it. What did I tell you? You look, but you never *see*."

At those words, Violet flinched slightly.

Alex placed his glass back on the table and looked directly at Mrs Peake. "That will do," he said.

The woman stared at him, apparently stunned he would object. Alex kept looking at her steadily, and she slowly realized the central truth of the day. Things were different now. Violet belonged to Alex, not to her. The Peakes were guests in his house, at his pleasure, and he far outranked them in every respect.

"Of course, your grace," she said finally. "One can't put aside the role of instructor and mother immediately, you know."

Violet looked at her aunt. Her brown eyes were wide with some emotion, but Alex didn't know her well enough to guess more. She stood up from the table. "Please excuse me," she gasped out, then turned and fled from the hall.

Millie half rose, intending to follow Violet, but Alex raised a hand to prevent her. "Finish your meal, Millie. I'll speak with her," he said calmly, setting his glass down. As he rose, he glanced at the Peakes, letting them see his contempt. "It seems *somebody* has to."

He left the room. The in-laws would have to go as soon as humanly possible. But first he had to speak to his wife.

Violet had barely reached the end of the hall when Alex stepped into it.

"Violet." He didn't say anything else, but that was enough to stop her progress.

She half turned. "Forgive me, your grace. But I had to get my breath."

"Come here," he said. "I'd prefer not to yell down the whole corridor."

Violet quickly retraced her steps. "Where would you like to yell—discuss things, your grace?" she asked, not looking at him.

"Follow me." Alex led her to a smaller room off the hall. Lit only by the sconces on either side of a small unlit fireplace, it was a gloomy space at the moment. The walls, paneled with dark wood, seemed to close in on them. When he shut the door and turned to

face her, she took a step back.

"Charming family," he observed.

"The only family I have left," she said, then added, as if she couldn't keep the words in, "She never acted in the role of mother. *Never.*"

"You actually lived with those swine?"

"Almost fifteen years."

"Dear God," he said, the full force of it hitting him.

"You must regret choosing me."

"I gather it's mutual," he replied.

Her eyes dropped to the floor, which was answer enough for Alex.

"You have heard about me," he said simply. "Though later than I would have preferred." He sighed. "If only we met sooner."

"Indeed," Violet said, a very slight reproof coloring the word.

Alex took a deeper breath. "All right. I deserved that. Though I'd point out that you didn't even respond to my letters."

"Because I received none," she protested, "though I wrote four to you..." Then she sighed. "Of course. Aunt Judith."

He understood Violet's conclusion immediately. "You suspect she prevented your letters from being sent?"

"And yours from reaching me. She was quite concerned that I know as little as possible, lest I change my mind."

"Now you do know. Tell me, are you frightened by these rumors?" The question had an odd quality in the little room. There was no echo here, unlike in the great hall.

"Whether I am frightened or not seems quite beside the point now," Violet said.

He heard a twinge of humor in her words, the gallows humor of one already damned.

"True," he noted, inwardly railing at this twist of fate. At least this one knew, he had thought, and was willing to ignore the rumors. But no, Fate had somehow managed to bring him the only

woman in England who didn't listen to gossips. He would have let her go, if only there was an honorable way to do it. But he could see none.

"Your grace?" Violet asked, when he did not continue.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked abruptly.

"It does not matter what the rumors say," she said finally. She did not actually answer his question, and they both knew it. "We are married. It is done."

"Not quite. The chief aim of any aristocratic marriage is to secure an heir to the title," he began.

"Yes, your grace," Violet answered, barely above a whisper. Alex saw her blush, and she would not lift her gaze from the floor. Such a quiet girl.

"But I'm not going to drop dead anytime soon, and neither are you," he added significantly. Violet looked as if she wasn't sure if she believed him. "I want you to be..." he paused. He'd been about to say *willing*, but he doubted Violet would ever have the spine to say no to anyone, especially not him. "I want to get to know you, and for you to know me better. I won't come to you until you ask me to. Is that fair?"

"More than fair. Yes, your grace," she whispered, still blushing violently. Her skin must be overheating at this point, he thought, fighting the sudden urge to touch her and find out.

"Violet, you haven't said the word *no* once since I've met you," he noted critically.

"No, your grace," she agreed quickly, but her comment was followed by a swift smile that was gone almost as soon as it arrived. Alex saw it, though, and felt strangely reassured. She had a sense of humor, at least. Perhaps she just needed time to become comfortable.

The prospect of not being bedded immediately appeared to make her more comfortable right away. At least some of the nervous tension flowed out of her. Looking at her in her pale wedding

gown, he realized he had no idea what to say to this woman—his *wife*. He opted for a momentary escape.

“Let’s rejoin our guests. They will be missing us.”

“I doubt anyone in the room will miss me,” she said. But she took his arm and let herself be led back to the dining hall.

The rest of the evening passed more quickly than the first part. Violet was still quiet, but the fight went out of her relatives, so the only conversation was awkward and desultory rather than abusive.

After the dessert course of a magnificent lemon cake which no one enjoyed, people passed through to the parlor. Violet declined to perform at the pianoforte, saying she did not feel ready to perform without some practice at the new instrument. “And anyway, I do not have a great talent for music.”

“Other than the music of the spheres,” Mrs Peake added absently, just at the edge of his hearing. Alex paused. What did that mean? But the thought of engaging Mrs Peake in conversation was enough to keep him from inquiring further.

So Millicent played her harp. She was quite accomplished, even though nearly everything she played was melancholy and in a minor key. Despite the beauty of the sound, it was not the sort of performance to energize people or encourage more revelry. Soon enough, the guests began to depart for bed or other pursuits.

The Peakes were led to their guest quarters. Alex watched as Mrs Peake nearly had to wrestle her husband away from a bottle of wine. The woman’s practiced moves made him think it was a common occurrence, and probably accounted for Violet’s own meager consumption of the wine at dinner.

Millicent left shortly afterward, after saying goodnight to Violet in particular. Then Alex caught Violet’s hand and said in a low voice, “Come. I’ll walk you to your own rooms now. For appearances, if nothing else.”

She nodded quickly. “Yes, your grace.”

He said goodnight to the few guests still in attendance and then

passed through the great oak doors, with Violet on his arm.

The dim hallway ran from one end of the main building to the other. The stone walls sucked any warmth out of the air. Gloomy would be an accurate description at the moment, and he didn't much like the idea of Violet being afraid in the Abbey.

"It looks different in the daytime," he said suddenly. "The Abbey, that is. You should not judge it by what you see now."

"I saw a bit today. I look forward to exploring it," said Violet. "It's very different from what I'm used to."

He led her up the wide staircase to the next floor, where the main bedrooms were located. He walked all the way to the end of the hall, stopping at her door.

Violet opened it, but didn't step through.

They stared at each other for a moment in absolute silence, perhaps finally, fatally aware that they were officially married, though they had only met that day. Alex also remembered that he had not kissed his bride at the ceremony. It seemed too late to fix the omission.

"Good night," he said, somewhat stiffly.

"Good night, your grace," she returned.

Alex crossed the hallway to his own rooms. What had he done? Duty to his family was all well and good, but what did he have in common with that little slip of a thing in the next room? He could hardly imagine her acting as duchess, a position that required considerably more confidence than Violet seemed to have.

He sighed, then cautioned himself to not draw too many conclusions from a single day, and a very strange day for her. She must be feeling overwhelmed by events. They would talk in the morning. Everything could be sorted in the morning.

Pausing at his desk, Alex picked up his notes regarding the murder of Galbraith. Reading over them, he became absorbed in the clues again. He sat down to reconsider the case from every angle. Sleep was forgotten, marriage was forgotten, as he sunk into

his work. This is where he could be effective, he thought. This was what was important.

But his concentration didn't last. He kept looking over at the connecting door, wondering about the stranger on the other side. He saw the light of a lamp burning from under the door. If she was awake, he could knock. He could speak to her, and learn something about her other than that she was shy and obedient.

And how would a shy, obedient woman react if he knocked and came into her room at this hour? Alex scared her just because of how he looked. Violating the sanctity of her room by entering without an invitation wouldn't help.

He stopped writing and fell silent. He listened hard, until he was sure he wasn't imagining it.

Crying.

His wife was crying on her wedding night.

So the curse was still going strong.

"Wonderful," Alex muttered.

Sleep was a long time in coming.

Chapter 6

6

VIOLET SLEPT BADLY, AND ROSE late. Neither thing was unusual, but the reasons were new. During the late night hours, she lay awake, odd thoughts racing through her mind, destroying any attempt to sleep. For hours after he saw her to her room, she thought of the duke, and their marriage, and her future. She had stared at the connecting door for a while, seeing a light at the bottom gap. So he was awake, as well, though she doubted he was fretting over the marriage. He didn't seem the type to fret over anything.

At least she had a small reprieve from one thing she'd been dreading. She naturally had been nervous about her wedding night, more than most women, since she had no older sisters or close friends who might have reassured her. Aunt Judith's hastily offered instructions had been as cryptic as they were alarming, and Violet assumed her aunt was deliberately trying to scare her. The fact that she wouldn't experience that mysterious act right away came as a vast relief.

But she was left more curious than before. As she lay quietly in the bed, a heat rose in her cheeks as she thought of the duke—her husband, she corrected herself, trying to get used to the notion. He certainly was lovely to look at. What would a kiss from him feel

like? Would she enjoy it?

Would he enjoy it? Violet didn't flatter herself that he was attracted to her in any way. And of course, her relatives were reasonable enough to regret marrying her. He must think she was just like them. That she was a crude, money-grubbing woman who didn't care who she married as long as it meant she would live well.

Panic rose in her breast as she thought of living in this house for the rest of her days, despised by her own husband. Overwhelmed at everything that happened, Violet indulged in something she rarely did, which was a cathartic bout of sobbing. But she did feel better afterwards, as if all the overwrought emotions fled along with the tears.

She must have fallen asleep at some point, because between one blink and the next, Dalby was suddenly there, the light was entirely different, and Violet felt a headache pulsing at her temples.

"Ma'am?" Dalby asked, concern all over her face. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Violet said, sitting up. "Why should something be the matter?"

"You were crying," Dalby noted. "Your cheeks are all blotchy and you've got salt stains on your gown." She paused, then said worriedly, "It wasn't *that* upsetting, was it? I mean, he wasn't cruel to you...last night?"

It took Violet a moment to understand what Dalby meant. She blinked several times—Lord, her eyes were dry—then felt a shock of comprehension. "No!" she burst out. "No. That...didn't happen. He didn't even step in this room."

"He didn't?" Dalby asked, taken aback.

"No. We spoke last night, and agreed that taking a little time to get to know each other first would be, um, wise."

"Oh." Her maid thought about it. "Well. Then why were you crying?"

"I don't know. I just was. Yesterday was not a good day."

"It wasn't such a bad day," Dalby said, trying to cheer her up. "You're a duchess now. And you never have to stay with your aunt again."

"True." Violet looked out the window. "And the clouds have moved off. That's something."

Dalby offered Violet a breakfast tray. She drank the coffee down and nibbled at the sweet, almost sticky bread on the plate.

After dressing, Violet found her way downstairs to the parlor where her aunt and uncle were sitting. They weren't talking. Roger was nursing the pains from his overindulgence the previous night, and Judith was embroidering again.

Her uncle greeted her with a slightly sick leer. "Up late as usual. Had a good sleep last night, missy?"

Violet guessed what he was referring to, and her mortification that he would even mention her "sleeping" with her husband seemed to be all the answer her uncle needed. He laughed, assuming her blush meant something different than it did. "So that's why he married again, is it?"

"Hush, Roger," Judith said mechanically. "No one is interested in your feeble attempts at humor."

For once, Violet agreed with her aunt. She didn't want to talk to them, however, so she quickly excused herself to find another diversion. Judith would stay at Dunmere Abbey for as long as she possibly could, enjoying the better accommodations and abusing the generosity of the duke by eating his food rather than their own. Violet sighed. The next few weeks would be painful at best if the Peakes were going to be around for every meal and social visit.

She hoped to find Herbert, or Millie, or even Alex. But her search was in vain, so she returned to the bedroom, where Dalby was arranging her clothes in the wardrobe room.

Violet stared out the windows toward the lake she'd not even seen up close. She turned to Dalby and requested the maid to bring out her riding habit. Once dressed, she quickly strode out to the

stables and asked for a horse to be saddled for her. One of the hostlers brought out a beautiful black one, who looked as eager to be outside as she felt.

“Will you want a groom, your grace?”

“Oh, no need. I only want to see the grounds and the lake.”

The boy nodded in comprehension. “The grounds will be muddy and slippery, your grace, after so much rain. Mind how you go.”

“Thank you for telling me. I shouldn’t be more than an hour or so.”

Then she was off. The cold air was glorious on her face. Winter hadn’t let go entirely, but Violet could smell hints of spring in the air. Not of flowers, but of mud and earth, of clean running water.

Violet circled the main house, looking over the various wings. She tried to guess the age of the oldest parts of the building, and saw where the newer additions had been added. She always considered Hawbeck Place large, but it would fit into this place several times over.

She rode past a few gardens, the beds mostly free of snow and ice but still quite bare. In the spring, it would be lovely there.

Actually, the whole estate must be gorgeous in the warmer months. Even in the last, grey part of winter there was a certain charm to it. She liked how the Abbey settled into the landscape, and how the lawns changed to meadows and then into woods beyond. She was eager to see what the coming months would bring.

The lakeshore was barely fringed with ice, so pockmarked and thin it looked liable to crack under any weight. She gave the shore a wide berth, not knowing if the edge would be too muddy to ride through. But she could see how the water would reflect the image of the Abbey at one end, and the sunset when viewed from the other side.

She came to the western edge, and then rode on to the strange building she saw the previous day. It really did appear to be a ruined tower. She rode all around, and tried the one door, but found

it locked. How very odd. And intriguing. She'd have to come back soon.

In the moment of silence before she nudged her horse forward, Violet caught the sound of rushing water. A stream lay beyond, perhaps draining from the lake to...somewhere. She rode on for several minutes, invigorated enough to investigate the mysterious sound. She found the little stream and followed it, approaching the line of trees in the distance.

Just as Violet was about to ride down a narrow path through the woods, she turned, hearing something behind her.

Hooves. Someone was riding toward her, fast. A moment later, she could see Alex, riding as if the devil drove him. In another moment, he was nearly on her. He slowed the horse with a sharp command, then circled her.

"Is something the matter at the house?" Violet asked nervously.

"Something is the matter right here," he growled. "What in the devil's name do you think you're doing?"

Violet, of course, had never seen Alex angry, and she had no idea how angry he was likely to get. The day before he'd seemed so cool, as if nothing could affect him. What had she done?

"I wanted to go for a ride, to see the grounds," she said nervously. "Why is that so strange?"

"It's been raining here for six days, and you are completely unfamiliar with the land. It's dangerous out here after so much rain!"

"How so?" She looked around, seeing nothing that hinted of danger.

"The riverbanks are known to collapse under even a little weight. The locals know enough to stay away until the ground dries. You should have a groom. Who let you go riding alone?"

"I refused the offer," she said. "I wanted to see the place for myself, and I'm not exactly riding off into the wilderness. We can see the Abbey from here."

He moved the horse closer, almost touching her own. "Don't

make excuses. You could have been killed!”

“As if it would matter to you—you don’t even know me,” she said, her voice finally rising in response to his unreasonable, unforeseen anger. “Or do you only care that the ton will start gossiping about your curse again?”

The duke didn’t even answer her. He instead grabbed her roughly and pulled her to him. Violet was too shocked to protest when he leaned forward and kissed her with punishing force.

It was not an act of love, or even passion. It was pure dominance. He wanted to show her she belonged to him. She could not leave him. She could not disobey him.

Violet felt the anger and power behind the kiss, and she wanted to melt away into a puddle to avoid the duke’s wrath. But the kiss made it hard for her to breathe at all, let alone move. Her body began to arch toward him, even as she raised her hands to push him away.

“Your grace,” she gasped, trying to catch her breath. “Please...”

He pulled away abruptly. “Never think I don’t care where you are every second of your life. You are my duchess now, and you cannot scurry about like a country mouse. You belong to me and you will behave like it.”

Violet dropped her head at the rebuke. She was not fit to be a duchess, and they both knew it. Her lips began to throb, unused to the kiss. Her first kiss from him. She had wondered if she would enjoy his attentions. It seemed she had found her answer.

“Look at me, Violet,” he said quietly, coldly.

She raised her face, unwillingly. The outburst was over, and the man of stone was back.

“Never do something so foolish again,” he warned. “And never go off alone. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, your grace,” she whispered.

“Good. Follow me,” he said grimly.

It was a silent ride back to the house. Violet didn’t speak as Alex

dismounted, then helped her down himself. He spoke sharply to the hostler who had come running out—it was the same boy who had saddled Violet's horse an hour ago.

The reprimand Alex offered was delivered in a perfectly normal tone of voice, but the boy looked as if he'd just been screamed at for allowing a murder to occur.

"It wasn't his fault," Violet said, as loudly as she dared. "He offered and I refused."

Alex didn't even turn back to her.

"The safety of the duchess is the duty of everyone who works on the estate. I should sack you," he said to the boy.

"Please don't," Violet said. "He is not to blame."

The duke paused, tense. The boy was terrified, his eyes flicking back and forth between them.

Then Alex shrugged. "See that she doesn't ride alone again."

"Yes, your grace!" the boy said quickly.

Violet rushed inside the house and up to her bedroom immediately, unable to stay and look her husband in the face. She was still burning with embarrassment over her own reprimand. She wanted to say something to him, but if she opened her mouth, absolutely nothing would come out. It never did when Violet was nervous. She would try to speak, she'd say nothing, and he'd be even more disappointed in her than before.

Perhaps if she wrote her thoughts down, it would help. Violet picked up a pen, then immediately put it down again. She was in too much turmoil to write down anything coherent. She had to settle her mind before she saw Alex again, or she'd surely say something she'd regret as soon as she managed to get a word out.

What had he told her? Oh yes. *You are my duchess now, and you cannot scurry about like a country mouse.* She was a mouse. Quiet all day, overlooked by everyone, and only up at night, when the rest of the world slept. Not at all what the duke thought he was purchasing.

But even if she was not a proper duchess at the moment, she

could learn. Violet could learn anything if she put her mind to it. If she could calculate the paths of comets, she could certainly master whatever esoteric skills being a duchess required. She could be hostess for a party. She could meet with the village's matrons. She could see what Dunmere Abbey needed.

And she could be a proper wife to the duke, in time. Perhaps Alex would never love her, or even like her. But he'd tolerate her as long as she fulfilled her obligations.

Violet sat on the edge of the bed, thinking of one specific obligation. At some point, she'd have to say the words she dreaded.

"You may come to my room tonight," she whispered out loud, trying the words. That was the phrase a lady told her husband, according to Aunt Judith. Of course, Judith immediately added that a husband could legally do whatever he wanted to his wife, short of killing her, and no one would raise a fuss. So the words might not mean much in reality.

Then again, Alex did say he'd wait, and he didn't enter her room last night, so perhaps he was being sincere. All the same, Violet wasn't sure she'd ever have the courage to say the words, especially if it meant inviting attention like the kiss of that afternoon. Her lips still hurt, and Alex only held her for a moment.

It was all too much to consider. Violet summoned Dalby to dress her for dinner. "Maybe the dark blue dress," Violet suggested. "If I'm going to face my old family and my new family again tonight, at least it will be in my most modern outfit."

"Yes, ma'am," Dalby said. "A shame you won't fit into that suit of armor down in the main foyer."

Violet smiled, happy she had at least one ally here. "Not this time, Dalby. I should be safe as long as Judith doesn't come to dinner with a sword."

Chapter 7

9

ALEX WATCHED AS VIOLET FLED into the house from the front courtyard, and he couldn't fault her for it, not after what he'd done to her. Alex didn't even think about what he was doing. He just grabbed her, as if that could somehow keep a curse from taking her away. The next thing he knew he was looking at wide, warm brown eyes still stunned by his outburst, and saw how red her mouth was after he kissed her. His first instinct was to kiss her again, softly, to make up for the first, but he knew it would do no good. His wife feared him, and it was entirely his fault.

Thus, when he returned to the house himself, his mood was as dark as most rumors suggested. The first people he encountered, unfortunately, were the Peakes. Alex saw them arguing in low tones as they stood in the small ground floor library. Irritation welled up in him. If they had been more honest with Violet, none of this would be happening. Mrs Peake had angled hard for the marriage, stressing Violet's noble lineage, her biddability, and Alex's own desperation. She'd used the rumors to wring out several concessions that would have no place in a typical marriage agreement. And yet she kept Violet in the dark for her own convenience.

Alex took a deeper breath, then strode into the room.

Mrs Peake saw him and immediately gave a little curtsey. "Why, good afternoon, your grace."

Her bleary-eyed husband looked as if he might not be sober enough to bow without falling over, but Alex ignored him. Mrs Peake was the one who held the reins in their relationship.

“Get out,” he told her.

“What?” Mrs Peake asked, blinking in confusion. “Do you require the room?”

“Not the room. The house. I want you gone in one hour.”

She gasped indignantly. “We’re not prepared to leave.”

“I suggest you remedy that, because in one hour you’ll both be seated in a coach leaving the estate, prepared or not.”

“You truly expect us to go home so soon?” she asked.

“You can go anywhere you like,” said Alex. “I can’t begin to describe how little I care where you end up, so long as it isn’t here. Fetch what you need. I’ll direct the servants to pack up the remainder and send it via another coach. You now have less than an hour.”

“Your grace, I don’t think you understand—”

“I will give you one hundred pounds when you enter the coach,” he said coolly, watching Mrs Peake’s expression change. Mr Peake gave a strange snort that might have been a laugh.

Without further comment, Mrs Peake hauled her husband from where he was standing and left the room.

Alex was true to his word. He issued instructions to the major-domo, and the Peakes were helped efficiently and enthusiastically by several of the household staff.

They were ushered into a waiting coach precisely fifty-five minutes after Alex’s pronouncement. He handed Mrs Peake several folded notes. “Safe travels,” he said shortly. “You may expect the other coach with your items to arrive one day after you do.”

He shut the door before either Peake could reply. The coachman drove off with commendable speed, and Alex watched with no small satisfaction as the vehicle disappeared down the lane.

It was as if a plague was lifted from the house. At least that was

one problem solved. With luck, he would never have to see that couple again. He glanced up at the brooding façade of the Abbey, wondering if he should have notified Violet so she could bid her family goodbye. Then he remembered last night's dinner and shrugged. Violet might feel a duty to see them off, but he didn't like the idea of her even interacting with the Peakes any longer. If she was upset about it, he'd simply add it to the ever-lengthening list of things he needed to apologize for.

Alex didn't seek Violet out again until dinner. It took that long to get all his emotions under control. He paced in his study, hearing her accusation over and over. *Do you only care that the ton will start gossiping about your curse again...?* Those were her words, and the worst of it was that it was partly true. He couldn't stand the idea of the gossips giving his name yet another round. But more than that, he knew how dangerous Violet's ride had been. The woods of the Abbey were unpredictable after heavy rains. The rocky soil along the gullies could collapse without warning, carrying a horse and rider into a stream, or down a slope, knocking a person unconscious. She couldn't know that, but one wrong step... He shuddered at the image of Violet lying broken on the ground. How could he bury yet another wife?

After a time, he regained his customary calm. He dressed for dinner and sought out Violet, after learning from a maid that she was in the library. He found her deep in a book, although she had changed into her evening gown before she started reading. The dark blue of the outfit emphasized her porcelain skin, and the very modern cut of the bodice definitely got his attention. It was perfectly ladylike, but still alluring. All that skin... Again, he regretted his thoughtless kiss from that afternoon.

"Good evening, Violet. May I take you in to dinner?" he asked formally, striving to forget his heated words from earlier that day.

Violet also seemed eager to forget, since she smiled at him when she raised her head from the book, laying it carefully aside.

"Why, yes, your grace." She rose gracefully and took his arm.

"I want to apologize," he said before they started for the dining room. "I scared you this afternoon. That wasn't my intention."

Violet nodded, saying, "I know. It was most irresponsible of me to ride in an unfamiliar place, especially alone. I'm very sorry to have worried you."

Had she just turned the tables and apologized to *him*? Arguing with Violet might be a challenge. He liked a challenge.

He said, "I'll take you on a tour. It's your home now. You should know it."

"Thank you. I look forward to it."

He frowned. This reconciliation was going too easily. He was also distracted by her outfit. Lovely as it was, something was wrong about it. But what?

"I am intrigued by that ruin on the other side of the lake," she went on. "I saw it up close today, but the door was locked."

"The folly. Yes. It's not a ruin—it's just designed to look that way. There's a room on the upper floor."

"Oh, is there?" she asked, interest in her voice.

"Yes. You can see quite a distance from it." He looked at her. "That's really the purpose of the folly. The view."

"I would very much like to see it for myself," Violet said.

"Easily done. I'll take you there on the tour. Tomorrow."

"That would be wonderful." She smiled fully at him now, making him realize her earlier greeting was forced.

All the same, he found himself smiling back. Violet appeared to have forgiven him. Perhaps he could start over.

They arrived in the dining room, and Alex led Violet to her seat, determined to behave as properly as possible to make up for his beastly behavior that day. As he looked at his wife across the table, something niggling detail caught him again. What was *wrong* with her appearance?

Millie and Herbert were seated as well, and Alex signaled the

butler to begin serving.

"Shouldn't we wait for the Peakes?" Herbert asked.

"They left this afternoon," Alex said shortly.

Violet looked up. "They did? I thought Aunt Judith would never—" She broke off.

Alex gave her a brief, slightly bitter smile. "Nevertheless, they left today."

"What good news," said Millie bluntly. "I suppose I'm too young for champagne."

"You're almost too young to sit at this table for dinner," Alex warned. "Particularly if you speak like that about houseguests."

"However hideous they may be," Violet added with surprising candor. She nodded to Alex. "Whatever you did, thank you."

That dinner was the first time Alex noticed something like natural grace from Violet. She spoke of little things, such as potential visits to and from neighbors, and asked about his plans for the estate. After her comment about her aunt, everything about her was calm and exceedingly polite. Was the removal of her family all it took? Alex could have simply paid a hundred pounds weeks ago and had Violet shipped over. He laughed to himself over the absurd thought. But all through dinner, something still bothered Alex about Violet's appearance. What was it?

After the meal, the family moved to the parlor. Herbert said he would teach Millie the intricacies of a few card games to ready her for such events when she joined society. It was plain he wanted Alex and Violet to remain apart, so they could talk and get to know each other better.

Violet refused an offer of wine, saying she'd have tea instead.

"Because of your uncle?" Alex asked, not wishing to circle around the subject.

"Partly," Violet admitted, her eyes downcast. "But I also find that wine doesn't agree with me at all."

"So no champagne toasts for you," he said.

She looked him shrewdly. "You paid her, didn't you? To leave the house."

"I did. A bargain at one hundred pounds."

Violet sighed. "Dear Lord."

"I suggest not thinking of it again," Alex said.

"I shall heed your advice, your grace," she said with a sad little smile.

Alex liked that she was honest enough to discuss it, and willing to put it aside. In fact, he liked her quite a lot more than he did only a day ago. If things kept progressing at this pace, he'd fall in love with her before the week was out.

And that was something Alex had no intention of doing. He'd treat her well, and he wouldn't mind her companionship. But whenever Alex fell in love, death tended to follow.

Not that he'd tell Violet that, of course. He kept chatting with her, trying to keep the conversation safe. But he was also now close enough to her to smell hints of soap and lavender off her skin, which was a little distracting. All that skin. All that bare skin above the edge of the gown.

Then he knew what was missing. "You're incomplete," he said, enlightened.

"Excuse me?" Violet's eyes widened over her teacup.

"You're not wearing any jewelry."

"Well, I don't have much," Violet said, putting the cup back down.

"What do you mean?" How could it be possible for his duchess to have no jewels? "You mean nothing you had suited?"

"Not for this gown. I do have pearls, but I didn't like the look of them with this. I have my locket, and a few rings, mostly from my mother." Embarrassed, she gave a little laugh. "As you may have guessed, what money Aunt Judith controls is only spent on necessities...as she defines them."

"That will not do. Come with me." Alex rose, catching the at-

tention of Herbert and Millie. "I'm going to show Violet something, and then we'll be back. Millie, why not tune your harp in the meantime?"

Alex led the way to his study, the same room where he first spoke to Violet privately. It was also where he kept the family heirlooms in a safe. Violet trailed along behind him, her curiosity evident.

He opened the safe with his own key, and removed a large box from it. "There should be something in here that will suffice until I can get you get your own jewels. Try this." He handed her a necklace.

Violet took it with considerably more care than he displayed. Diamonds lay in a glittering strand, accented by a large sapphire every two inches. Fastening it carefully around her neck, she walked to the mirror hanging on the side wall. The sapphires echoed the blue in the dress perfectly.

"They're beautiful," she said.

"They'll do," he agreed, secretly well pleased with the result. Violet would be a picture perfect duchess, if only she'd learn to stand up for herself.

"Is it too much?" she asked, plucking at the necklace.

Moving toward her, he reached out to adjust the stones lying on her breastbone, touching her skin, which felt exactly as soft as he imagined it would.

"*Too much* is not a term you'll be using as my duchess," he said.

"As you say, your grace." Violet lowered her eyes and looked away.

Alex lowered his hand to take hers, but he immediately noticed how tense her whole body was. Over the whole evening, she'd been projecting an aura of calm she didn't feel.

He stepped back, wondering if his nearness was making her even more nervous than usual. *Cursed*, he thought, unable to block the word from his brain.

Violet noticed the change in mood. "Shall we go back down?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes. Follow me," he said, his grim mood returning.

"Should I not..." She choked on the words, but her hands flew up to the necklace.

"Keep it on. I gave it to you to wear, Violet. What the hell am I going to do with it?"

They rejoined Herbert and Millie in the parlor, but Alex felt cold the whole time. Violet sat by him, and most people would have said she seemed at ease. But she kept touching the necklace nervously, and smoothing down the skirt of her dress. She didn't want to be near him at all.

She excused herself after Millie finished her last song, and cast an uncertain look at Alex before she left.

He went to his study for a little while, and then after the rest of the house was quiet, he went up to his room, though he wasn't sleepy in the least.

Despite the late hour, he again saw the light in Violet's room from under the connecting door.

He knocked lightly. As soon as he did, he wished he hadn't. Perhaps she'd simply fallen asleep while a lamp remained on. Perhaps he was the last person she wished to see.

But then the door opened. Violet stood there, now in a dressing gown, with her hair down and merely tied back with a ribbon. He instantly wanted to touch it.

"Oh. I didn't expect you," she said.

"Who else?" he responded.

"Well, nobody, considering the hour...and the door." A little smile pulled at the corner of her mouth after she said it.

"I saw the light on," he explained. "You're obviously awake. You were up late last night as well. Is something wrong?"

She shook her head quickly. "No. I'm just, ah, acclimating, I suppose. It's quite different from where I used to live."

"You're sure? You're not ill?" Alex didn't like the tension wrapping around his chest. "If you're unwell..."

"It's not a cause for concern," she said. "I just have a different schedule."

"Will you be too out of sorts to ride tomorrow?"

Her expression brightened. "No, no. I want to see the estate. Truly."

"All right," he said, uncomfortably aware that he was hovering at his wife's door. "Get some sleep."

"You do the same," she said. "I wasn't the only person awake last night, or this one."

She smiled sweetly at him as she closed the door. So she'd noticed. Alex wasn't sure if he was pleased or not.

Chapter 8



VIOLET DID NOT SLEEP WELL, but she rose earlier than usual in anticipation of the tour, and summoned Dalby to help her dress. She thought she was early. However, when she arrived in the breakfast room, she found Alex already there, sipping coffee.

“Good morning,” she said. “I see I slept later than I ought to.”

“Not at all. We’re not in any sort of hurry,” he said. “Did you sleep well after all?”

“I was...restless,” she said, uncertainly. Restless wasn’t really the correct word, but how else could she describe the wakeful hours and strange, barely remembered dreams that marked so many of her nights. Eventually, people would know that her sleep pattern had nothing to do with adjusting to life at Dunmere Abbey. It was simply how Violet lived.

Alex was surveying her carefully, but didn’t say anything more about it. “Perhaps some breakfast will help set you to rights.”

“Coffee will certainly help,” she said.

She helped herself to some bread and jam from the sideboard, but discovered that Alex already poured her some coffee from the silver carafe near his place.

“Oh, thank you,” Violet said. She sat and immediately drained the cup.

Wordlessly, Alex slid the carafe across the table. She looked up

to see him hiding a smile.

"I like coffee," she said, feeling a bit defensive.

"Yes, I can see that. You might wish to tell Mrs Simpson—that's the housekeeper—to increase the next order."

Violet, who had just poured a second cup, felt a heat creeping up her neck. "I don't mean to be extravagant."

"If that's your definition of extravagant, then I have no fears on that account. Drink as much coffee as you like. There will always be more."

His casual tone reminded her of just how different her life would be in his house. Judith had always been so mean about finances, parceling out pennies only when she absolutely had to. Alex appeared not to think of money at all.

"Is this your customary hour for breakfast?" she asked. "I don't wish to disturb the schedule of the house."

"The house meets my...*our* schedules. And, yes, I generally rise early. I've never understood the attraction of dozing until noon."

"Ah." Violet's embarrassment didn't fade. He wouldn't think much of her own schedule.

"That reminds me of something," he said. "I've made arrangements for you to get fitted for a suitable wardrobe. The modiste will come tomorrow."

Violet guessed most of her own clothes would be inadequate for the sort of image a duchess ought to project. "That will be most appreciated."

"Doubtless you know what you like, but be sure you select several evening gowns. I am afraid we will both be victims of the ton whenever we go to town for the remainder of the Season."

"You don't sound thrilled," Violet observed.

"Society rarely thrills me. But I have a duty, and everyone will want to meet the new Duchess of Dunmere."

"What does thrill you?" she asked.

Alex glanced at her rather sharply.

"I thought we were meant to know each other better. Shouldn't I learn about your interests?" she said nervously, when he did not reply.

Then he nodded. "I'm interested in the Abbey, as you'll learn today. I'll probably tell you far too much about it."

Violet was happy to have found something he was willing to share. "I want to hear everything."

"You say that now," he warned. But he smiled at her, and Violet felt a little flutter in her stomach. Alex looked like a whole different person when he smiled.

They both mounted up and were soon riding away from the house. Alex stayed close to Violet and kept the horses' pace relatively slow. He told her some of the history of the Abbey, which had been seized during the time when many church lands were taken during the tumult of the Reformation. The Kenyon who had supported the king's efforts at the time was rewarded with the gift of the estate now known as Dunmere Abbey.

"There are many ruins and old villages still here on the land," Alex said, when they crested a hill and could look at part of the estate from that vantage point. "In some ways, little has changed, even after all this time."

"It's beautiful," said Violet. "I wonder that you would leave it for London at all."

He shrugged. "It's rarely by choice."

"But you're duke," she pointed out. "Who compels you to go?"

His expression went cold, making Violet wary. "It doesn't concern you, Violet. And you would not find it interesting in the least."

She wanted to protest that it did concern her, or else she would not have asked. But she remembered her intention to become a proper duchess, which of course would require graciousness.

"I understand, your grace," she said, keeping her voice even. "I'll not ask again."

He sighed, looking off at the land below. "What interests you,

Violet?"

After the previous exchange, she was surprised he would ask, and she wasn't sure how to answer. For some reason, she felt too shy to mention her love of stargazing. He'd think it silly. "I like... being outside. This morning has been quite enjoyable. I spent most of my time out of doors in fact, when I lived with my aunt and uncle. And when that was not possible, I had books. I read quite a lot."

"So you stayed outside of your relatives' home when you could, and when you were forced to stay inside, you read so you would not have to speak to them," Alex rephrased.

"I...I would not put it like that," Violet said, blushing again.

"But you don't deny it."

"I don't like lying," she admitted.

Alex actually smiled at that. "Violet, I think we'll get along after all."

"Yes, your grace," she agreed.

"Call me Alex."

"Yes...Alex," she said. It was the first time she said his name.

He twitched the reins. "Well, let's keep on." He glanced down just as he was about to move forward, and pointed. "Watch out so you don't crush the snake."

"The what?" Violet followed his finger to where a snake slithered its way over a flat rock. Fear twitch up her spine. "I can't..."

He hadn't noticed her reaction yet. "Must be warmer than I thought, for it to come out for the sunshine so early in the year."

"Make it go away, please," Violet said tightly, feeling as if she were nine years old again. "Please."

Alex finally looked over at her. "It's harmless, Violet. Just a grass snake. Keeps the mice down."

"I don't care. I hate snakes."

"Really? Why? Were you bitten by one?"

She shivered at the thought. "No. I just...I've always been

scared of them.”

Alex moved close enough to take the reins of her own horse for a moment. She let him lead both horses away from where the little dark green snake was sunning itself. Violet turned her head to keep watching it. What if it suddenly followed her?

“You know it’s harmless,” he said again. “And you’re a few feet above it. On horseback.”

“I never said it was rational,” Violet tried to explain, at last feeling the distance was enough that she could look at Alex once more.

His expression was concerned. “Are you all right? We could go back.”

“No,” Violet said, feeling foolish. “I’m sorry. I want to see more of the estate. And you promised to show me the folly.”

“So I did. Follow me.” He led her down the hill, both horses moving into a canter across the wide meadow at the base.

They passed by the lake, the waters now blue, and the fringe of ice even narrower.

“There are swans in summer,” he said. “They should return any week now. It’s the best way to know spring is coming.”

Violet thought swans would fit perfectly into the scene. They were as aloof and noble as Alex was.

A few moments later, they reached the odd structure Violet noticed before.

Alex dismounted, striding to her horse to assist her. Violet was acutely aware of his hands as he took her by the waist. Once her feet were firmly on the ground, his touch lingered for a moment, and Violet felt a little shiver that was oddly pleasant.

He offered his arm to her before they started to the door, saying, “The Abbey was so large at one point that they built little cells for the brothers so they could escape the bustle of the main building and pray quietly. Most have completely vanished by now, but one of my predecessors ordered this folly built with the same idea in mind—not that a monk would get a tower. But it’s a place sort

of separate from the world.”

Even up close, it looked like the ruins of a very old building. Only the well-mortared walls and the newness of the wood frames of the door and windows revealed it as an imitation.

Alex unlocked the door with a key he held.

“Do you fear vagrants?” Violet asked.

He smiled. “No. Dunmere Abbey must be one of the safest places in England. I’m not sure why there’s even a lock on it. Privacy for contemplation, perhaps.”

He stepped through the open doorway, and drew Violet in after him.

A staircase wound up along the outer wall. At the first landing, there was another door, which led to a small room. Violet peeked in.

“Oh!” She was delighted. “This is darling.”

In one corner, there was a small brazier, the sort that burned coal rather than wood. Near it was a teakwood desk, small but heavy. On the other side of the brazier was a sort of bed or couch frame, though there was no mattress or pillows.

“It’s dirty,” Alex noted apologetically. “I can’t remember the last time I was in here. Years ago.”

“It’s a little untidy, but that’s easily remedied. It’s very charming.”

There was a balcony, not visible from the lake side. Violet stepped out of the double doors to view the land beyond. The meadows past the lake rolled away toward a wood, and then down to a wide valley. In the far distance, she saw a ridge of hills. And above, there was only sky. She could put her telescope right out on the balcony and stargaze to her heart’s content. “Oh, this is perfect.”

“Do you like it?”

“I want to live here!”

“You do live here,” he pointed out gently.

"No, *here*, here in this little room! I would sleep in that corner. And the desk just needs a chair and lamp. And the balcony—it would just be stars and moonlight, night after night."

"What if it's cloudy?"

"Then I will read."

"Do you want to see the upper level?"

She absolutely did. "There's more?"

"Follow me."

He led her up the winding steps again. He opened the hatch door in the ceiling, and then both of them were standing on the top level, which was just an open space, perhaps fifteen feet across at its widest point.

"I'm sure this was why the folly was really built," said Alex. "The view."

Violet spun around slowly, taking in the whole panorama. The bulk of the Abbey rose on the other side of the lake, and the sky arched overhead. The wall came to about waist height—enough to protect someone from falling, but not too high to inhibit the view.

"I was wrong before," said Violet. "*This* is perfect." She looked directly up at the thin clouds stretching across the heavens.

"So you like it," he said.

"I adore it. Can I come back some day?"

"Any day." He held the key out.

"Truly?" She reached for the key, but he quickly enclosed her hand in his.

"One small condition," he said.

"What's that?"

"The price of the key is a kiss."

Violet felt the key pressed between their palms. "Oh."

"Not like yesterday's," he said quickly. "Yesterday was a mistake."

"It was?" she asked. The flutter in her stomach was there again.

"Yes. Let me make up for it."

Violet nodded, rather flummoxed by his request. "All right. I think so."

He reached out to touch her face. He bent then, his lips touched hers, and she forgot to think at all.

Violet warmed when he kissed her. He wrapped a hand around the back of her neck, the other threading through her hair. She didn't notice, lost in the exquisite feeling, so different from the harsh kiss before. No, this kiss melted her. She leaned into it, craving more.

Alex deepened the kiss slowly, and she was quite content to let him. But when he slipped his other arm around her, drawing her closer, Violet stiffened, pulled away from the kiss. "That's enough."

"Just a kiss," he murmured against her mouth.

"And what will it become?" she asked, gasping when he moved his lips to her neck, sending shivers down her body.

"Something more." He kissed her again.

She felt her body react to him, molding itself to his. But part of her still held back. "I just can't yet. I'm sorry."

He broke off the kiss, pulling himself away from her. "What are you afraid of?"

"Alex, I..." The words froze up in her throat. Violet tried to speak, but couldn't. She still barely knew him. She wasn't anything like the duchess he needed her to be. And she had no idea what she was doing. "Give me time. You said you would."

"I did," he agreed tonelessly.

She struggled to get the words out of her mouth. "I'll learn how to be a duchess. I will. But I'm not... I can't..." Violet's throat closed. She felt like she was choking. A hostile audience always did that, and Alex's expression could only be described as hostile now.

He let go of her hand, leaving the key with her.

* * * *

Violet rode back with Alex, but then didn't see him for the rest

of the day. Dinner was largely a failure. Herbert and Millie tried to carry on normally, but Alex was distant and distracted. Violet kept as quiet as possible, feeling as out of place as she had the first day.

Violet stayed awake most of the night. She read a pamphlet from the Royal Academy of Natural Sciences on the topic of recent phenomena sighted in the heavens, and then tried to decide if she had sighted one of those things herself. Someday, she'd like to be mentioned in a pamphlet as the discoverer of a comet or a nova. Even if she was a woman, she was a duchess now. Would that allow her to publish? Or would it be even more shocking? Violet didn't know, then assumed the worst, and as a result she was miserable when she finally dropped off to sleep.

Dalby woke her at eleven. A tray stood nearby, with both toast and coffee. Dalby dressed her in a loose-fitting morning gown, meant for days without formal company.

Downstairs, Violet found only Millie in the parlor. She was dressed in black again, and she was reading from a volume of poetry.

"Good morning," Violet said.

"Oh, hello," said Millie, glancing up. "So Dalby wasn't exaggerating. You do sleep on in the mornings."

"I stay awake quite late," Violet said. "Do you happen to know where Alex is? I'd like to speak to him."

Millie put the book down. "Oh, he's gone off to London."

"He has?" Violet asked, surprised and oddly perturbed. "He said nothing about it."

"He never does. This happens all the time. He gets a sealed letter, and then he flies off to London as though the devil were at his heels."

For someone who claimed that he didn't like London, he was certainly happy to go there at the least provocation. "What could possibly require someone of his rank to obey such a summons?" Violet asked, hoping that Millie would prove more forthcoming

than her guardian. "Is he active in politics?"

"Oh, no. He claims it's personal business."

Violet tried not to think of one very plausible explanation for what constituted personal business. A mistress. She said casually, "And you've no notion of what it might be?"

"Not the slightest. It's been going on for years," Millie added. "I asked about it once or twice, and Alex told me it was nothing for a young lady to know about, and then he sent me to my room."

"Ah." Something stung Violet's heart. What else but a mistress, then?

She walked to the window, uncertain of what unwanted duchesses did in their spare time.

"Don't forget!" Millie said then. "The modiste is coming. Alex said you required a suitable wardrobe."

"I do indeed."

"May I join you for the fitting?" Millie asked, suddenly sounding shy. "I'd like to see the new designs. I never get to see what the ladies are actually wearing in the city."

Violet agreed to that readily, thinking that it would be pleasant to have someone around.

As it turned out, Violet had less spare time than she expected. Both the majordomo and the housekeeper wanted to speak to her, and Violet soon discovered that Dunmere Abbey was aching for the opinions of a lady.

"His grace never bothers about such things," the housekeeper confessed over a discussion of potential dinners. "But now that you're here, no doubt the Abbey will have more callers and you'll be hosting events, just as it used to be. The Abbey has been too quiet."

Violet did her best to answer the staff's questions, all the time feeling that she was not adequately prepared to take over the administration of the estate—though, of course, the household ran perfectly well before she ever arrived. But she did get the sense that

most of them were happy the duke was no longer alone.

She sorted through some letters and invitations sent by neighbors, who had already heard of the wedding and sent congratulations. "Despite not being invited themselves," Violet murmured to herself. A small entertainment might be a good way to dip her toe in the waters of duchessing. A tea for the closest neighbors, perhaps.

A maid summoned her to her sitting room when the modiste arrived. Millie was already there, looking through renderings of new gowns and items that were most fashionable that year.

Fortunately, the modiste was an old hand at this business, and Violet more or less allowed the woman to do whatever was needed. She chose styles and colors that appealed to her, but she knew that it was better to let an expert work unencumbered.

Between measurements and fabric selections, Violet used her time with Millie to ask about Alex.

"Millie, can you tell me about the duke's previous marriages? I don't mean to pry..."

"It's not prying, Violet. He should have told you himself," Millie added with a huff.

"What happened? From the beginning?"

"He married for the first time to a Lady Catherine, who he knew quite well. I was only a baby and not living here yet, but I've heard the stories from Uncle Herbert and others. He was nineteen, I think, and she was about the same age, because it was her first Season when he proposed. They were married in September, and seemed quite happy. But Catherine died in childbirth, along with the child. It was less than a year after the wedding."

"He must have loved her, to marry so soon."

"I don't know," Millie admitted. "They said he was infatuated with her, and she with him, but perhaps that's only time talking. Anyway, he spent a year in mourning. But he was young, and rich, so he was still a catch on the marriage mart. Two years after Lady

Catherine's death, he married again, this time to a very different type of woman. He was twenty-two by that point. The girl was only eighteen. They didn't get on well. Some lively fights, according to those who were around. Marianne had a temper when she didn't get her way. She also hated the Abbey. She insisted on spending as much time in town as possible. But Alex loves this estate, so sometimes he would send her to London and remain behind."

Millie then clapped her hands together. "Oh, that's a lovely gown you've got on now!" She told the modiste to have one made for her as well. "But in the black silk, please."

"Why do you wear black so often when you're not in mourning?" Violet asked her.

"I just like it," Millie said. "It goes better with my poetry."

Violet tried not to laugh, and then recalled that she was still in the dark about Alex's history. "So you were discussing Marianne."

"Oh, yes." Millie's face grew serious again. "One day, they had a huge row. Marianne stormed out of the house and took her horse for a long ride. She did that from time to time, and by that point Alex refused to chase after her. He just let her come to her senses on her own. Well, she didn't come home that evening, so he finally went in search of her—accompanied by all the men in the household. He was certain she was staying away to needle him further."

"And they found her?"

"Not until the morning. She was in the river downstream of the estate. Mind you, all this is just what I was told. They never knew if it was an accident, or if she drowned herself..."

Or perhaps murder, Violet thought. The duke rode out in the evening, after all. Maybe he *had* found her. Then she shook herself. She was being unfair, just like the gossips. And that did explain Alex's reaction when *she* went off riding on her first day at the Abbey. Of course he'd fear a repeat of the past.

"But he had a third wife," Violet recalled.

"Yes. Several years passed since Marianne's death. He didn't

want anything to do with wives after her. But he was still going to become duke, and an heir is expected. His mother lives in Bath now, did Alex tell you that? She'd have come to the wedding, but she hates to travel. Anyway, he married again, mostly because his parents begged him to. Lady Virginia."

"And what happened to her?"

Millie went on with some reluctance. "After Marianne's death was when some people started talking about a curse. They said the Abbey was haunted. *Some* said—" Millie paused, glanced at the modiste, then shrugged. "Some said Alex killed her in a rage." The accusations clearly bothered Millie. She went on, "Virginia heard some of the earlier rumors, unfortunately, and she believed them. Or seemed to. Alex was careful approaching that marriage. He spent a long time with her, getting to know her—"

"Good of him," Violet couldn't stop herself from saying.

Millie shook her head, remembering that he had not done so with Violet. "He liked her well enough. But she changed after the wedding. She became strange and moody. She took sick, but I think she wanted to die. Or she thought she was destined to die. She wasted away. She wouldn't even eat at the end."

"And then he chose me," Violet said.

"Not for years after Virginia."

"Did he ask anyone else?"

"I don't think so," Millie said.

Because he was afraid of the answer, Violet completed the unspoken statement. Until she came along, too ignorant and sheltered to question his interest in her. So he married his first wife for love. The next, for hope. The third for duty, and now her. Why had he married her...desperation?

* * * *

Over the next several days, Violet settled into a certain routine at Dunmere Abbey. Alex's continued, unexplained absence was a

little hurtful, true, but it also gave her room to breathe. In between the many small duties she inherited as duchess, and the social calls people began to pay her, Violet also found time to set up the folly.

She ordered the building cleaned out and aired. As soon as the servants declared the folly fit for a duchess, Violet directed them to move several items into the main room, including a comfortable chair, some crates of books, and other items to make the space livable. The housekeeper had a few of the maids sew and stuff a new mattress for the built-in bed, and Violet spent a pleasant hour unpacking and rearranging books to fill the little bookshelves.

Millie came with her once or twice, curious to see the changes. "Is there anything better than unpacking a box of books?" the younger girl asked. "I don't think there is."

"Reading a book, perhaps?"

"Maybe," she said, "But there's something even better about deciding which one you'll read next." Millie paged through several of the astronomy books. "I say, you could do with more poetry. These are all pretty dull."

"A matter of taste," Violet said, unperturbed by the critique.

Finally, she carried the telescope case to the folly herself, as well as her special lantern.

"But there's already a lamp there, your grace," said one maid, as Violet left the house. "Brand new, and crystal clear."

"Thank you, I shall use it when I'm at the desk. But this lamp is particularly important." The chimney was made of red-tinted glass rather than clear. When it was the only light source, it was far less harsh to the eyes, and Violet could read by its light and then immediately look through her scope without fearing night blindness.

Violet opened the telescope case and carefully unpacked the telescope. It was a gift from her father. Along with the lantern, it was almost the last thing he gave her that seemed to be offered from the heart, before he'd descended into the madness that ended his life. Violet cherished it.

She was delighted when everything was set up to her specifications. All her stargazing equipment was in place, and she had her books and extra coal if the nights should be cool. The bed had a pillow and blankets if she decided to take a nap during the night. She could set the scope up on the balcony or the top floor. It could not be better if she designed it herself.

“I don’t believe in fate,” she murmured. “But I could almost believe someone built this place with me in mind.”

Chapter 9

9

WHEN CHATTAN SENT A LETTER to Dunmere Abbey, a few days after the wedding, Alex seized the chance to escape. He marveled at how that quiet slip of a girl managed to completely upend his life, just by existing. If only he knew a thing about her...but of course, he'd muddled that up already.

At least he understood murder. Alex went to the Zodiac's building as soon as he could. Chattan welcomed him inside the office. She wasn't alone this time. A boy sat in one of the chairs, kicking his feet at the rungs. When Alex entered, he stood up eagerly.

"This is Rook," Chattan said. She put her hand on the boy's shoulder. "One of the Disreputables."

"Rook?" Alex asked, thinking he'd misheard.

"Philip, really," the boy said. "But I've been called Rook for years. Long story." He was rail thin, and around twelve years old, but with an expression that seemed far older. A life on the streets tended to do that to even the most innocent of children.

Chattan said, "Rook's here because he knows about an earlier death that matches the one you're looking into. A homeless man was killed during the night in January. When the body was found, it was next to a symbol drawn in blood." She pointed to a rendering of the symbol, one that looked just like the sign for Capricorn.

"I knew him," Rook said. "He didn't have a place to sleep most nights, but I saw him here and there. He never hurt anybody."

"Do you know his name?"

"Mr Lyle. He said his Christian name was Randolphus. He'd been a sailor. Full of stories."

Rook explained how the body had been found, stretched out on the front steps of a church still under construction. The bloody sign painted next to the body was assumed to be a random scrawl. "No one thought it had meaning—until the right people looked at it and recognized it." The boy looked at Chattan as he spoke, clearly impressed with her.

"A few newspapers reported on it," Chattan added, "but only that it was a particularly gruesome death—you know how sensational newspapers are."

"I certainly do," Alex said. He tended not to read newspapers himself, having seen his own name in them too many times. "They are not the first place I'd go for an accurate account."

"Nevertheless, it meant someone was asking questions." Chattan picked up another piece of paper. "I have the names of the journalists here, should you wish to follow up."

From the report Chattan made, both victims died in very similar ways—stabbed in the chest with a knife, and with bruises on the face suggesting that they were held so they couldn't yell for help.

"Exactly when was his body found?" Alex asked.

"The morning of the seventeenth of January, though it's likely he was killed earlier, possibly the night of the fifteenth, to judge by how frozen the body was. But no workmen came to the site on Sunday, and Lyle was only discovered on Monday."

"Why kill a man like Lyle?" Alex asked. "What could a street beggar have done to attract a murderer?"

"He might have seen something," Rook offered. "Mr Lyle was old, but he was pretty sharp. What if he got the attention of the wrong person?"

“Maybe,” said Alex. “In any case, I’ll have to see where it happened.”

After leaving Chattan, he took Rook along to visit both spots where the bodies were found, hoping for something new. Alex wanted to find other connections to Lyle, but it would be difficult for him to gain the trust of the sort of men Lyle knew.

Rook promised to gather information on his behalf. “Mr Lyle never hurt a soul,” the boy said. “It’s not fair that he was killed by some nutter.”

There was still plenty for Alex to work on regarding both murders. From various authorities in the city of London to the underworld contacts who heard things the authorities never would, bits of information came filtering in. He heard more about James Galbraith’s political leanings, who he tangled with in politics and business, and even some family history. Apparently, Galbraith had an illegitimate son who he tried to raise, though the young man turned to crime and cursed Galbraith’s name.

Alex was the only one who had all the information. He tried to find a pattern in it, but so far, he had only hints.

So what did he know? There were two victims, at minimum. Each was killed roughly one month apart, a fact that seemed ominous, considering the symbols painted near each body. Alex worked at identifying a pattern in the dates of death. He thought at first it was the night of the full moon that tied them together. But only the most recent death actually occurred on the night the moon was full. The other was close to it, but not exact. And something told Alex that his killer would be exact.

The killer himself remained a shadow. Alex knew a few things. He was young enough to have dark hair. He was a larger man than Galbraith had been. He was strong enough to hold and kill someone without causing a struggle. And he wanted them to be found, along with the symbols he left nearby. Unfortunately, that wasn’t nearly enough to go on.

Things began to stagnate. He rattled around his townhouse, a gigantic pile of bricks that was far too large for Alex alone. The servants kept the place running perfectly, which made Alex feel even more superfluous. He announced he would return to Dunmere Abbey. The air of London was getting to him. He needed to go home.

* * * *

Despite her days filling up with various small duties and diversions, Violet felt more alone than ever. Millie frequently provided her with company, and the weather improved, offering more opportunities to walk and ride through the grounds, which were slowly waking up in anticipation of spring. She lived for her long nights under the stars, happy at the folly. But she still felt adrift.

Alex was in London—so he said—and she wondered about him every day he was gone. She knew so little about him that she sometimes thought she'd dreamed the wedding. For the short time they were in the same house, he was alternately angry and kind; distant and cool one moment, then darkly passionate the next. He was the master of the estate, and then gone altogether. Violet had no idea what he thought of her, but she suspected he bitterly regretted his decision to marry her. In any case, by leaving he'd placed a barrier between them.

So she went on alone. She wrote letters to neighbors, then paid a few courtesy calls. She even attended church in the village, hoping that no one would find it odd that she attended alone. Though she met several new people, she felt no less lonely.

One day, when the sun shone brightly and the early March breeze was tantalizingly fresh, Violet was walking through the grounds and found a small graveyard under some trees. The ruins of a chapel stood nearby. This was a long abandoned place, and no one had been buried here for decades.

It was not entirely deserted, however. She found Millie lying on

the fresh green grass of an old grave. The girl's legs were splayed out a bit, revealing slippered feet. Her arms were crossed over her stomach, and her eyes were closed.

"What are you doing?" Violet asked.

Millie answered without opening her eyes. "I'm imagining what it's like to be dead, of course."

"Why?"

The girl held up a slim volume of poetry, which had been lying at her side. "Wordsworth speaks so eloquently of finding repose among nature."

"And are you feeling repose?"

"I did at first. Now I feel a tree root in the small of my back." Millie sat up awkwardly, her black skirts pooled about her.

"Come on up," said Violet. "It's not as warm as it seems. And you'll get dirt all over you if you stay like that."

"No one cares what I look like," Millie grouched. "Until my coming out, I may as well be invisible."

"That is not true," said Violet. "You must have plenty of friends."

"No," said Millie. "There's no one interesting around here. Alex won't let me go to London yet, and there are so many plays I want to see. But he says I'm too young to risk the corrupting influence of the city. As if it's any better in the country, where there's nothing but gossip."

"But the gossip isn't about you."

"Some of it is," Millie said. She glanced sidelong at Violet. "You haven't heard what they say about me?"

"Does it have to do with your penchant for black clothing and graveyards?" Violet asked with a smile.

"No, not that. I mean..." Millie trailed off, then took a breath. "I didn't always live here, you know. I lived in Deal with my parents. But my mother died when I was six, and my father was not much of a father."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Violet said.

"Someone must have written to Alex about it. I've got Kenyon blood, and it reflected badly on the name, I suppose. My drunk father gambling away his money and my dowry when I was so little. How improper! Alex just showed up one day and announced that I'd be moving to Dunmere Abbey. He paid my father some money—told him he could do whatever he liked with it, for good or ill. But he brought me back here as his ward, hired a nurse and teachers and all. I've never been back to Deal. I don't want to either. This is my home now."

Puzzled, Violet said, "There's nothing wrong with that story. You're not responsible for your father's behavior. And it was kind of Alex to take you."

"But they say Alex only took me because I'm his," Millie explained. "His daughter, that is."

Violet blinked in shock. "What?"

"It's not true, of course," Millie said quickly. "I'm my father's daughter—got the Sherwood skull, he always said. And my mother barely knew Alex when they were children. Cousins, you know. Alex was abroad for the whole year before I was born, but does that little fact stop the gossip? No! They say the worst things they can about him, and anyone around him." Millie looked at her. "They'll say things about you, too. Just wait. Something horrible and cruel and utterly laughable, but people will still say it, because it's so salacious to say such things. All the scandal and none of the pain."

"Oh, Millie." Violet wasn't sure what to say. The younger girl suddenly seemed more worldly than her. In many ways, she was. "You must ignore it. Life here is good—let them talk if they want to. If you're happy, then their gossip will eventually be revealed as nonsense."

"I try," said Millie. "I never go to the village anymore. The other girls are beastly to me. But I'm happy here. Alex taking me in was

the best thing to happen to me. I'm sure he regrets doing it every third day, but I try to be better."

"I understand," said Violet, struck by how similar the two ladies actually felt. "Now come back to the house with me. We'll have tea together. It's just about time."

After that, Millie became a sort of ally. Over the next few days, Violet's gowns began to arrive, as well. Every time she got the chance, she wore something different, just to see how it felt. She reveled in the novelty of having such a wardrobe. She appeared at luncheon in a gauzy linen gown with an empire waist and green ribbons at the neckline, feeling quite pretty. But then she ended up dining alone, which took all the joy out of it.

Violet went out to the folly every night after supper, and spent hours tracking something she suspected was a comet, as well as observing a few other phenomena. She even sketched a detailed map of the surface of the moon one night when it was half full. She felt such confidence when she found a star or planet just where her calculation said it would be. And no one bothered her or belittled her about her pastime, which was the most wonderful thing of all.

* * * *

Alex returned home from London on a bright afternoon, when the sky was so blue and clear that it seemed impossible anything bad could happen in the world.

He walked into the main foyer and stopped short. Violet stood at the top of the stairs, wearing a gown the color of the sky he'd just been contemplating. Her soft brown hair was done up in loose curls, and she wore pearls at her throat. Perhaps it was partly due to the fact that he had to look up at her, but the effect was that she seemed almost untouchable. She looked entirely like a duchess.

"Hello, Violet," he said finally.

"So you've returned from London," she said, without a trace of

a welcoming smile. "Is your business there concluded?"

"No," he said, frustrated.

Violet paused, then said in a level voice, "So you'll be going back."

"Inevitably."

"I see."

Alex stood there for a moment, unsure of her mood or in fact the actual meaning under her words. But when he walked up the stairs, she didn't move away. He should say something husbandly, but he was at a loss. Violet seemed more of a stranger than before.

"I'm happy to be back," he said, feeling like an intruder. "And I would like to spend some time with you while I'm here."

Her expression turned a little wary, then curious. "All right," she said. "You could begin by joining me on a few social calls over the next few days. I would appreciate your presence."

He nodded. Alex despised most activities like that, but he could hardly refuse after asking to spend time with her. And her hint about wanting his presence reminded him that one of the reasons he married her was to have a duchess again, partly to make him act more like a duke. He needed to reconnect with the social world around Dunmere Abbey, and joining Violet was the easiest way to do it.

As it turned out, the whole process was not nearly as bad as he remembered. Violet told him where they were going and when. He merely had to be ready to join her in the carriage, and they'd be off to another house or hall for a few hours. Violet had not been idle while he was away. She'd begun correspondence with several local ladies, hosted a tea for a few of them, received callers two afternoons a week, and gone to the church in the village once, in an apparently lovely gown, according to several people who'd seen her there.

In between the visits, Alex and Violet were thrown together, and they inevitably learned a bit more about each other. Violet be-

came more assertive when she learned that Alex would not criticize her as her family had, and she told him a little more about her childhood. But on the subject of her parents, she would say nothing. She was never rude—Violet didn't know how to be rude—but she had a gift for gently deflecting questions.

Alex realized that only when they were at the Harleys' home one afternoon. Harley was the vicar in the village, and he and his wife quietly controlled much of the local society. Mrs Harley asked Violet about her parents, and Alex listened with considerable interest as Violet managed to completely avoid explaining anything about them. She did it so subtly that by the end, Mrs Harley decided she'd really asked about Violet's interest in heading up the committee for the improvement of the village green, which Violet graciously agreed to do.

A rumble of faraway thunder distracted him. "Ah. That may be our signal to return home now."

Harley turned to watch the stormy sky that had captured Alex's attention. "Perhaps you'd better wait it out here instead, your grace. Looks like a nasty cloud. Storms out of season never bode well."

"We only live a short distance away," Violet said, and Alex nodded his agreement. She turned to Mrs Harley. "Thank you for a lovely afternoon. We must have you to dinner soon."

"We should like that, your grace. The Abbey has been quiet too long, I think. It's time to open up again," Mrs Harley said, with a sidelong glance at Alex.

He was more concerned about the sky, though. The Harleys accompanied them to the carriage, again offering to house them until the storm blew over. But Alex was determined, and they were soon off. The horses sensed the sky's mood, and they needed no urging to keep a steady clip.

No matter how fast they went, however, the oncoming storm moved faster. Violet stared fixedly at the roiling, purple-black cloud, wincing whenever a particularly wicked flash of lightning

arced down. The wind whipped across their faces in ever stronger gusts.

"I may have miscalculated this time," Alex muttered. "We'll get wet before we're home." They passed into a small copse of trees growing close to the road. They were like a tunnel of green in the summertime, but now the bare branches tangled into each other, and the black clouds made it as dark as twilight.

"Water we can endure. It's the lightning that worries me," Violet said.

He risked taking his gaze off the track for a moment, concerned at Violet's tone. "I should have left you with the Harleys," he said in apology.

She smiled at him. "Nonsense, I—" She broke off as a great flash of light illuminated the world, followed instantly by a tremendous clap of thunder that deafened them both. Violet screamed as the horses spooked, tearing at the reins.

Alex tried to pull the horses in, but another flash came, this time bringing a long cracking sound with it. He looked up, saw a branch falling, and before he even thought about what he was doing, he pushed Violet, propelling them both out of the carriage.

Cursed. The word flashed into his brain. And then, everything went black.

* * * *

Violet rose from the ground, stunned. She saw a massive tree branch about three feet in front of her. On the other side of it, several feet away, Alex lay on his side.

She stumbled toward him, hardly daring to breathe.

"Alex?"

He didn't respond, so she put her hand on his shoulder and pulled him toward her. He rolled onto his back, and then she saw his face.

The eyepatch he always wore had come off.

A weird pain shot through her when she saw the thick, white scar tissue over the sunken eye socket. She couldn't begin to imagine how it hurt. How did anyone endure such a wound? It seemed impossible.

Before she even knew what she was doing, Violet bent down and kissed Alex's cheek. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. Sorry it happened, sorry she didn't know how to help him, sorry she couldn't fix things. She searched the ground for the patch, finding it not far away. She did her best to put it back on. Alex would not like it if he knew she'd seen his wound.

"Alex," she said, when it was done. "I need you to wake up." She put a hand on his chest. He was breathing. He just wasn't responding.

Violet stood up, looking around helplessly. She couldn't move him. She couldn't leave him. Raindrops began to spatter on the cold ground, unconcerned at their plight.

But they were found only minutes later by a servant returning home from the village. Soon it seemed dozens of people were about, helping them back to the Abbey. Alex didn't wake up at all, and Violet ordered his doctor to be sent for immediately, regardless of the storm. The way the whole household jumped to obey every directive revealed how concerned they were about their master's fate.

Violet repeatedly assured everyone who asked that she was unharmed. True, her side ached from where she hit the ground, and she was chilled from the rain that still lashed at the windows. Dalby saw to it that she got dried off and then dressed her in a new, warm woolen gown. But Violet was only concerned with Alex.

She went to his main bedroom door and knocked. Alex's valet stood there, uncertain as to whether or not to let Violet in.

"Step aside, please," she said, relying on his instinct to obey orders.

He did step aside, and even announced her arrival to Dr Bald-

win.

The doctor was at Alex's bedside, wrapping something around Alex's head. The layers covered his forehead and his missing eye.

"Is he awake?" she asked nervously.

Dr Baldwin turned. "No, your grace. That branch hit him quite a solid blow."

"Can I do anything?"

He shook his head. "We must wait for him to regain consciousness. It is possible he suffered the sort of wound that will leave him in a coma."

Violet moved to the bed. "I don't believe that."

"I hope you're right, ma'am." The doctor cut off the end of the bandage. "He should be kept warm, and someone ought to stay and watch."

"I will do that."

"It may be hours," Dr Baldwin warned.

"He pushed me out of the way," Violet said suddenly. "If he hadn't, I'd be the one lying unconscious. Or worse."

The doctor paused in his tidying up, uncertain what to say.

"I'll sit with him. It's the least I can do." She added, "I nursed my cousin in her last illness. Sitting by a bedside is nothing new to me."

"Very well, your grace. I'll give further instructions to the staff."

"Thank you. Will you come again in the morning?"

"Yes." Baldwin hesitated again. "Though I can promise nothing, his grace is a strong man."

"Have you been his physician long? Did you tend to him when he lost his eye?"

"He was injured while abroad, but I did tend to him on his return. A long and painful recovery. Learning to see differently, to judge distances correctly... He never complained."

"Did he tell you what happened?" she asked.

"No. He's a very private person. I got the impression though,

that it was a dire situation. He had other wounds, too. Any one of them could have been mortal, if they'd bled a bit more or festered at all. He evaded death that time."

"Just as he will this time," Violet said, trying to sound confident.

"Let us hope so."

The doctor left her then, and once Violet settled what needed to be done, everyone else left, too. She pulled up a chair to sit near Alex's bed.

How strange, she thought. She'd never been in this bedroom before, but now she was alone with Alex, and the only thing she could do was watch helplessly to see if he woke or slept on.

Violet put one hand on his cheek. His skin was warm, she noted with relief. That was a good sign. But he didn't react to her touch at all.

He breathed steadily, undisturbed. Violet settled into the chair, and kept watching him, hoping to see a change. The stress of the day slowly dragged at her, though. By the time darkness fell, she was dozing in the chair, with only the light of one candle burning by the bedside.

* * * *

Alex woke slowly. His room was dark except for a single candle. He was lying in his own bed, and in a chair next to him sat Violet, dead asleep. Surprised, he gazed at her for a full minute. Her delicate features were enhanced by the strong shadows, and her hair glowed as the light picked out every strand. Seeing her in the golden light of the flame, he breathed in uncertainly, not sure if he had ever realized how beautiful his wife was. Also, why was she there at all, beside his bed?

"Violet?" he said aloud.

She stirred. "Alex?" Once she saw that he was awake, she burst into a smile that dazzled him. "Oh, Lord, Alex, I was so worried!" She reached out and took his hand. "Are you in pain?"

Was he? Alex paused and took stock of his condition. He had a headache, for certain. "What happened?"

"Don't you remember? We were riding back home when the storm struck, and lightning hit the tree..."

Oh, God. In a flash, everything flooded back. The storm, the crash, Violet's terrified scream. His last conscious thought that the curse had returned to mock him again. Alex shuddered. "I remember."

"Should I call for Dr Baldwin again?" She began to stand up.

"No." He stopped her with the pressure of his hand. "Are *you* all right?"

"Perfectly." She smiled, though her eyes were shadowed. "I was sure we were both going to die. When the carriage went down and I saw you on the road, I thought you *were* dead. The branch of the tree crushed the top of the carriage, and struck you." She shook herself. "But someone from the Abbey was riding back on an errand and found us only a few minutes later. Your people came straight away to help."

"How long has it been?"

"Several hours. The doctor said you're not to try to get up. Not yet. He'll come again in the morning."

He nodded. But he kept his grip on Violet's hand, unwilling to let her go. Had she waited for him to come to? Did she care that much?

Inspired, he said, "A kiss might help me heal."

Violet shook her head, wearing an odd smile. "I already gave you one earlier. You need to rest now." She left the room as fast as she could.

Alex could do nothing except wait for morning. Had she actually given him a kiss, and he missed it? How was that fair?

Partly because he was determined to not miss such an opportunity again, Alex healed remarkably quickly. He got out of bed as soon as he could the next day.

"You ought to rest longer," Dr Baldwin told him.

"I have things to take care of," Alex returned.

"You have a household of servants to attend to things."

"These are things only I can do," he said.

That was true. Nothing made a man take stock of his life like a brush with death, Alex reflected ruefully. How had he deluded himself into thinking that his marriage to Violet could be a simple contract? And how could he have been so blind to Violet herself? He had to get to know her better.

* * * *

Over next few days, Alex spent nearly all the daylight hours around the estate, reassuring the household, the tenants, and the neighbors that absolutely nothing was wrong. Thank God Violet hadn't been hurt—the slightest injury to her would doubtless rekindle old rumors. But she seemed perfectly normal, the same quiet and polite woman every time he saw her. The distance between them was unbridgeable. Alex had once planned on that. Now he regretted it.

One evening, Alex returned to the house much too late for supper, so he went to the parlor, hoping to find Violet, who he knew stayed awake late. However, only Millie was there, reading a play out loud to herself, doing both voices in the scene.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. "Where's Violet?"

"I don't know," Millie said with a pout. "She's probably outside."

"Outside? It's nearly midnight."

"I know that, Alex. But she runs off outside nearly every night after supper. Didn't *you* know that?" She rolled her eyes, disdainful of his ignorance.

Alex wouldn't let Millie see it, of course, but his temper was rising. "She may be outside now, but not for long. It's not wise to wander around at night, even on the estate."

"She's not *wandering*," said Millie. "She's at her folly."

Her folly. Alex left the room, too angry to say another word. *Her* folly. Alex gave Violet the key to the place. It was *his* folly. In every sense. He trusted Violet, and for what? She wouldn't even let him touch her, but she fled out to the folly every evening?

Alex could only think of one reason why she'd do that.

He didn't even put on a coat. He just yanked open one of the French doors to the gardens and stalked outside.

He would catch Violet and whoever she was inviting to her little folly. Alex sneered at himself as he walked past the shore of the lake. Violet had been so clever, feigning sweet and shy around him. He genuinely thought she liked the folly for itself. He was an idiot. She probably had some lover before she even married him. She was twenty-five, after all. Perhaps she just had her lover follow her, and now they met every night on the estate grounds. It was hardly an inconvenience, especially since Alex was gone so often and so stupidly agreed to let Violet set the terms of their own marriage.

What a conniving, sneaky, two-faced woman. No one could be that sweet and adorable. It had to be an act.

Alex reached the door of the folly, and took a steadying breath. He found the door unlocked. What a careless lady, he thought. He slipped in and moved up the steps. They were stone, and therefore utterly silent.

At the landing, he saw the door to the room open a few inches. He eased it open further. The brazier was going, providing a steady warmth. But there were no lights, and the room was silent and empty.

He was actually worried for a moment, but then remembered the upper floor. Of course. He looked at the steps to the roof, and saw the hatch door open. He could take them by surprise.

Or he could just turn back.

Alex realized how little he wanted to find what he expected to find. The idea of Violet with another man sickened him. But

wouldn't it be better to have it over? He walked up the steps.

Just before he reached the top, he heard Violet's voice.

"...moving through the constellation of Argo Navis. Magnitude brighter than last week's observation..."

Her voice was soft and lilting, as if she were speaking to herself while writing slowly.

As she undoubtedly was.

Be rational. This was *Violet*, he told himself. She was incapable of acting the way he'd pretended she was doing. Alex's gift for picturing scenes completely failed him this time. But still, what was she doing up here, at night?

"Violet?" he asked, not wishing to scare her by popping up like a ghost in a bad theater production.

The soft stream of words stopped.

"Alex?" she called uncertainly.

He climbed the last few steps.

She stood up from the little stool she'd been sitting on, and carefully stepped away from a telescope so as not to jar it, ruining the angle. She put the book she'd been writing in on the stone surface. "Alex? Why are you here?"

"I was looking for my wife," he said, feeling a little dazed.

"Well, you've found her," Violet said with a smile.

"Yes. What are you doing?"

"I'm stargazing. What else would I be doing?"

He laughed to himself. And at himself. "Nothing comes to mind."

"Were you worried about me?"

"I'm less worried now that I know where you are."

"But I told you I intended to set the folly up for this." Violet paused, tipping her head. "Actually, it's possible I didn't tell you. Are you angry? That I changed the folly around for my studies?"

"No. I was just...curious," Alex said. "I didn't know you owned a telescope."

"It was my father's," Violet explained. "He gave it to me because it had the best lens of all the ones in his collection."

"Looks quite heavy. You carry it up and down each night just to see the stars?"

"Yes. They mostly come out at night. Mostly."

He gave her a disgusted look. "There's no need to insult my intelligence."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she said.

"So what are you looking at? Specifically?"

"There have been sightings of an unknown object in the north sky," she said, enthusiasm kindling in her voice. "Possibly a nova, but much more likely a comet. However, it's faint, and some of the reports are conflicting about its location and movement. I'm tracking it."

"The telescope is that powerful?"

"It's better than most, though if I knew I was looking for a comet, I'd want a telescope with a shorter focal...ah, never mind. The point is, the conditions have been quite good over the past five nights. I've been able to identify it. Now if I can keep it in sight over the next few weeks, I'll know if it's moving like a comet ought to."

Alex nodded, but said, "I'm not sure I like the idea of you out alone."

"You said yourself this is probably the safest place in England."

"I wouldn't have said it if I'd known you were planning to come here at night."

"Please don't tell me not to come back," she said suddenly.

"Would you listen if I did?"

"I wouldn't like it." Then she said, "Would you feel better if you came to get me at the end of the evening? I'm almost always done viewing by about two."

"Do you ever sleep?" asked Alex.

"Yes. Usually around four or five in the morning."

"That leaves hours. What do you do before you fall asleep?"

"I try to fall asleep," she said practically. "That's about how long it takes."

"You could take something to help you."

"Thank you, but no. I've tried several options already."

"Nothing works?"

"Oh, some work quite well, but at the expense of my sharpness of mind. I'd rather be able to think and be awake half the night than live in a fog all my waking hours."

"I see." Alex looked around. "Well, if you'll permit, I'll walk you back now, since I'm here. May I carry that down for you?" He pointed to the telescope.

"Oh, I'll do it. If it should break, I want only myself to blame."

"If it breaks, I'll buy you a better one," he said.

Violet paused. "Very well. Thank you."

He carried the telescope down the stairs. It was not a light-weight object for a woman like Violet to haul up and down.

As they walked back toward the house, Alex had another minor revelation. Many of Violet's books must be on astronomy. Perhaps he could go through them and see if there was a sign or symbol that he'd missed. Or perhaps he'd see a pattern at last, and be able to prevent the next murder.

He almost asked Violet where to look, until he remembered how little he'd be able to explain. No, he had to work alone, as usual.

But it was reassuring to know what Violet was up to. When they passed by the lake, Alex said, "I'm glad you like the folly."

"Oh, it's perfect. Almost custom made for my needs."

"So it made the inconvenience of the marriage worth it," he observed, before he could stop himself.

"There is nothing inconvenient about my life here," Violet said calmly. Then she added, "Though to tell the truth, I'd have wed Bluebeard himself if it meant getting out of my aunt's house."

“To many women, the difference between me and Bluebeard is probably insignificant.”

Violet sniffed. “Regardless, I’d have taken my chances, folly or not.”

He couldn’t tell if she intended the double meaning of her words, and didn’t want to find out.

*

Once Alex learned exactly what Violet did most nights, he began a new ritual of walking to the folly at whatever time she told him. The hour varied from night to night, depending on exactly what Violet was studying. When he asked how she knew, Violet just said, “It’s easy. The whole night sky is a clock and a calendar all in one.”

Alex was profoundly relieved that it was the night sky—and not a lover—pulling Violet from the house. But he was also glad to discover something about her personality, which until then seemed rather opaque.

He also made a point of looking through her books, though he waited until she was otherwise occupied to do so. Explaining his interest would have been awkward at best, even if he was permitted to mention the Zodiac, which naturally was to be kept secret.

Alex paged through several titles. Most were histories or descriptions of very specific discoveries or theories and were of no use to him. But he did find one larger book that was more of a reference. It contained charts and tables of various constellations and other stars, including their signs, when they rose and set, and some of the details of their place in the sky. Alex noted several spots in the pages, jotting little notes to himself on scraps of paper as he went. He’d have to consult this book again, but he didn’t want to remove it from the shelf, so he slid it back among the others when he was done.

He looked through a few more books in Violet’s collection, then saw a small pasteboard box on the shelf. Curious, he opened

the lid and found a stack of loose papers. These must be Violet's own notes about her stargazing.

He idly scanned some of the pages, not really reading. Most were rather dry, technical notes about the positions of stars or calculations of some kind. He unfolded one page near the top and found a sketch of a rough, cratered surface, filled with shadowed spots and empty fields of brightness. Something Violet viewed through her scope, he decided, studying the alien landscape.

Now intrigued, he kept sifting through the papers. As he went, he noticed the handwriting growing steadily more childish. No more scholar's notes; these were little passages and cryptic phrases, sometimes accompanied by a crude illustration.

He held up one page he dug from the bottom of the box, struck by what he saw. In the corner there was a line drawing of a robed figure he took to be Death, though instead of a scythe, it held a bright red serpent in both hands. The snake was as long as the figure was tall, and it looped and coiled menacingly over the page. Alex frowned. It seemed like far too gruesome an image for his Violet, especially as a child. He read the words near the drawing: *gift of death, thirteen, father after mother*. The words were jumbled together, as if written in dim light. None of it made sense. He saw one more phrase at the top, above a list of numbers: *the serpent handler*.

He put the papers back, and returned the box to its place on the shelf. What could possibly have inspired a young Violet to draw such a thing? He thought of her polite, endlessly sweet manner, and realized again that he didn't know her at all.

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Elizabeth Cole is a romance writer with a penchant for history. Her stories draw upon her deep affection for the British Isles, action movies, medieval fantasies, and even science fiction. She now lives in a small house in a big city with a cat, a snake, and a rather charming gentleman. When not writing, she is usually curled in a corner reading...or watching costume dramas or things that explode. And yes, she believes in love at first sight.