



*The
New Girl
at Uskweirs
Manor*

by Miriam Roborn

The New Girl at Uskweirs Manor

a pastoral romance by Miriam Robern

CHAPTER ONE

A Fateful House Party

Monmouthshire, May 1812

Miss Amelia Wright gained access to Uskweirs Manor by supplying a false name. The attendant at the door dipped his head, murmured, “Of course, sir,” and gestured her within.

There was a party being held at the manor, but by popular account there was always a party being held at the infamous country estate. The dull echo of music had flowed out of the open windows into the courtyard; as she stepped inside, the full cacophony of strings and voices and laughter washed over her. The tide of noise was more than Amelia was entirely comfortable with, but she pressed on.

The foyer of the venerable manor house was peppered with guests standing in twos and threes, drinks in hand and smiles on their lips. With so many conversations happening at once, everyone’s voice was raised in genial competition to be heard. Amelia registered few personal details outside of the sweep of skirts and breeches pulled taut across finely-turned legs. She was on a mission.

Lord Ashbourne, Viscount of Monmouth and master of

Uskweirs Manor, was somewhere within this house party. Amelia intended to secure an audience with the nobleman. She willed herself not to think about the propriety of sneaking into someone's house party without an invitation only to seek them out.

Her old self was not usually this brazen, but she reminded herself that this was the new her. This was the Amelia who didn't deny herself what she wanted—what she needed. She was the Amelia that reached out, the Amelia who seized opportunities, the Amelia who made her own opportunities if need be. Or at least, she hoped she was.

She was terrified.

Amelia drifted through a pair of flung-open double doors into the ballroom. Ruffles and lace and ribbons and fabric whirled and twisted before her. She knew what Lord Ashbourne looked like—tall and regal, almost stretched out, but that might only be how the engravers illustrated him in the papers. No one in the ballroom seemed a likely match and she turned to go.

But she turned to stare again at the dancers, to confirm what she had thought she'd seen. There was a man out of place in the quadrille. She watched as he bobbed and pranced through the steps to make sure she had seen right, but she had. He was dancing in place of a woman, sharing a smile with his dancing partner when they joined hands again. Amelia dragged her eyes away and hurried out of the ballroom.

Surely, she thought, scanning the rest of the thronged party, there were enough guests here that no man would be unable to find a partner. Or the rumors really were true and the parties here really were as scandalous as she'd heard. As she'd hoped.

She passed through a sitting room filled well past capacity. The couches and chairs were packed to bursting, hips abutting, arms stretched out behind and tucked in front, a tangle of bodies stuffed together with no sense of propriety. Every tabletop, too, was full of half-drunk glasses. Gales of laughter and giggling filled the room. Amelia spied one young woman who, for want of a seat, had simply sprawled across three other guests, smiling up from the lap of her conversation partner, chatting away merrily.

What would Amelia's parents think of such a party? What would they think of her, if they knew she was here? Her heart pounded in her chest. She didn't care, she told herself, which wasn't wholly true, but it was more true now than it had been yesterday. Besides, they had never properly debuted her to society, so really, her ending up here was on their heads. The thought made her titter uncontrollably.

A footman appeared at Amelia's elbow, bearing a platter of coupes filled to the brim with champagne. She gratefully accepted one, if only to forestall her titter from progressing further. She thanked the servant and caught his eye long enough to ask, "Do you know where I might find Lord Ashbourne?"

Lord Ashbourne apparently preferred the cool of the gardens to the heat of the house, and the footman gave her simple directions to get there. She sipped at her champagne and set off, fussing with her ill-fitting jacket. This, in turn, reminded her of the breeches she'd struggled into, how maddeningly tight they were, and how if she walked too quickly the fabric would audibly creak. She downed the rest of her champagne and let her head swim at the fuzzy burn of alcohol rather than let her mind blunder onward to complaining about the cravat, too.

Her route out of the house took her through a spacious parlor that had been turned into a labyrinth of guests sitting at small tables playing cards. The din of conversation was muted, here, but interrupted every few moments by shouts and groans from one table or another. Amelia threaded her way through the tables, trying not to bump into the players, who were all focused on their cards, anyway.

A man seated across the table before her threw down his cards in crowing victory. The rest of the table's melodramatic groans quickly gave way to jeers and pointing at another player who had revealed his cards with good-natured chagrin. The winner beckoned him to draw closer. He complied with a smile.

Amelia watched in fascination as the two men shared a lingering kiss as the rest of their table cheered them on. When one of the men began to crawl into the other's lap, she realized that she was staring. She beat a hasty retreat—but turned back when she had put two tables between her and the display. They were still kissing. The rest of their table had apparently turned to conversation and shuffling the cards for a new deal.

Where in hell was she?

Amelia burst out of the house and onto the back portico. The cool night air seemed to welcome her, brushing away the cloying atmosphere from inside. She took a long, steadying breath and looked around to orient herself. Steps swept down onto a wide terrace, the first of many that structured the elaborate gardens behind the house. There were scattered guests out enjoying the gardens in the gathering twilight. A few pavillions were set out on the lawn below. That must be where the master of the house was holding court.

She had some time to collect herself as she descended the

steps, chiding herself for her shock. She had come all the way out to the edge of Wales, to the most notorious manor in the kingdom, to sneak into a party she hadn't been invited to. And she'd done it all alone, without a chaperone or guide. She had no reason to be scandalized.

Was she scandalized, though? Shocked, certainly. None of this was something that one was accustomed to seeing. She had imagined quite a lot of it, if she was being honest, but her mind's eye was not the same as seeing. And sure, she'd slipped out of her father's townhouse before, to visit houses of ill repute, even. There she saw everything put on gaudy display, but somehow it was different when it was ladies and gentlemen, not professionals plying their trade.

Perhaps it just took some time to get used to.

Amelia hoped that she'd have the opportunity to get used to it.

Snippets of a conversation came to her through the cool garden air, equal parts muffled words and smothered laughter. Probably a pair of lovers, she thought, flirting on the other side of the tall hedge she walked down. Scandalous anywhere else, of course: a man and a woman, out of the sight of their chaperones, would ruin both their reputations. But perhaps it was different, here at Uskweirs. Perhaps it could be simple, innocent fun, instead of needlessly and permanently labelling them as a slut and a cad. Amelia turned the corner at the end of the hedge, stumbled to a halt, and gasped.

It was not a man and a woman. It was a man, a woman, another man, and another woman. They were not flirting. They were quite naked. Clothes were strewn all around them on the close-clipped garden grass. The four of them were arranged like

nested spoons except for the last woman, who sat astride the other woman's face— Amelia looked away.

“Hey there, handsome!” called the woman whose tongue wasn't already engaged. It took a moment for Amelia to realize that she was being addressed. She hazarded another glance at the quartet, who had not slackened their pace for her sake at all. The woman crooked a finger at Amelia. “You wanna join us?”

Amelia stammered something politely negative as she staggered back around the thick hedge. Laughter followed her, but she couldn't tell if it was directed at her, or the natural product of the open-air bacchanal she fled from.

She was more careful about her route through the gardens from there on out, keeping to the broader, more open areas, where she could see what she was walking into. This did not mean she avoided other nude couplings—the gardens were apparently full of such assignations—but she was at least able to give them a wide berth.

It occurred to her that the viscount might be one of the disrobed men that she was avoiding, and she worried not only over missing him but also making a poor first impression. Finally she concluded that, even if he were, she would hardly be able to have a chat with him while he was... otherwise engaged.

Someone, somewhere, was calling out a name, now, not in the throes of passion, but as if they'd lost their friend in the maze of gardens. That seemed plausible enough. Amelia turned at another call, this time clearer; the caller had appeared at the opposite end of the terrace that she was about to exit. A stout gentleman in a dark blue jacket and cream breeches, it looked like. She turned onto another gravel pathway and down the steps

to the next terrace below.

“Mister Frobisher!” rang out the call again, and Amelia shook her head at the futility of the search. Wherever Mister Frobisher was, it was doubtful he wanted to be found. The searcher was apparently following the same path that she was, as the voice seemed to grow closer and clearer.

Something nagged at the back of Amelia’s brain. She was most of the way across the terrace before she remembered where she’d heard the name Frobisher before: it was the false name she’d supplied to the doorman. She stumbled to a halt and looked behind her.

“There you are, Mister Frobisher,” laughed her pursuer, and strode down the pathway with an extended hand. “I didn’t expect to see you here, but in London next week. What a happy coincidence.”

Amelia bit back a swallow. As the figure came closer to both her and the light of a nearby bonfire, she could see that what she had mistaken to be a stout gentleman was in fact a woman in the clothes of a gentleman. A handsome woman, with strong features, jet black hair cut short and pulled back in a sailor’s knot, and a generous bustline gamely contained in what must have been a inventively tailored jacket. Amelia hardly knew what to make of her. She extended her hand to shake and said something clever, like “Um.”

“Theresa Chesterley,” the woman introduced herself with a fierce smile. “We’ve corresponded by post. You’re printing some pamphlets for me. The Daughters of Wollstonecraft. I can’t tell you how happy I was to find someone who’d take on material that is so maligned and yet so important.”

Of course; Amelia had only realized the need for a false name while reading in the carriage-house the night before. She had seized the name closest to hand: the publisher of the book she was reading. “I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I think you’ve... got me confused with someone else.”

Chesterley tipped her head, expression cloudy. “The doorman said you were Mister Frobisher. You’re not Edwin Frobisher of Fleet Street?”

“Oh, ahm, no,” Amelia scrambled to answer. “That’s my— my brother. I’m... John. John Frobisher. I’m not in printing. Like my brother. Edwin.”

The woman considered Amelia for a long moment, eyes slowly narrowing. And then, quite suddenly, her hand came down like a clamp on Amelia’s elbow and a knife had appeared in her free hand. “Edwin Frobisher doesn’t have a brother.”

“Oh my, that’s... that’s not at all necessary,” Amelia begged. “It’s... it’s a false name, I admit it; but there’s no need for—”

The knife pressed up against Amelia’s ribs. “Who’d you come to malign and denigrate, hm? Which of my friends’ lives did you think you’d ruin with exposure?”

“No, it’s not that—” Amelia gasped, but her captor wasn’t hearing any of it.

“Start walking,” she directed, with a shove towards the lawn. “I’m taking you to Ashbourne. For his sake, not yours, because I’m a considerate guest.”

Amelia decided not to mention that she was looking for the Viscount, herself.

* * *

Ashbourne was, in fact, under the white pavillion on the lawn. A number of rugs had been laid out across the grass, populated with couches and chairs and endtables to hold the ubiquitous drinks. Most of the seating stood empty; twilight had fully fallen and what guests had been enjoying the lawn had since left it to seek other diversions. Two older men reclined on a single couch, one in an eye-wateringly bright fushcia jacket, the other in pale powder blue. The man in pink was resting his head in the lap of the man in blue, and they were sharing a private chuckle when the two ladies came into the tent.

The man in blue noticed them first. “Miss Chesterley, have you brought me a present? At knifepoint?”

“An interloper,” the woman responded, not letting go of Amelia’s arm. “Impersonating my publisher. I don’t know who he’s here for, but I thought I’d bring him to you.”

The pink-clad man didn’t bother to sit up, but watched Amelia from the other man’s lap, eyes alight.

“I apologize, Lord Ashbourne,” Amelia blurted quickly, before everyone else in the tent could decide her fate for her. “I gave a false name. I’m here without invitation.”

The man in pink tittered. “Invitation. Invitation! Can you imagine?”

“My dear, no one is here by invitation,” Ashbourne chuckled, absently petting the balding pate of the man in his lap. “Committing such details to paper is just tempting fate.”

“If it comes to it, my lord,” Chesterley offered, “I can dispose

of a body so no one will find it.”

All the blood rushed out of Amelia’s head and she teetered on her feet. What had she got herself into?

But the viscount’s lips only twitched upwards at the woman’s suggestion. “I don’t think that will be necessary, Theresa.” He then leaned back and considered Amelia for a long moment, his pale grey eyes roving up and down, lingering on her hands, her face. “In fact, I think you can dispense with the knife entirely.”

“Milord?”

Now Ashbourne rolled his eyes. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Miss Chesterley, but I think I have the situation under control. You may go. I’d like to speak with my guest in private.”

Whatever other civilized rules were ignored here, a dismissal from a viscount was not one of them. Chesterley released Amelia’s elbow, made the knife disappear, and stalked off into the night. The handful of others under the pavillion decided it was time to see the rest of the party.

“Won’t you have a seat?” Ashbourne asked as if Amelia had not been held at knifepoint until a moment before. “I am, of course, Lord Ashbourne. This creature splayed out like a drunken kitten is Lord Mulvey. And what may we call you, my dear?”

“Think before you answer,” Mulvey advised, eyes closed. “You shouldn’t lie to a great lord of the land.”

Amelia sat down on a chair that was mostly facing the two lords, folding her hands together between her knees. She

obviously couldn't continue with Frobisher. Not that she had come here to lie to Ashbourne, great lord of the land or no. She had imagined this moment, over and over again, in her mind's eye. She would stand before Lord Ashbourne, give her proper name, and ask for his help. But now that the moment was before her, she quailed before it.

"I thought I'd be standing up," she murmured.

Ashbourne didn't answer immediately. "Then by all means, stand, if it makes it easier for you."

She laughed off the suggestion, but then she stood, anyway. He watched her patiently. "My name is Amelia Wright, milord. And I am hoping that you can help me."

He nodded once, slowly, as if he had known her name all along, breeches and cravat or no. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Wright. How can I help you?"

"You see, it's a... it's a strange request."

"We get a lot of interesting requests here at Uskweirs," the viscount assured her, the correction so mild she almost missed it.

"Yes, milord," she agreed with a slight smile, and paused to gather herself. She'd already given him her name, after all. "They say a lot of interesting things about Uskweirs. That you can help with a lot of interesting situations. And perhaps you can help with mine."

Lord Ashbourne lifted a single eyebrow. "I'd like to try, Miss Wright, but you'll have to tell me what it is, first. You need to say it out loud."

Amelia steeled herself, fists clenched. Forced herself to

speaking the words: “I don’t want to live as a man any more.”

When she opened her eyes—when had she closed them?—Lord Ashbourne was watching her with a soft, avuncular smile. “Of course you don’t, my dear. It doesn’t seem to suit you at all.”

“It doesn’t,” she breathed. “But it seems... impossible.”

“Difficult and impossible are two different things,” Lord Mulvey opined from Lord Ashbourne’s lap.

“Indeed,” the viscount agreed. “Miss Wright, may we have the pleasure of your company for an extended visit to Uskweirs? We’d be ever so happy to have you.”

Amelia sat, hard, as the relief hit her. Distantly she realized she was crying. “Thank you, milord. I’d love to.”

CHAPTER TWO

The Impossible

Monmouthshire, May 1812

The dress was nothing special, but it was taunting her from across the room.

That is where the maid, presumably, had laid it out while Amelia slept. The Uskweirs house staff had also fetched her luggage from the nearby carriagehouse and quietly unpacked it into her room. She could see her trunk in the corner; her hair brush had been placed on the vanity. But in addition to the breeches and waistcoats and cravats that she'd brought to Monmouthshire, someone had added a house dress, carefully spread over the back of the vanity chair.

And it really was nothing special: light cream falling in soft folds, the same short bodice and long skirt as almost everyone had been wearing last night. She could feel its silky texture from across the room. Under that sheer colored fabric lay a white muslin shift, neatly folded in the seat of the chair.

The latter was presumably an identical garment to the one that Amelia was already wearing, that she wasn't terribly sure the provenance of. The details of the prior evening were all murky

after accepting the Viscount's invitation. She had been shown to a room, the bed had been turned down, she didn't have a nightshirt but the shift had been provided (had it been laid out on the bed?). She had stripped off waistcoat and breeches, pulled on the sleepwear, and collapsed into bed.

This morning she'd spied the dress before rising, and like a terrified prey animal, she hadn't moved since. Now she and the dress were locked in a staring contest.

Her belly informed her that it expected breakfast soon. Breakfast, which would be served downstairs among all the other houseguests, strangers all. Did the Viscount expect her to come down dressed in that? That was exactly what Amelia wanted to do—the impulse was thrumming under her skin, compelling her to snatch up the soft, silky garment and bury her face in its folds—but the prospect was nothing short of terrifying.

If she went down dressed in that, everyone would look at her. They would know. They would wonder what was wrong with her—or perhaps they wouldn't wonder, because they were houseguests at Uskweirs, after all, but then that was worse because then they would know.

She briefly considered vomiting, which would preclude hunger and postpone dressing that much longer, but didn't want to make a mess for the house staff to clean up.

She debated putting it on in the privacy of her room. Trying it on, seeing what it looked like in the mirror: that didn't necessarily mean that she had to wear it downstairs. But would she be able to take it off again? If wearing the dress felt like she hoped it would, she would be filled with such terrible confidence

that she might just march downstairs in it.

She couldn't.

Her stomach complained again—dimly, she realized she hadn't eaten anything the evening prior—and she hauled herself out of bed. Without looking at the dress, she crossed the room to the wardrobe and found her familiar ugly clothes. They would do for breakfast.

Only once the Viscount had led her outside, the breakfast table far behind them, did Ashbourne ask how she was feeling that morning. His voice was gentle, his expression kindly. Amelia stopped up the immediate rush of tears that threatened to spill all over everything.

“That well, hm?” he murmured, and glanced backwards. “We are out of everyone's sight. It is terribly forward of me, but I can offer you an embrace and a shoulder for you to cry on. I'm sure there is an absolute tumult inside of you.”

Grinding tears from her eyes, Amelia looked back herself, finding only hedgerows and flowers behind them. “That's... very kind, but... I don't think I could...”

“An arm, then?” he suggested, proffering said appendage.

She grasped it as if it were a liferaft in a freezing storm.

“There, now,” he murmured, patting her hand on his arm and directing them deeper into the garden. “And before your brain leaps forward to worry how anyone might perceive two people in breeches leaning on each other in the gardens, I assure you it's

quite an ordinary sight around here.”

“I... came upon a few people in the gardens last night,” Amelia said, without thinking.

“I’m sure they did, too,” the Viscount responded with a twist in the corner of his lip. “What happens here can be rather... intimidating to the uninitiated. Was it a difficult gauntlet to run?”

“No,” she answered immediately—politely, deferentially—but the trailing vowel drew out longer than she intended, and to her surprise she found she wasn’t done speaking. “Well. There were a few rather shocking tableaux... more than a few, in all honesty. But the difficulty wasn’t in seeing them, but in feeling... somewhat guilty at being shocked by them. Naked lovers in the garden aside, most of it was just... a party.”

The Viscount made an encouraging sound and turned a corner down a hedgerow, letting her speak.

“There was one woman, early in the... well, early in my run through your gauntlet,” she went on, a slight smile tugging at her cheek. “There were three or four people hip-to-hip on the sofa.”

“Scandalous,” Ashbourne hissed, softly enough so as not to actually interrupt.

“Yes, but on top of them, laid out across them all, was this young woman. And she was simply talking with the gentleman in whose lap she rested her head.” She paused, looked at a rosebush without really seeing the blooms. “She looked so comfortable. I envied her desperately. And also I was shocked at her pose. And also I didn’t think I should feel shocked.

Because it seemed so... natural to her. At ease. I think that's what I envied the most."

"The siren song of the libertines," Ashbourne mused. "Drop your burdens and be at ease with yourself. Which is easier said than done, of course."

"It seems impossible."

He nodded, looking off into the trees. "It's meant to, I think. The walls of the corral must look unscalable, lest the sheep remember they can jump."

"I couldn't wear the dress you had laid out for me," Amelia confessed, rather needlessly given that she was plainly not wearing said dress. "I... I wanted to, but... I didn't know who would be at breakfast, and I couldn't—"

"Hush, dear," Ashbourne soothed, petting her hand. "I apologize if it was too much. I wanted to give you the option, if you were inclined to take it. Most of the current houseguests will trickle off over the course of the day. Breakfast tomorrow will be a much more private affair. You can wear the dress then, or not, however the morning takes you."

"Perhaps it is for the best," she found herself saying. "I haven't embarrassed myself before the crowd. I can set out today as well," her mouth kept moving, flapping along on a wave of panic flooding through her. "We can forget I was ever here."

Ashbourne rested his hand on top of hers and brought their leisurely pace to a halt. "I think that would be a poor choice on your part," he told her gravely, seeking out and holding eye contact. "If you wish to leave, of course you may, and if you

wish to be forgotten, I will do that for you. But I think that path will only deliver you to sadness.”

She looked into his grey eyes for the longest time. Finally, she breathed, “But it’s impossible.”

He smiled, making the wrinkles around his eyes bunch up tighter. “I can tell you with certainty that it is not. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Watched the entire process.”

Amelia’s heart threatened to hammer right out of her ribcage.

Ashbourne started moving again, his arm under hers gently guiding her back into motion. For a moment she stared down at their intertwined arms, trying to make sense of the image. His arm jutted out, elbow gently cocked, steady and unmoving. Hers wrapped around and over his, curved and coiled, taking the preferred support. Had she ever linked arms with someone like this? Like a woman?

“Tell me how you came to us?” he suggested, the soft upturn in his voice making it clear that it she could dissemble as easily as answer.

“I’ve had your name for months, nearly a year, but I hesitated,” Amelia admitted with a sigh. “I was referred to you, if you can call it that, by Mademoiselle d’Eon.”

Ashbourne immediately made an awkward, half-choked sound, as if he were beating down an involuntary response. “Nasty business,” he growled, and then his voice turned even darker to snarl. “Those proceedings should never have been performed, let alone published.” But then he sniffed and forced a

smile to bestow on Amelia. “But I gather it brought you to us.”

“Yes,” she answered with a bob of her head. “You see, I thought at first that she’d been putting me on. I... paid to have an audience with her, which sounds tawdrier than I like to admit. And I thought perhaps she was only telling me what I wanted to hear, to string me along.” She looked at the gravel path slowly passing under their feet and tried to not remember the damp little room with its moldering wallpaper and the pathetic little bed in its center. “The interview was not pleasant, and to be perfectly honest I had a decidedly uncharitable reaction to the conditions to which she’d been reduced. I resolved to put it from my mind entirely, but then the autopsy...”

The Viscount looked off to the horizon. “‘Roundness of limbs, breasts remarkably full,’ if I remember correctly. So kind of the newspapermen to banish all speculation as to the lady’s sex at the trivial cost of stripping her corpse of what small tatters of dignity remained.”

Amelia nodded guiltily. “As you say. It should never have been performed or published, no matter how much celebrity she’d gathered in life. But I am ashamed to say that I was just as tempted as any other voyeur, and when I read the articles... there it was, in black and white. Which made me consider her referral in a different light.”

Ashbourne nodded slowly. “The mademoiselle was a regular guest here for some time. As far back, in fact, as when she called herself Charles.” He pronounced the name with a French curl to it, and a soft ch. “We knew she was a spy, of course—she never made it much of a secret—but she was also a friend. For some time.”

“And the... techniques she used,” Amelia pressed, “she learned here?”

He chuckled at that. “In the end, I think she taught us as much as we taught her. But yes. The techniques she used are available here. If you’re willing to apply them.”

“How can I not?” Amelia breathed, heedless with relief and hope.

“Some are rather distasteful,” he told her, as if she wanted an answer to her question. “And many take a great deal of time, and patience, and quite frankly harder work than that which someone of your station is accustomed. It is not an easy thing, and others have started only to give it up.”

She bit back her immediate response. Unlike many of her peers, Amelia understood that she enjoyed a life of relative luxury. She knew from experience that her family’s money and station meant that she could have most anything she wanted. The girl had blown through all manner of indulgences, especially after she had realized what she actually wanted. That one, the impossible one, she could never ask for. So she asked for all the others for a good long time, not that they ever satisfied for long. Not when she knew what she really wanted.

Here in the cool morning air of the most disreputable manor house in the kingdom, she wondered at her long refusal to ask. She had not shared how she felt with her parents, her brother, her best friend. Had it been fear of their censure that held her back, or the fact that this want, unlike all the other trifles, would take work?

She hadn’t known it was even possible... but no. That was a

lie she had told herself. She had known it was possible. Possible and scandalous. Unnatural. Sinful, even. But there had always been stories, and for all her adult life there had been the Mademoiselle-Chevalier d'Eon gallivanting through the newspapers. The crowing over whether d'Eon was a 'he' or a 'she' banished all confusion. The possibility had always been there.

The simple fact was that she had made herself forget that it was possible many times over. She had convinced herself that d'Eon was a charlatan, that the other stories were just rumors. She told herself that it might be possible for some blessed others—specially touched by the gods like Tiresias—but not for her. Possible for those who would put in the work.

All she had ever been was a spoiled little girl. The daughter of a duke who didn't know he had a daughter because she'd never screwed up the courage to tell him. She'd never worked at anything her whole life. And now she thought she could do this?

“A friend of mine recently passed,” she found herself saying. “We'd grown up together, gone to school together. He was thrown from his horse in the street. Broke his leg. We thought he would recover, but... a fever took him. He was gone before I could even visit.”

Ashbourne's hand was warm atop hers. “Condolences, my dear. It's so much more difficult when they go too young.”

“He was going to propose,” she tried to explain. “He'd written me, confiding that he was... quite smitten, and hopeful. He had her father's permission. He had been riding to her home when...” Her grip on his arm tightened involuntarily. “When

something startled his horse.”

They stepped out of the hedge maze onto a promontory that overlooked the manor grounds and the landscape beyond. The rugged welsh terrain rolled out before them; the ribbon of the River Usk glimmered among the rippling fields and horse-dotted pastures. Fingers of morning mist were still retreating into the crooks of hills.

“Anthony didn’t get to live his life,” she told the tableau. “And I haven’t been living mine. When my time does come, I want to have been living my life. No matter how much work it is to do so.”

The Viscount contemplated the landscape with her for a long while. “Very well, then.”

“Finally, some housekeeping details,” he said later, waving his hand as if they were trivial and unimportant even as he added, “Rather important housekeeping details.” He scowled ahead to the house, which they were fast approaching.

She nodded and tried to look attentive.

Ahead of them, a handful of guests lounged about the patio, chatting and reading. Ashbourne slowed his steps to keep the conversation private. “You must treat Uskweirs a bit like Faerieland,” he explained. “There are different rules here which must be followed, and there are grave consequences if they are not.”

She smiled in no small measure of relief. “Your grace, there is nothing I would appreciate more than having the rules of this

place laid out clearly and explicitly. That is a favor which I have often longed for in other milleux.”

“No one is invited to Uskweirs,” the Viscount began, his measured tone belying how often he had recited the faerie rules of his manor. “Everyone who is here found their own way here. We went over that last night. So no one is invited to Uskweirs, but also: no one ever visits Uskweirs.”

Amelia frowned softly. “I’m not following.”

“No one admits to visiting Uskweirs,” he clarified, watching her closely for understanding. “You don’t talk about your time here. You don’t talk about who you saw here. You don’t talk about what you saw here. Not to anyone that you haven’t seen here at Uskweirs with your own eyes.”

She nodded, but that didn’t seem sufficient. “I would never betray this confidence, your grace.”

He patted the small of her back with a smile that turned from affectionate to indulgent. “Now, feel free to talk about what you *heard* happened here all you like. Hearsay. Gossip. Make up even more salacious details that you *heard about*; it’s something of a little game that many of our guests play. But you were never here, yourself. So you never saw anything yourself.”

“Of course.”

“Uskweirs is a house of secrets and trust,” he went on with less cant and more fluidity to his voice. Off script, perhaps? “No one comes here for reasons that can be public knowledge. And many of us have more than one reason, layers of secrets, that bring us here, that make here make sense to us and for us. If

someone trusts you with any of their secrets, you keep them, even from other guests at Uskweirs.”

Amelia tried to make her nod as earnest as possible.

“There are some men here who enjoy sex with other men,” Ashbourne explained, without a trace of reproach to his voice. “Some men here long for romance with other men. Some men want both. Some men are here because their wives enjoy sex with other men. Or the man may not be a man at all. You can’t tell why any given man is here at Uskweirs, you should not presume to know, and you ought not ask. A man might proposition another man for some naked exercise in the gardens, of course. But that’s quite a different thing than asking if he’s here for dick over the canapés. Does that make sense?”

“I think so,” Amelia nodded. “Just because manners are a bit more relaxed doesn’t mean discretion is completely disregarded.”

Ashbourne nodded. “You will grow accustomed to it, and rather quickly. Just... err on the side of tact until then, hm?”

“I usually err on the side of intimidated silence,” Amelia said with a wan smile. “I don’t think that will be a problem.”

Ashbourne chuckled, and then started his litany from the top again. “House of Secrets and Trust. No one has ever been invited to Uskweirs and no one has ever visited Uskweirs... but a few people have been banned from visiting.” His voice grew grave. “They spoke when they ought not. They took it upon themselves to invite others. And now they’re no longer welcome. I hate to do it, but it is occasionally necessary to preserve the safety of everyone else. Many of our guests are of a social caliber that protects them from consequences, but most are

not. And I take the safety of my guests very seriously.”

“Despite no one ever visiting you,” she agreed with a slight smirk.

But he did not mirror her amusement back. Instead, he looked pained to continue. They stopped, at the edge of the gardens with the doors back into the solarium a stone’s throw away. “And lastly.... understand that if you try to go to the authorities—a magistrate, the church, the House of Lords—to stir up trouble for us...” His blue-grey eyes were suddenly on her, boring into her. She could not look away. “I will destroy you. Socially. Politically. Financially. In every way that matters.”

Amelia tried to smile, to chuckle, to alleviate the sudden, vicious seriousness in his previously avuncular manner. But her face refused to answer her; her eyes were trapped in his icy gaze. She managed a shaky nod without moving her eyes at all. “Yes, your grace. Of— of course, your grace.”

He held her gaze for a moment longer, and then nodded. “Good. Now since you’ll be staying with us for some time, I’d like to introduce you to my daughter.” With gentle guidance, he directed the both of them toward the house.

CHAPTER THREE

Girl Talk

Monmouthshire, May 1812

Ashbourne rapped on the bedroom door and gave Amelia the ghost of a smile. “It is the ungodly hour of... well, nearly noon, so there is a slight question as to whether my daughter is even out of bed.”

But the door was swept open by a young woman in a pale blue day dress, all her long, dark hair wound up atop her head except for one rogue lock that she held in her other hand. She looked a few years away from twenty. Her delicate, sharp features blossomed into a surprised smile. “Good morning, father,” she greeted him merrily. She then directed her smile to Amelia and back to him, her eyebrows lifting minutely.

Sudden recognition struck Amelia: this was the girl stretched out across four laps from the night before, the girl conducting a casual conversation without any regard for her outrageous posture. The girl whose ease had ignited a smouldering envy in Amelia. The girl whose father would surely be scandalized by what she had been doing the night before, even if he was the host of the entire wicked party, himself.

But before Amelia could ascertain what Ashbourne might know and what he might think about it, the man himself wished his daughter a good morning. “Elizabeth, I’d like you to meet Miss Amelia Wright. Amelia, my dear: my daughter, Miss Elizabeth Randall.”

Amelia cringed at the introduction, abruptly aware that her name contrasted sharply with her waistcoat and breeches.

But Elizabeth evinced no trace of disquiet, and instead beamed at her. “Father, have you brought me a new toy?”

“As you are fond of reminding me, my dear,” he replied with the barest touch of reproach, “I have no idea how lady’s fashion and comportment work and I had hoped that you might assist Miss Amelia in—”

“Yes yes,” the girl cut off her father, seized Amelia’s forearm, and dragged her through the door. “Thank you for the new dolly, Father. You may go, now.” She then swung the door shut with a measure of force just beneath a slam.

Amelia struggled to find words as the girl pulled her over by her bedside. She was in a young lady’s bedroom. The door was shut. Her father was just outside. Surely it was moments before he would start roaring with anger. A desperate impulse to flail her way out of the girl’s grip and scramble back to the door welled up inside Amelia.

Any thought of flight was banished as the girl laid hands on the lapels of Amelia’s waistcoat. “Let’s get you out of these beastly clothes, hm? First things first, after all.”

Amelia finally found her words, at least for a moment.

“Please, miss, I can’t—”

“Why can’t you, Amelia?” the girl retorted, locking eyes with her even as she started tugging at her cravat.

Amelia found, grabbed, and stayed the other girls’ fingers. “It’s not... proper.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrow peaked as if she were accepting a challenge. “How so?”

Amelia glanced back at the door, through which Lord Ashbourne was neither bursting nor shouting. Did he not care about his daughter, alone in her bedroom with— But there her thoughts tumbled, and she desperately grasped for some other handhold in her mind. Perhaps the viscount was as wicked as they said, perhaps so wicked that he had raised his daughter without any sense of propriety. The worst rumors called Uskweirs a brothel.

The girl tugged on Amelia’s hands to bring her back to reality. “The words need to come out of your mouth instead of just tumbling around inside your head,” she said archly. “Otherwise this is a staring contest, not a conversation.” She waited a beat, and then asked, “What makes this improper, Amelia?”

She released the other girl’s hands. “A lady can’t have... guests... in her bedroom, not with a closed door. Certainly not... undressed guests.”

The corner of Elizabeth’s mouth twitched. “Ladies often invite other ladies into their bedrooms and close the door,” she said as if explaining to a small child. “Especially when they’re changing clothes. Or do you expect a lady to change her clothes

with the door open?”

“Yes, I mean no, but I’m not—” she started, and her thoughts stumbled again. Suddenly the image of Theresa Chesterley sprung into her mind’s eye, the woman who had brought Amelia before Lord Ashbourne the night before—she had dressed in a man’s clothes. How common was that sight at Uskweirs? “Oh. You think I’m a woman dressed in men’s clothes.”

Elizabeth took a moment to compose her features, as if forcing herself not to laugh. “Amelia. You are a woman dressed in men’s clothes.”

The parade of Amelia’s thoughts broke formation: the show horses reared up, the carriages lost all their wheels at once, and the marching band members tumbled head over heels on top of each other. She stared at Elizabeth, blinking, for some time.

The girl, maddeningly, just smiled up at her patiently.

“Perhaps— perhaps you don’t understand...” Amelia struggled. “I’m not— that is, it’s just that—”

Now it was Elizabeth’s turn to find and clasp Amelia’s hands. “I do understand, Amelia.” And when that wasn’t enough to stem the tide of Amelia’s sputtering, the impish smile crept back onto Elizabeth’s face. “Let’s be perfectly crass, shall we? I know there’s a cock between your legs.”

Amelia flushed so hard she feared she might fall over. It was only Elizabeth’s grip on her hands that prevented her from tumbling backwards onto the girl’s bed.

The girl watched her and when Amelia had collected her wits enough to listen, she spoke simply and directly. “None of that is

any reason that I can't entertain you in my bedroom, or help you change clothes, or close the door while we do. That's what ladies do."

Desperate, Amelia spat, "You're being deliberately obtuse."

This time Elizabeth didn't even try to stop up her laughter. "I'm not the only one!"

"I am not being obtuse!" Amelia cried, but when she tried to articulate why, exactly, everything became a jumble again.

Elizabeth kept laughing.

The laughter infected the jumble in Amelia's mind, transmuting frustration into farce. All at once, the magnitude of Amelia's distress turned ridiculous; before she knew what was happening she snorted, guffawed, and then collapsed into laughter alongside Elizabeth.

At some point, the merriment subsided enough for Amelia to loosen and unwind her cravat. As she tossed it aside, she remembered how much she hated it, and all the rest of her clothes. The absurdity of clinging to them so desperately sent her in spirals of laughter again. She could hardly find the air to explain to Elizabeth what had set her off again.

Elizabeth undressed her with the efficiency of a tailor, chattering happily about nothing whatsoever. After a discreet knock, a maid entered with a short stack of fabric: the dress and shift that had taunted Amelia in her own room. But Elizabeth was of course insensate to such taunts. She draped each over Amelia in turn, along with the bundled corset that had been

hidden between them.

The full-length mirror standing in the corner of the room took up the task of taunting Amelia, but Elizabeth insisted that she ignore it. They were hardly done dressing her, after all; she and the maid busied themselves seeing to Amelia's fit. The dress needed to be let out in some places, taken in elsewhere, and entirely re-hemmed.

While the dress was removed and reshaped, Elizabeth relaxed and adjusted the soft, quilted corset around Amelia's middle. The girl's fussing seemed more than a little absurd. "Surely that's unnecessary. I don't have anything for the garment to, erm, manage."

"I think you'll be surprised," Elizabeth said, smirking up at Amelia. "And this one doesn't even have stays. Just wait till we get you in evening wear."

Then the dress was ready for fitting and was pulled back over Amelia's head, then pulled off again for another round of refinement. "I'm sorry I'm such a nuisance," she told both Elizabeth and the maid, blushing. "It must take so much effort to fit such a dress onto such a body."

But both women only laughed. Elizabeth explained with casual confidence, "Everybody needs their dresses fitted and refitted. Your body is no more unruly than any other."

The maid favored Amelia with a soft smile and confided, "My last mistress had need of refittings week to week. Don't worry your head none, miss."

When the dress was pronounced acceptable, Elizabeth confiscated both it and the corset. Amelia was sat down in a

chair placed in the center of a sheet and the girl dug her fingers into Amelia's hair. "Well, at least you've worn this long, as far as men's cuts go. I'm sure we can do something with this. Tonight we'll roll you up in papers, but in the mean time..."

The maid advanced with a comb, scissors, and a determined look.

Amelia took a deep breath to try and still her head and heart.

But while the comb tugged and the scissors snipped, Elizabeth cupped Amelia's chin in her hand. Bright blue eyes roved across her face, evaluating. "Your skin tone's a little ruddier than mine," she muttered, "so we'll need to mix you your own powders." She disappeared while the maid continued her work, slowly circling around Amelia.

When the girl returned, she bore an armful of crockery. "I couldn't find a tray," she muttered as she staggered over to her vanity. "The kitchens are still recovering from last night, bless them."

She set to pouring and stirring across the room, then bringing a small crock to where Amelia sat, applying a smudge of powder across her cheek, scowling at it, and then wiping it off with a damp cloth. Then she returned to mixing and stirring on the vanity. This was repeated ten or twenty times before she smiled instead of scowled.

"I've taken note of the proportions for you," she said as she dusted the first powder across Amelia's face. "Corn starch, turmeric, pimentón, safflower. I went easy on carmine because it's so dear. You will no doubt adjust things to suit your taste in cosmetics, just as soon as you develop a taste in cosmetics." She applied three different powders in succession, promising to show

Amelia where to put how much of each the next morning.

Two short curls bobbed down on either side of Amelia's field of vision and the maid declared her work done. The corset was wrapped around her middle and the dress draped over top. Elizabeth finally allowed her to stand and look in the mirror.

"I don't think I can," Amelia admitted ruefully, pressing herself back into her chair.

"I can bring the mirror to you, but that's just silly," the viscount's daughter said, setting her fists on her hips. "Also, it's heavy."

It took her five full minutes to steel herself, to get her breathing under control, to actually heave herself up onto her feet, and force those feet to start walking across the room. At Elizabeth's teasing suggestion, she accepted the girls' hands over her eyes.

She wasn't sure she even wanted to see. Maybe this was enough of the fantasy already. Getting dressed, primed, and most of all treated like just another girl. It had been a barrage of discomforts and surprises, but throughout that strange process her shoulders had slowly unwound and unclenched. It occurred to her that she had never felt so relaxed in her life.

In a moment she would see what that process had turned her into, and she knew, down to the pit of her stomach, that every scrap of ease that had collected in her would be annihilated the moment she saw the results. The depths of her delusion would be exposed. The impossibility of her dreams would be revealed. She would look ridiculous. Miserable. Grotesque.

And then the hands darted away from her eyes and there in

front of her was the mirror, and there in the mirror was... a girl.

For the flash of a moment, she thought it might be somebody else. But no, it was her. The girl moved when she moved. The girl's image shared features with the image that Amelia had seen in the mirror for years. But this was the image of a girl.

The more she looked into the mirror, the more she saw herself, in more than one way. She saw the same eyes, the same tawny-colored hair, the same lanky limbs. But the way those eyes were set in that delicate face, the way the hair was curled and piled atop her head, the way her arms and shoulders rose up to that graceful neck. These were new... but also uncannily familiar.

Suddenly, she realized that for years she had looked into the mirror and, in that brief half-heartbeat before the eyes can see, she had expected these features. She cringed, knowing that her expectations were about to be crushed by reality, but then... reality cringed back in the mirror's reflection. She cleared her throat, smoothed out her expression, watched as her reflection did the same, and then she hazarded a smile.

The girl in the mirror smiled back, or started to. Amelia's hands flew up to cover her mouth. With difficulty, she forced them back down, breathed another smile, and marveled as the girl smiled back. "This is sorcery."

"Of course it is," Elizabeth laughed. "If support garments and cosmetics aren't sorcery, I don't know what is."

Amelia's hands fell to her sides, where the soft corset hugged her body. She didn't have a bust, exactly, but something about her shape seemed to imply that she did, anyway. The same for her waist and hips: neither resembled wasp or bell, but her

silhouette still bore the suggestion that they were there. The resulting effect was entirely feminine.

Amelia felt something hot hit her cheek. “No, I can’t cry, tears will ruin everything!”

Behind her, Elizabeth snickered, but not unkindly. “Tears won’t ruin much, that’s why I didn’t kohl your eyes.”

But when Amelia’s tears had subsided, the viscount’s daughter wiped them away and re-applied the cosmetics with a deft hand. “And now, I imagine I am rushing things, but what would you think of going downstairs? It’s luncheon, I skipped breakfast, and I am famished.”

Amelia looked to the door fearfully. “Oh, I don’t... I don’t think I’m ready to go outside.”

“Well then I guess we’ll just take all this off and put you back in breeches, hm?” Elizabeth watched her from where she leaned against her bedstand. “Wrap that cravat nice and tight around your neck?”

Amelia looked back in the mirror. The girl was still there. Or was she?

The more Amelia looked, the more she saw. There were... gaps and inconsistencies. She didn’t stand right. If she turned her head just so, her jawline was all wrong. She stared at her reflection, picking apart the image, peeling off layers of artifice and deception. She knew what she’d find underneath: the ridiculous, miserable truth.

And who could really be fooled by a little muslin and corn starch? If she went outside, people would look at her, and then...

“This can’t possibly actually work,” Amelia declared. “People will... they’ll see through this. They’ll know.”

But Elizabeth only airily declared, “You vastly overestimate the discernment of our species.”

“People aren’t that stupid, Miss Randall.”

“People are exactly that stupid,” Elizabeth insisted. “People see a dress, they expect to see a woman in the dress. If the person in the dress is not their vision of femininity, they don’t conclude that she’s not a woman. They conclude she has some... unique and curious features.”

“I know a euphemism when I hear it,” Amelia snorted. “I have no wish to be accounted as ugly, either!”

“Well there’s little chance of that,” she said, and nodded to the Amelia in the mirror. When she looked back to Amelia outside the mirror, her eyes narrowed in consideration.

For a terrible moment, Amelia wondered if she, too, were peeling away the layers of artifice, if even her new friend was digging for that terrible truth underneath the facade that she herself had just built.

But instead, the girl asked, “Let me ask you this, then. If it came down to it, would you rather be accounted a handsome man or a homely woman?”

Amelia didn’t answer immediately, because her impulse was surprisingly clear. Eventually, she admitted it: “A homely woman.” A beat later, she admitted aloud, “Perhaps I have conflated femininity with beauty.”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” Elizabeth said with a shrug.

“But if—” The girl was cut off by a knock at the door. Immediately her features turned mischevius. “One moment,” she called, and started walking backwards towards the door. To Amelia she whispered, “Providence has delivered us a prime opportunity to test if ‘people will just know.’”

“You wouldn’t,” Amelia hissed.

But Elizabeth laughed. “My dear, you haven’t known me long enough to understand, this is exactly the sort of thing I’d do.” And then she spun on a heel and threw open the door. “Ah, Theresa, good morning. Do come in.”

“I think you mean good afternoon, Lizzie,” corrected Theresa Chesterley as she stepped into the room. A beat later, she noted Amelia, hastily pushing herself to her feet.

The woman looked Amelia up and down. Her regard seemed to last forever, but Amelia, quailing under that scrutiny, could hardly tell if the elongation of time was real or imagined. The woman’s eyes followed the line of her dress, rested for a moment on where her hips ought to be if she had any, and fluttered across her face. Finally she took in Amelia’s curled hair before returning to her face to make eye contact. “And a good afternoon to you as well, Miss...?”

Elizabeth stepped in. “This is Miss Amelia Wright. Amelia, meet Theresa Chesterley.” The girl then gestured to the chair on the sheet still littered with snippets of hair. “Amelia needed a trim, and my maid is a magician with scissors.”

The new woman looked to Amelia with renewed interest, scrutinizing her hair again. “You look marvelous, Miss Wright. Short hair is a rare sight, but you are doing it credit.”

“Poor thing had to have it all shaved off due to illness a few months back,” Elizabeth declared. To underscore her patent fabrication, she made an impish face at Amelia behind Chesterley’s shoulder. “It takes so long to grow back out. I keep telling her that we should find some clever curls she can pin in.”

“Hard to match that exact color, I’d wager,” the woman replied. “The cost of having such a exquisite shade.” She smiled. “I don’t think you need extensions, for howevermuch my opinion matters.”

“I think it’s always nice to have options,” Elizabeth put in, and then shifted the conversation. “What brings you to my boudoir, Miss Chesty?”

Finally the woman turned her gaze away from Amelia, who struggled not to collapse into a chair or across the bed. The other two talked about Amelia knew not what while she marveled at the reception that she had received.

Theresa Chesterley had not batted an eye when confronted with Amelia’s appearance. Hadn’t been brought up short when given her feminine name. Had complimented her appearance. Had chatted about hair, like the women whose conversations on which Amelia had spent a lifetime eavesdropping.

She also hadn’t recognized Amelia from the night before.

“And a good afternoon to you as well, Miss Wright,” the woman in question was saying. Apparently their conversation had run its course while she had followed her dizzying thoughts. “I’m afraid I’m taking my leave and heading back into the city. I would have liked to better make your acquaintance. Perhaps we’ll cross paths again, here or elsewhere.”

Amelia opened her mouth to answer but her stomach dropped through the floor. Her voice. Her voice would certainly give her away. Instead she smiled a brightly as she could.

The woman met her eyes once more, smiled shortly, and left.

“What just happened?” Amelia exhaled, inviting herself to collapse onto Elizabeth’s bed. Her knees certainly couldn’t keep her standing up.

“Theresa stopped by to say goodbye, got introduced to you, said you had lovely hair, and left,” the girl summarized as she sat down next to her. “Oh, and she didn’t find anything amiss, did she?”

Amelia bit back a correction—she hadn’t said her hair was lovely, but that she looked marvelous—and pressed herself into the mattress. “How is this possible?”

“I told you: people see what they expect to see.” She bounced back off the bed and crossed the room to her vanity. “Just like you didn’t find anything amiss when you met me.” She picked a book off the desktop, carefully removed the bookmark, and stowed the latter in a small drawer.

It took Amelia a moment to register what the other girl had said. She pushed herself up onto her elbows. “I’m sorry, what?”

Elizabeth’s impish smile was back. “Amelia Wright, you are not the only one who had to convince the world that you were a girl. I’ve just a little more practice than you.” She allowed Amelia to gape at her, smirking down and resting the little book against her cocked hip. “But more importantly, lunch is waiting downstairs, and I am famished.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Correspondence, Concoctions, and Coaching

Monmouthshire, May 1812

Dearest Mother—

I hope this letter finds both you and Father well and in good spirits. I myself have been blessed with good health in the last few months.

*I write to inform you that my imagination has been seized as I have never experienced, my captor being the fascinating book *Tour of Iceland*. The author, one Mister Hooker, describes the strange natural world to be found on that island. I was seduced by a friend's advance copy; it will be published in large numbers later this year. But before that happens I have resolved to travel north myself to see these wonders with my own eyes.*

As it is already well into summer, I had thought to delay until next year and travel in the spring. However, I am seized with such a desire to see these wonders for myself—and perhaps to make my own small addition to the sum of human knowledge—that I cannot delay. Whether that means I dash back to our shores ahead of winter storms or wait them out in some quaint ice-rimed cottage depends entirely on how much my entreaties

are heard by whatever unnamed muse concerns herself with scientific inquiry.

I have secured the services of a Mister Julian Clark, a man of business who will handle my affairs while I am abroad and forward my correspondence to wherever I happen to be in the North. I plan to move about, and do not want to make myself entirely unreachable. I have enclosed his card and the address of his bank for you to use if you have cause to write me. I am relinquishing my lease in London; letters posted there will not find me.

Do forward this news to Father, please, who I am sure would prefer a succinct mention over breakfast to an actual letter to read, and to David, who does not bother with such trifles as correspondence from inferior siblings.

—your youngest

Amelia read the letter full of lies a dozen times over, each time ending with her eyes resting on the bottom edge of the paper. She had tried to will herself to sign the thing properly, but was experiencing difficulties.

When she tried to sign it with the name her mother gave her, Amelia's fingers refused to obey. Not even initials were acceptable to her writing hand. And she obviously couldn't sign it "Amelia."

She could lie about developing an absurd scientific fascination and traveling to some icy rock to sate it, but not, apparently, her name. A name that she'd only been using outside her own head for a single day. But oh, when someone else called

her by it... she simply could not let this feeling go.

On its own, “Your youngest” was accurate and clear enough, but her relationship with her mother was not a casual one. Amelia could see in her mind’s eye the suppressed sneer and arched eyebrow that would float up her mother’s face upon reading such a valediction.

But she would never see her mother’s face again, she reminded herself. What need had she of worrying about the reception?

Her mind nimbly leapt from the insoluble problem of her name to the insoluble problem of her future. Ashbourne had counseled her, watching her with sad eyes, that she would have to leave the whole of her life behind, including her friends and family. Total social death, as he called it, was the only safe way forward.

Amelia had no friends, she mused ruefully. With Anthony gone, she couldn’t think of anyone she cared to keep in touch with, anyway.

While her family was hardly close, never seeing them again was a strange and daunting thought. She could still write, of course, maintaining the ruse of an endlessly travelling English diletante. First she would say she was off to Iceland, and then elaborate some need to visit Lappland. Once the fighting on the continent was over, she would write “from Paris” or “from the banks of the Rhine,” all along an endless string of fictional travels.

But how would she sign all those letters?

“Ah, here she is!” Elizabeth’s voice rang out, “This way,

gentlemen.” The girl swung the library door open and swished into the room. At her heels followed Ashbourne and a liveried servant bearing two tall amber-filled glasses on a tray.

Amelia folded up her insufficiently signed letter and moved to slide it into a breast pocket before remembering that she didn’t have one. After a moment of hesitation, she simply set it aside. “What’s this?” she asked, eyeing the oncoming tray. “Beer?”

Elizabeth snorted. “You wish.” She sat down opposite Amelia at the small table where she’d been writing. The two glasses were set down between the two of them, releasing a sickly-sweet miasma that made Amelia’s nose try to close itself up.

“This,” Ashbourne said as he settled himself into a nearby armchair, “is virus amantis equae.”

“It’s been some time since Latin drills,” Amelia said dubiously, “but that sounds like, erm... Randy Horse Poison. Or is it named that because of the... the smell?”

“There’s a reason it smells like horse,” the other girl giggled.

Ashbourne cleared his throat with the tone of mild reproof. “This preparation wrought the bodily changes in Mademoiselle d’Eon that brought you to us, my dear. Elizabeth has been taking it twice daily for years, to obvious effect. The only question for you, Miss Wright, is if you want to know what is in it before you start taking it.”

“It smells medicinal, which I suppose is to be expected,” she hedged instead of answering. “Licorice?” Amelia looked from grave Ashbourne to giddy Elizabeth. The girl’s eyes danced with

amusement at the concoction's barely-contained secret.

"In part." Now it was Ashbourne's turn to hedge.

"It's easier if you don't know at first," the other girl advised, and then the corner of her smile curled upwards. "And funnier when you find out later."

Amelia eyed the amber contents of the tall glass and the beads of condensation on the outside. One clear bubble of water trembled before merging into its neighbor, then raced down the glass surface to the table. "I think I need to know what's in it first."

"You're no fun at all," Elizabeth teased, putting on a playful pout and sitting back in her chair.

"Extract of licorice, as you noted," Ashbourne supplied with a bob of his head. "In a very strong spearmint and fenugreek tea, combined with concentrated urine harvested from pregnant mares."

"Concentrated *what?*" Amelia couldn't prevent herself from squawking in alarm, looking to the tall amber cylinders before her with sudden revulsion.

Elizabeth reached forward and hefted her glass. "I'd say you get used to the taste, but... you never do." She grinned impishly, holding the glass forward as if to toast, and bounced her eyebrows.

"We have learned to chill it," Ashbourne offered, "which makes it a little more palatable."

But Elizabeth slowly shook her head. "Don't believe him."

“Then I’ll stop ordering ice; it’s a huge expense.”

She looked over at her father fearfully. “Oh please don’t, it’s ghastly when it’s lukewarm.”

Amelia hardly heard them. Was she really going to drink this twice a day, and for the rest of her life? It smelled terrible: now that she knew the contents, she could pick out the ripe, acrid scent of the urine underneath the sweet patina of licorice and mint.

“Smooth skin,” Elizabeth whispered to her over her raised glass. The other girl was watching her, not like she was the butt of a joke, but like she was a lost kitten being coaxed out of a tree. “Silky hair. Cheekbones. Big, bright eyes. Breasts. Even your sweat stops smelling bad.”

Amelia wrapped her fingers around the chill glass. Lifted it. Clinked it against Elizabeth’s. And then she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and drank.

A moment later she set the glass back down on the table. It made a loud plonk sound—Amelia’s focus was on controlling her gag reflex and not her fingers. When she finally mastered her throat, she wheezed. “Well, that tastes exactly as you’d expect.”

Elizabeth had also downed hers in two and a half gulps, and placed her empty glass next to Amelia’s. “But it’s worth it, I promise.”

“I feel a very strange sense of accomplishment,” Amelia confessed a little sheepishly. Possibility seemed to be welling up inside her.

“Oh, that will pass, and quickly,” Elizabeth assured her with

a laugh. “If you’re lucky, you’ll start to see changes before it becomes a chore.”

Amelia nodded and, remembering her muted encounter with Theresa Chesterley, hazarded to ask, “How long until this... delightful preparation starts changing my voice?”

Elizabeth’s smile faltered and Ashbourne coughed. “I am afraid,” he admitted, “this treatment does little for the voice.”

Amelia looked from the viscount to his daughter. “But Elizabeth, you have a such a delightful voice. Pardon my candor.”

“I’m inclined to pardon any complimentary commentary on myself, thank you,” the other girl said with a smile. “But the fact of the matter is I’ve been drinking these since before my voice changed at all. If one starts early enough, the voice matures in a feminine manner, you see. But once the voice drops, this stuff can’t reverse it.”

“So I’m stuck sounding like this?” Amelia asked querulously, a sense of panic rising in her throat. “If I look the part but don’t sound it—do I just pretend to be a mute?”

Elizabeth reached forward to put her cool hand over Amelia’s and looked to her father. “Is Miss Cordelia still visiting? I thought I saw her last night—or rather heard her—but I didn’t see her at luncheon.”

“Miss Cordelia’s short visit, which began nearly a month ago, continues apace.” Ashbourne nodded ruefully, and then he tipped his head to the side, considering. “But you’re quite right, she’s certainly capable of providing good help to Miss Amelia. I don’t think she’d normally be inclined to provide it, but the...

gentle pressure of unbalanced social obligation might convince her otherwise.”

Which is how Amelia found herself dragged through the house, one hand pinched in Elizabeth’s grip, as the younger girl scoured the rooms of the ground floor looking for their guest. The search ended in a secluded library at the far end of the west wing, the walls lined with leather spines of hundreds of volumes warm in the golden afternoon light.

The room bore a single occupant, propped up in a window seat with a small volume open in her lap. The woman was slight, with features too sharp and strong to be called aristocratic. Striking, Amelia thought, would be the proper word. Rich dark curls clung all around her face. The woman’s white day dress bore subtle purple edging worked into the lace at collar, sleeve, and hem. She did not look up as the two girls entered the room.

Elizabeth cleared her throat delicately. “Miss Cordelia, may I introduce you to Miss Amelia Wright.”

The woman looked up from her book, which closed with a delicate but still audible thump. Her features seemed to swim out of the otherworldly distraction of her reading and came to focus on Amelia with a palpable sense of stately grace. Her lips twitched into an exquisite smile that communicated welcome and poise, along with the barest trace of amusement.

It was like looking at a portrait by a master painter, animated by magic to move. Amelia stood transfixed.

“Ah,” the woman breathed, in a rich contralto that sent shivers up Amelia’s spine. “The new girl, in more ways than

one.”

At which all of Amelia’s wonder came crashing down around her ears. Suddenly she was painfully aware of how she was standing, what she was wearing, the cloying itchy feeling of the powders across her face, the awkward strangeness of the curls at her temple. Of course this picture of feminine grace saw right through her petty deceits. Next to Cordelia, she was a dancing bear. “Oh, ahm,” she stammered. “Am I so obvious?”

Cordelia’s eyebrows rose like a cat stretching, which did little to banish the amusement written across her face. “Apologies, my dear. I’ve upset you.” She unfolded herself from the window seat, a liquid motion without beginning or end, just a ineffable transition from seated to standing. “I doubt you are obvious to the layperson. I simply know what to look for. At breakfast you were in breeches, now you’re in this beautiful frock; at Uskweirs that can only mean a handful of things.”

While she spoke, she had reached one langourous hand to brush up the line of Amelia’s wide collar. One fingertip gently compressed the curl of lace trim while its neighbour ghosted across bare skin. The girl steeled herself not to stagger backwards as her whole body flushed, from forehead to collarbone and down her spine. She desperately, desperately hoped her suddenly erect member was not poking out the drape of her dress.

Elizabeth sighed gustily. “Cordy, you can stop playing with her any time, now.”

The woman’s eyes slid sideways to regard her hostess. “But she’s so much fun to toy with,” she purred.

To that the girl could only nod begrudgingly. “That she is.

But we're hoping to ask you a favor. Or rather, Father would like to ask you a favor on Amelia's behalf."

"I am of course at your father's service," Cordelia answered quickly, and at least half of her allure seemed to wash off of her, like a torrent of water rinsing away dye. There was still quite a lot left when she turned her attention back to the new girl. "What can I do for you, Miss Amelia?"

"Well I've just... started," she answered hesitantly. "Today, in fact. Or possibly last night? But. I don't sound the part."

One eyebrow on the beautiful woman's face tipped upwards. "And his grace the Viscount Ashbourne would like me to help you... act the part." She ladled extra significance on the last few words while spearing Elizabeth with an aggrieved look.

"Just sound the part," Elizabeth corrected lightly, and helped herself to the window seat that Cordelia had vacated. "I can't help her with voice, obviously. I don't know the trick to it."

Cordelia slitted her eyes at the girl. "Centuries of tradition, artistry, and discipline, passed down through generations of the maligned and marginalized by the so-called great and good of the land," she groused, freezing Amelia in place with an icy look and stepping past her to cross the room, still talking, "a delicate art which has sheltered civilization through its worst ages, an endeavor met not just with thanklessness but with sneers, derision, suspicion, and prosecution... and you call it a trick." The library door clicked shut. "We shall require some privacy to share 'the trick.'"

Amelia dared not move, not even turn to see where Cordelia had gone, completely at a loss as to what she should be doing. "I'm sure it's not a trick," she offered hesitantly, "But if it can

help me, I should like to know what it is, when... properly considered?"

A deep, sonorous baritone intoned, "Properly considered, it is the sacred dance of Melpomene and Thalia."

Amelia turned at the sound of the man's voice, surprised that someone had stepped silently into the library before the door had closed. The next moment, she leapt back, surprised at the broad-shouldered man standing there, facing the door, draped in a white sheet.

"It is the golden thread woven from ancient Greece through noble Rome to the present day," the man continued, turning to face her. Amelia blinked. He wasn't draped in a sheet; he was wearing a toga.

A toga... edged with purple thread.

"It is nothing less than the thing that makes us human, makes us civilized, makes us more than the brute beasts of the field," said the man in the toga. No—it was Cordelia's dress. But how had he got it off her so quickly?

"It is no trick. It is..." With no small measure of relish, the man lifted one open hand before his face, fingers splayed, and concluded: "Theatre."

From her perch in the window, Elizabeth groaned. "You bring new depth of meaning to the word 'histrionic,' Cordy."

"Cordy?!" Amelia gasped, staring at the man before her. Cordelia's dress. And, now that she focused on it, he wore his hair in tight brown curls; she never would have called it a feminine style, except that it was. And was that the faint touch of

powder across his strong, sharp features? Like an actor descended from the stage.

“When in a masculine role, I am Ned,” he corrected lightly. Then his shoulders dropped, his eyes widened, his hips rolled forward, and his fingers splayed out. Cordelia stood before them again. “And Cordelia when en femme,” she concluded in the breathy contralto she’d used before.

“How can you possibly do that?” Amelia sputtered.

“Decades of honing my craft,” she answered, and as she continued speaking her voice swung from feminine to masculine to old to young to feeble to hale: “...performing thrice nightly more often than not, studying at the feet of masters and mistresses who have studied at the feet of their elders, who studied their elders, and onwards and back to the dawn of civilization. That’s where I learned... the trick.”

“Dear Lord, Cordy,” Elizabeth sighed, pulling a book off of a shelf and opening it in the afternoon light, just so she could pointedly ignore the show. “She just wants to sound like a girl. She doesn’t have to channel Lysistrata.”

“Even a single corner of my profession is an ocean of technique and training,” Cordelia intoned regally. “I can do it, but it will take... weeks.” A beat later, she added, “And that only to impart the fundamentals. Months of practice after, ideally with my checking her progress regularly.”

The girl in the window rolled her eyes, bit back a reply that looked like acid on her tongue, and forced herself to smile sweetly. “If that means you would grace our home for those weeks, my Father and I would be glad for your company.”

Cordelia favored Elizabeth with a smile of no little satisfaction, and then rounded on Amelia. “From you, Miss Amelia, I shall require discipline, dedication, and a great deal of your time and patience. Or to be more accurate, I shall require your time, and you shall require your patience.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the new girl stammered.

“We shall meet here twice daily. An hour before luncheon, and then again an hour before supper.” She nodded, evidently considering the matter settled without any input on Amelia’s part. “Read Lear before tomorrow morning. You may go.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Strangers on a Hill

Bath, June 1812

The carriage, like everything else that Ashbourne owned, was well-appointed, suffused in rich fabrics, and, at least objectively speaking, very comfortable. But Amelia perched at the edge of her seat, back teetering stiffly, a torrent of hasty words spilling out of her mouth.

“...these stays aren’t as sturdy as I thought they were, they are sliding around, and they are doing a very poor job living up to their namesake. Which means that my middle does not have the shape that it needs which in turn means that the drape of this dress is...compromising. I don’t think I’m credible. I think it’s plain—and I’m plain, too, but that’s another issue—that I seem to be... intending to deceive, and that’s hardly the best foot forward when making new acquaintances.”

Amelia was doing her best to push her voice forward, up against her teeth, as Cordelia had drilled into her over the past month. Her sibilants had been vexing her, and she was ashamed to admit that had developed a bit of a lisp. Even now she was intensely aware that she was forcing too much air through her mouth, which made her sound reedy and whiney, but she also

couldn't seem to stop.

This had been the theme for Amelia for the past few weeks. As she had settled into life at Uskweirs, large portions of her internal mental architecture had simply come... unmoored and disjointed. Everything that had been stationary inside her was now in motion.

It seemed as if the foundation that her mind had rested on had fractured—or perhaps her foundation had been revealed, in fact, to have been long fractured and its weaknesses ignored. Now thoughts, fears, emotions, and impulses that she barely recognized came oozing up through the fissures—or at least, they rose up like an incoming tide when they were not erupting out of nowhere, seizing her with sudden swells of feeling.

Once upon a time, before Uskweirs, Amelia had prided herself on her restraint and self-control. She had always been careful to only think the right thoughts, only do the right things, only feel the right emotions. That was gone, now. The jumble that replaced it was not unpleasant—it felt right, being so discombobulated, freeing in the best and worst senses—but she often felt like the inside of her head was swamped, and whatever melange of joys, stray thoughts, and misgivings with which it was suffused... it all inevitably came dribbling out of her mouth.

Which at the very least gave her opportunity to practice her voice.

“Perhaps it’s best if I simply wait in the carriage,” she said, either to Ashbourne or Elizabeth, or both. It wasn’t clear even to Amelia whose permission she was seeking.

The viscount scoffed. “You’re going to spend two nights in

here? I pride myself on these cushions, but they are not that comfortable.”

“I wouldn’t want to deprive you of the chance to visit with your... friends,” she said, hesitating only a moment on the last word. What Lord Ashbourne and Lord Mulvey were to each other was unclear, and neither man seemed interested in clarifying things. Mulvey had invited them all to a short visit at his estate outside of Bath; both Ashbourne and his daughter had leapt at the offer, but Mulvey had made it clear that Amelia must come, too.

It was the first time she had left Uskweirs.

Crossing that threshold had inspired strong feelings in Amelia, which was really not much of a distinction as just about anything inspired strong feelings in her, these days. The other morning at breakfast she’d almost cried at the perfection of a poached egg.

Elizabeth, who had spent most of the trip staring pensively out the window, cracked a distracted smile. “Friends,” she repeated distantly.

“Mulvey wants to see you,” Ashbourne said, not unkindly. “You must forgive your elders our vicarious pleasures in watching you find yourself. It’s been some time since we had our own heady days of youthful discovery.”

“But... strangers...” was all she could articulate.

The viscount smiled gently. “Strangers is the point. You’ve blossomed at Uskweirs, but you’ve been knocking about among the same handful of people for weeks. You’ve already made

every possible awkward misstep with each of them, and so everyone there knows you as the girl who is trying. You need a chance to be a girl who is.”

“That would be well and good,” she answered, letting a jostling of the carriage send her back into the seat cushions, “if there was a girl who I am. I’m not certain that’s the case, yet.” She paused a beat, and then felt compelled to fill the silence: “I am a mess.”

“As are we all,” the viscount chuckled. “And one of the greatest pleasures in being a mess is sharing your messiness with others. You never know who will find some scrambled corner of your mess absolutely charming.”

Elizabeth sighed gustily at that, but then tapped the window. “We’re nearly there. I remember that signpost.”

“When we arrive,” Ashbourne said with the weight of authority in his voice, “we’ll say our pleasantries to our hosts and then Elizabeth, why don’t you and Amelia retire for the evening. It’s quite late already, and pleading travel weariness is perfectly reasonable.” He reached forward to pat Amelia’s knee. “You can gather your wits, enjoy a good night’s rest, and awake refreshed in the morning.”

The next morning, Amelia awoke and, after a moment of self-evaluation, became vaguely annoyed at how refreshed she actually was. Elizabeth, with whom she had shared the room, smilingly chided her for indolence as she slipped out the door, already made up fresh and perfect. Amelia dressed and made up her face, which was taking less and less time each day, and only

hesitated a moment before stepping out her door.

The Mulvey's house at Bath was, as many houses in Bath, a composition of compact opulence. The upstairs corridor and its six bedroom doors encircled an open space that looked down on the ground floor hall. Downstairs was a dining room, sitting room, and a library, each of them designed to maximize their use of space without being obvious about it. It was the kind of house that people who lived most of the year in a much larger and grander manor would initially call their 'summer cottage' and over the years forget to say those words with any trace of irony.

Amelia saw no one as she went down the grand staircase and across into the dining room, and was simultaneously gratified and disappointed to find only Elizabeth at the table. She sat and served herself some cake and some ham, then belatedly fetched herself coffee from the urn on the sideboard. The two girls talked a little as they broke their fast.

When Elizabeth's cheery voice faltered in the middle of complaining about the stiffness in her back, Amelia looked up to find her friend forcing herself not to smile into the hall. She turned to see what Elizabeth's eyes had fixed on. A young man had just descended the stairs.

He was tall and lean, willowy, with an improbably bright mop of red hair bursting from the top of his head. His features would have been bland if it were not for the spray of freckles that spread across his face. The spots contrasted sharply with his pale skin, as did his rust-coloured eyebrows. He smiled brightly as he entered the dining room.

"Miss Randall, a pleasure to see you again."

“Mister Harcourt,” she replied warmly, with a dip of her head. “Your uncle said we’d see you here, but we must have come in too late to catch you yesterday.”

“More likely I arrived later than you,” Harcourt replied, pouring himself coffee. “Well past nightfall. And now...” he smiled as he crossed to the table, “...I am desperate to see the place. I may go for a walk. It’s been more than a year since I last climbed Solsbury Hill.”

“That’s your day gone,” Elizabeth said lightly, and sipped at her coffee. “We won’t see you until dinner. Oh, excuse me. ‘We’ is myself and my friend, Miss Amelia Wright. Amelia, please meet Mister Francis Harcourt, our host’s nephew.”

Truth be told, Amelia had been perfectly fine playing the wallflower, but she put her hand forward, palm down, and Harcourt took it, pressing gently in greeting. She screwed up her resolve, made sure her tongue was where it ought to be to push her voice forward, and said, “A pleasure.” She was moderately sure she hadn’t embarrassed herself, but felt herself blushing all the same.

If Harcourt noticed anything amiss in her voice or appearance, he made no sign. “Well we can fix that easily enough if you join me,” he told Elizabeth. “It’s a good walk, a little long but not arduous. And once you gain the hill, it’s a fine view.”

“We can take a basket, make a picnic out of it,” the other girl suggested smilingly.

“Clever girl,” the man said, touching the side of his nose. A moment later he pushed his chair backward. “I’ll go tell Cook

right away. We can leave... within the hour?"

After he strode out, Elizabeth hid another smile in her coffee cup before looking uncertainly to Amelia. "You don't mind?"

Amelia shrugged helplessly. Elizabeth abandoning her to strangers in a strange house was hardly appealing. But she said, "I'm sure Lord Ashbourne won't mind my company through the morning."

Elizabeth looked at her like she had spoken in another language. "You're coming, too, Amelia. I'm not disappearing into the woods with a man and no chaperone."

It struck Amelia rather suddenly that she was the chaperone, and for that matter Elizabeth would be hers. "Oh. Of— of course. I don't know what I was thinking." She sipped at her coffee. "No, I don't mind. Not at all. I love the Cotswolds."

Spending most of the day on a walk with only one stranger, in fact, was very appealing to Amelia, but it was not to be. While the girls changed clothes for the outdoors, a coach rattled up the drive and disgorged two figures in heavy black traveling coats. By the time Amelia descended the stairs, Harcourt had swept the two new guests into their walking plans.

He smiled to them as they came back down the stairs. "Miss Randall, Miss Wright. This is Doctor Barry. Don't be fooled by his youth, he's a real, bona-fide doctor."

"Aye, for near two months, now," the young man replied with a rueful Scots accent. He was slight and ruddy, but held himself with a whipcord precision. As his hat was already in hand, he touched his brow and dipped his head. "It's a pleasure to make

your acquaintance, ladies.”

“And this is a friend of my aunt’s,” Harcourt continued, gesturing to the other guest, who was facing the door and in the midst of doffing a heavy coat. The nephew’s voice wavered just slightly with uncertainty. “...Miss Theresa Chesterley.”

The figure turned, and indeed, it was Miss Chesterley, again wearing her waistcoat and breeches, the ruffled folds of her elaborate cravat thrust forward like the prow of a ship. She favored them, or perhaps just Elizabeth, with a short, familiar smile. “I am in fact already acquainted with Misses Randall and Wright. Pleased to see the both of you. I understand we are hiking up a hill!”

It did not take long for their party of five to attenuate along the road into a pair and a trio. Harcourt took the lead with Elizabeth at his side while Amelia, Theresa, and Barry followed along behind. This soundly dashed her hopes of being only a third wheel chaperone whose only contribution to conversation was an odd word or two.

Theresa grilled her with questions at the outset, asking after her health, if she had recently been to London, what she has last read, asked where she had acquired the fetching ribbon along her sleeve. As the suited woman did not appear to wear ribbon, Amelia was uncertain why she cared to ask, not that she could furnish a decent answer as to their provenance, in any case.

Walking and talking, it turned out, was much more difficult than just talking. Amelia struggled to keep her voice forward, hold her tongue up against the back of her palate, and make sure she was pushing the right amount of air into her words. If she slipped up—and she must have, not that she could place her

finger on any one instance—she hoped it was covered by the exertion of the walk. At least she had changed into a lighter, breezier outfit suitable for the exercise.

Luckily, as the walk's incline increased, the frequency of Chesterley's questions decreased as she conserved her own breath.

Barry suffered no such limitation, but his conversation was sparse, if not guarded. He did not speak quickly, instead pausing before nearly every reply. More than once he would begin speaking, come to an abrupt halt, and then begin again from the start. Amelia recognized the same habits that she had developed in the past few weeks.

“Forgive me if I am being too forward, Doctor Barry,” she said along a particularly shallow bit of the path, “but are you attempting to tamp down your accent?”

For once, he evinced an emotion as he flushed. “Aye, lass. I must admit, I'd hoped to use this visit to practice my proper English, as it were. I start my courses in London in the fall, and I'll be facing enough judgment as it is without sounding the bumpkin.”

Amelia was so relieved to find some camaraderie in her own goals that she laughed. “I noticed you doing the same things I do.”

“If you've set out to conquer an accent, Miss Amelia, I'd say that your fight is over.”

“Not an accent,” she answered, and hoped her scrambling for an explanation didn't show on her face. She might as well go

with the truth, or at least one aspect of it. “I’m afraid I’ve developed a bit of a lisp. I’ve been taking elocution lessons to tame it. My tutor says I need practice.”

“And we’re your target dummies,” the doctor laughed. “Just as you lot have been mine. I dinnae ken—I didn’t... imagine... that pretty young ladies such as yourself worried about such trifles. A lisp can be quite fetching, don’t you think, Miss Chesterley?”

“I am not fond of the sound,” the other woman answered brusquely. “I like to hear grown women sound like women and not like little girls in pigtails.” She accorded Amelia a nod. “Your efforts do you credit, Amelia.”

Amelia murmured her thanks and turned her face to the path, suddenly dizzy. Was she flushed? What was this feeling? Such a surge of giddy happiness and... pride? It was kin to the tiny thrill she got whenever someone used her name, and while Theresa had indeed addressed her by name, there was some other aspect to it, too. That she had been complimented? But Barry had also just called her pretty, which was nothing more than a nicety, but still technically a compliment.

Perhaps because she felt that Theresa believed what she had said, and she’d directed that genuine compliment to her, to Amelia, by name. It felt real, more real than any well-meaning pleasantries that had ever been applied to her.

Everything was so complicated, now. Amelia loved it.

The path’s grade had fallen further, and now the hill did not rise up alongside them but laid down before them. They had reached the broad summit, and a carpet of greenery stretched out

all around them. The weather was bright and clear, and they could see for miles. Hedgerows and roads and lines of trees cut up the endless pasturelands, spread across rolling hills off to the distant horizon.

Harcourt had stretched out both his long arms and was slowly turning round and round, beaming. “Is this not marvelous?” He led the party to a handful of vistas, pointing to his uncle’s house, to Bath in the middle distance, to the newly-completed canal just visible as a thin silver ribbon, shimmering straight lines like stitching through a quilt.

They laid out a blanket and the picnic provisions, which Harcourt promised would be sufficient for five even if it had been packed for three. Cook had a long history of trying to overfeed him.

Amelia sat down and tried not to admire how her own legs looked, folded up beside her beneath the thin cloth of her dress.

They ate and laughed and chatted about nothing deeper than the quality of the food and how fresh air improved the taste of everything.

It was not long before Harcourt leapt back up and held out a hand to Elizabeth. He had remembered that he wanted to show her something. They ran off giggling, and Amelia watched them go, not quite certain how intently she should take her responsibility as chaperone. But they stayed within sight, standing at the edge of the hill’s flat top and looking off at something that Elizabeth apparently found thrilling.

“They make a charming couple,” the doctor observed with a

soft smile.

Theresa looked over at the two. “Lizzie makes a charming couple no matter who she’s standing next to,” she confided with no small measure of affection. “But she does seem particularly taken with Mr. Harcourt.” The three of them watched the couple for a while, communally confident that they were too distant for their staring to be obvious. Amelia tried to keep her simmering sense of consternation from her face.

Dr. Barry chuckled. “If I were a betting man, I might propose a wager for how long it takes for wedding bells to peal.”

“But—” Amelia began to say, and then stopped herself. She smiled and said instead, “But you are above such petty trifles.”

“As marriage?” the doctor laughed in surprise.

Amelia rolled her eyes. “As gambling.”

But Chesterley snorted softly as she found another sandwich. “I’m above such petty trifles as marriage.”

“Are you really?” The words came blurting out of Amelia’s mouth before she could stop them. One corner of her mind worried what voice had been used to say them. The rest of her tried to smoothe over the conversation. “You don’t hope to marry, Miss Chesterley?”

“There’s too much work to be done to allow myself be entrapped and distracted by a marriage,” the woman replied airily. She took a sharp bite of her sandwich and chewed meditatively. “I am lucky. My dear aunt left an endowment for my maintenance. It’s not a great deal, but it does mean that I do

not need to marry. And if I do not need to marry, I choose not to. Besides, I've never met a man even halfway intriguing. No offense, Doctor."

Barry put up his hands. "None taken. I'm in the same boat."

Amelia giggled. "You've never met a man even halfway intriguing?"

"I have my work, too," he insisted with an easy laugh. "Medicine is my mistress, and I am quite happy with the arrangement."

Amelia turned back to watch the two lovebirds, who were slowly making their way back to the picnic blanket. Amelia, of course, would never marry, and neither would Elizabeth, no matter how she played at making love. Amelia supposed it might be entertaining to flirt and to be courted, but doubted she could do it. Since she could never marry, even these first steps towards courtship could only be performed under false pretenses. She had no doubt that she would be consumed by guilt far surpassing any enjoyment.

But if Elizabeth could take pleasure in a man's attention for a day, Amelia wanted her to do so. She liked seeing her friend happy.

"What about you, Miss Wright?" Theresa was asking.

Amelia turned her vicarious smile back to her immediate surroundings. "Marriage is not for me, either," she answered lightly.

"Have yet to meet a man even halfway intriguing?" the

doctor teased.

She turned to face Barry and before she could stop herself, replied sweetly, “Present company excepted, of course, but medicine has already captured your heart, so you’re taken.”

When she realized what she’d said, her heart thudded in her chest. What was she doing? False pretenses, indeed! She had found the doctor easy to talk with, but their conversation had stirred no romantic feelings in her. If he took her flippant remark the wrong way—

But the doctor laughed, high and long, and plucked another sandwich from the platter.

CHAPTER SIX

The Mulveys Give Dinner

Bath, June 1812

The party's hostess was attenuated and grey, with eyes that flashed with life only rarely. More often they sunk into a sort of jaded weariness that she wore like old familiar clothes. Otherwise Lady Mulvey was dressed in colorful silks and dripped with jewelry—fashions almost forty years out of date, not that she seemed to know or care. She regarded her assembled guests, most of them her husband's invites, with blameless if perfunctory hospitality.

Amelia dipped a near-faultless curtsy when she was introduced, to the same bare response that everyone else received. Only Theresa Chesterley merited anything more: the old lady extended a hand, palm down, with a tight little smile. She then led them into the dining room.

The first course of fish and soup awaited them, laid out in a set of crockery that clearly but not ostentatiously communicated the Mulvey's comfortable wealth. Eight chairs were arrayed down the table, four to a side.

“Francis, across from me, if you will,” she directed, waving

at the near end of the table. “And Doctor Barry, I would be delighted to have you on my right. Theresa, dear, across from the good doctor. And then Miss Wright across from milord Ashbourne, with Miss Randall at his left.” Lord Mulvey took the remaining seat, at Amelia’s right and at the far end of the table from his wife, without comment.

Amelia might have hoped for Elizabeth’s seat at the end, but she reminded herself that she was here to interact with people, and so being at the middle of the table and surrounded by conversation partners was ideal, if slightly terrifying.

Talk began light, with Mulvey putting salmon on her plate and soup in her bowl, chattering about how Cook brought half of their native Hertfordshire with them whenever they repaired to Bath to take the waters. He had no idea if the local onions and carrots tasted any different than those at home, but he also could not argue with Cook’s results. Ashbourne asked if she cared for oysters, and when she answered in the affirmative, deposited two on her plate.

Being served by the men seated next to her was still new, and a little awkward. At least saying, “Oh, no, not so much, please,” or “Might I trouble you for a little more of that broth?” were easy enough. It was all going swimmingly until Amelia made passing mention that she had been visiting the Randalls.

“At Uskweirs?” the doctor at her elbow asked, eyebrows raised. “I haven’t been in London long, but I’ve heard it’s... lively there.”

Amelia opened her mouth to respond that it had actually been a rather quiet (if eventful) month, and then remembered. Faerieland rules. She couldn’t say she’d been to Uskweirs, not to

someone who hadn't. The words tangled up on her tongue and came out as an inarticulate squeak.

"We keep a quaint little house in Malvern," Lord Ashbourne put in from across the table.

"Father raises horses there," Elizabeth put in. "I feel like he raises horses everywhere, but especially in Malvern."

"Oh, for racing or for working? Or show?" the doctor replied, happily led into an entirely different conversation with the viscount. Once the men were distracted, Elizabeth shot Amelia a short smile and a wink. Awkwardness smoothed over.

The first course was cleared and the second brought out: roast lamb encrusted with rosemary at Lord Mulvey's end, a baked honey ham on his Lady's. Amelia accepted slices of both and lost her earlier reservations about sitting at the middle of the table.

"Her aunt was one of my dearest friends," the Lady Mulvey was explaining to Dr. Barry, nodding genially to Theresa. "Back in the days before 'bluestocking' was a dirty word." When the woman across from her made a sympathetically rueful noise, she asked, "I don't even know how the current state of affairs came about. Can you explain it, Theresa?"

Chesterley sniffed disdainfully. "Godwin did us no favors writing about his wife's affairs, but I feel like that's merely the foundation stones for more recent construction. Mostly I blame the war, but that's hardly polite conversation."

"Pish tosh," the hostess scoffed, and the way that Theresa smiled betrayed that she had expected that exact reaction. "I

doubt anyone at this table has any innocence to be preserved. Speak frankly.”

“Respecting the native abilities and powers of women was in vogue for a little while,” the woman across the table began, with no small measure of relish. “All across Europe. In France, this gave rise to the *citoyennes*: women invested with authority and responsibilities beyond the home. They quickly became an instrumental part of the Revolution, which is all well and good for the women in France... just not for women in England.”

“Not a rising tide for all our boats?” Lady Mulvey prompted encouragingly.

“Perhaps if it had happened in peacetime,” Theresa continued with a sad shrug. “But England is at war with France, has been at war with France for entirely too long, and so now the English must hate everything French. We hate the Revolution, even though we’ve had two, and we hate, inevitably, the *citoyennes*. If French women have power and authority, then English women must be their opposites, with no power and no authority and happy to have neither. And so the *bluestockings*, who were respected mavericks in thought and the arts before the war, are derided as *squawking harridans* in the papers today.”

“Do you think that disdaining the Revolution occurs only at the behest of the war machine?” Harcourt asked with the trace of a smile. “There’s no room left for actual disagreement over the ghastly state of their politics?”

“There’s no need for it,” came her ready and diffident reply. “Mark my words, it’s only a few years before England remembers that the light, high-waisted frocks that these young ladies are wearing mirror the dresses of Empress Josephine.

Very suddenly everything that you now consider to be ladies' fashion will become suspect, and replaced with some rough, heavy, and 'properly English' style."

"Is there anything to be done?" Lady Mulvey asked, with the sort of unthinking assurance one occasionally finds in elders that a younger person, more in touch with the problems of the world, will also know how to fix them.

"About the bluestockings or the frocks?" Amelia put in with a slight smile, and was rewarded with laughter. She lifted her glass and gave Theresa an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to make light. I'm afraid I'm terribly ignorant about all of this, and I'd love to know more." Before she could interrupt further, she sipped.

Theresa answered indulgently: "I can't say regarding the frocks, although I'll be sad to see them go. As for the bluestockings? The rights of women?" She sighed. "I think my generation will be consigned to rear-guard actions, protecting what few steps of progress our mothers made. It may be some time before progress is again possible. Certainly not until this war is over."

Lady Mulvey shook her head. "I'm very upset to hear that, Theresa. Not that I blame you, I'm sure you have the right of it. I should blame myself: I could have done more when I was young and full of vitality like you girls."

"Milady, you can't blame yourself," Harcourt insisted.

"Don't tell me what I can't do," she snapped back, and then tried to make a joke of it: "After all that's the whole point, isn't it? Men telling women what to do." Their end of the table

chuckled, pretending they hadn't heard the knives in her voice.

Conversation turned back to pleasantries until after the third course had been laid out. The light fare on offer struck a chord in Amelia and she soon set Doctor Barry, Lord Ashbourne, and Lord Mulvey all to provisioning her with salads, jellies, and cheeses.

“The good doctor comes recommended by Davie Erskine,” Lord Mulvey told Lord Ashbourne as they passed her plate around the three of them. “You remember him? Used to be Cardross, forever ago.”

“Recommended professionally or personally?” the viscount asked, with the sort of neutral conversational tone that said he already knew the answer.

“Personally, of course,” Mulvey laughed, a touch defensively. “He’s taking courses in London, not seeing patients. And the poor boy doesn’t know anybody in England, so his mentor thought I might help him make connections.”

“I din— don’t—know if I’d call him my mentor,” the doctor put in sheepishly. “I’d be quite honored to, of course, but... patron might be more apt. I’m terribly grateful for all his help.”

“Well, whatever your connection to old Cardross or to Lord Mulvey,” the viscount said with a practiced politesse that raised the hairs on the back of Amelia’s neck, “I should be honored to extend welcome to you.” She looked between the three men, trying to puzzle out what was being said without being said.

Finally she looked across to Elizabeth, who rolled her eyes.

Amelia resolved to interrupt whatever it was that was going on between them. “Doctor Barry, if you are already a doctor, why are you attending courses in London?” There. That was a good, sociable question, and she was moderately sure she had sounded right asking it.

“Well, a good doctor is never done learning,” he answered, “and there are a number of techniques and treatments being taught down here that haven’t yet reached Edinburgh. But mostly, I should like to be well-prepared before I join the army. There are diseases that aren’t typically seen on our fair island that I expect to encounter elsewhere in the Empire.”

“The army?” Amelia echoed. “My. You’re a braver man than... well. Than anyone I know, but my acquaintance is limited to civilians.”

Dr. Barry blushed at that, but shook his head. “Doctors rarely see the front lines, miss. Very little bravery involved. Mostly it just means that I’ll have a steady stream of work.” He winced slightly at where he’d turned the conversation, and pivoted: “Have you tried these pickles yet?”

Amelia hadn’t, the doctor amended the oversight, and the dinner proceeded apace. Chesterley spoke about the necessity of securing broad access to both education and divorce, one of which was popular but expensive while the other reform was deeply unpopular but would cost nothing. “In fact, taking legal fees into account, it would actually add to public coffers, not that that’s a good argument to put forward.” Harcourt did his best to look politely interested, but his face betrayed a turmoil to which he did not give voice.

Amelia was happy to indulge in the middle table

conversation, in which Barry and Ashbourne talked horses with enthusiasm. While Amelia was hardly an equestrian, she could at least participate, keeping careful rein over her voice and inflection. More than once she tried to draw in Elizabeth, but the other girl seemed distracted and, as the evening drew on, bored.

Finally the whole table was cleared—service and plates, candles and cloth—so that desert could be laid out. Amelia had not been shirking her duty as a guest to enjoy her hosts’ hospitality, and had held out a silent hope that the last course would be spare. But as a burgeoning spread was all laid out—cakes, tarts, fruit, cheese, and even a flavored ice, carved into the shape of a swan—her mouth watered nonetheless. She settled on pleading with the gentlemen to give her the slightest portion of each.

For all its bounty, dessert turned out to be the shortest course. Amelia had hardly more than sampled her plate when Lady Mulvey’s voice, clear and just a touch too loud, cut through the gentle table patter like a knife: “That is quite enough, Francis. I am exhausted with this!” A moment of silence later, she rose from her seat.

Theresa and Elizabeth rose, as well, and a beat later Amelia followed suit.

Lady Mulvey said only, “Gentlemen,” turned on a heel, and swept out of the room. Amelia and the other ladies followed. They did not go far: just to the adjacent sitting room. As soon as the adjoining door was closed, the lady of the house pointed at a footman by the sidebar. “Brandies. No water.” And then she threw herself onto one end of a couch with a gusty sigh.

Amelia had followed the train of ladies into the room but now drifted into the little circle of chairs and couches, coming to the slow realization that she was completely adrift. She was with the women. After dinner. She had no idea what she was supposed to do. A footman pressed a tumbler of brandy into her hand. Like a hot air balloon losing air, she sank onto the other end of the couch from Lady Mulvey.

“I should not have lost my temper,” their hostess finally told her half-drained glass, and then glanced up at the other three ladies. “I’m sorry if I cut your evening short, girls.”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth insisted from her chair facing Mulvey’s couch.

Theresa leaned up against the sideboard. “By my estimation, milady, all you’ve done is improve the quality of conversation.”

“But he’s not even a boor,” the lady sighed. “He just... grates on my nerves so. It’s nothing he does, it’s not even who he is. It’s who Edgar has made him, or will make him, conveniently only after Edgar dies.”

Amelia looked from face to face, and then gently cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, milady. But... who is Edgar?”

Lady Mulvey gave her a weary look, blinked once, and smiled ruefully. “My husband. The current Lord Mulvey. As opposed to Mister Harcourt, who will be the future Lord Mulvey, because the current one could never be bothered to give me a child.”

Whatever Amelia was expecting, this was not it. All she

managed to say was, “Oh.”

Lady Mulvey drained her glass and held it out to the footman. “Everyone assumes I am barren. Was barren. Certainly am barren, now! Thank you, dear,” she murmured as she took her refilled glass. “Sometimes I think... or I wonder... if it might have been true. Perhaps I was barren the entire time, and never had the opportunity to test the hypothesis.”

“I’ve told you before,” Chesterley remarked, gesturing with her glass, “you could have tested that hypothesis... independently.”

“Would that I had your counsel when I was your age, my dear,” Mulvey laughed, delighted. “There were so many men I would have fucked.”

This was not the after-dinner conversation that Amelia had been expecting to have with the ladies.

Their hostess leveled a finger at Amelia and Elizabeth both. “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, young ones. Else you’ll end up like me, having to sit across from your nephew who, when your husband dies, will take charge of your house and your money and every other detail of your life. And he tries to be solicitous about it because he knows just as well as you do the trap you’re both in, but somehow that only makes it worse. And all you can do is hate him because it should be your own son in his place, but you were never allowed to have one.” She turned her attention to the bottom of her glass.

Amelia looked helplessly from the Lady Mulvey to the other two. Theresa simply looked grim. Elizabeth gave her a diffident

shrug that said, “She’s always like this.”

“Do you have a mother?” the old lady asked suddenly, spearing Amelia with a piercing look.

“I—yes,” she answered, nodding slightly, hoping that that was the correct answer.

“Don’t let her marry you off,” she advised. “She’ll tell you that you want to marry, that everything will be better when you marry, that marrying will complete your life, but the thing you have to understand, dear, the thing that all you young girls need to understand and never do, is that you don’t understand anything.” She nodded as if she had said something profound.

Amelia wondered how much wine the lady had consumed at the table before even starting in on the brandy.

“Mothers. They marry you off before you understand anything,” Lady Mulvey went on. “And the men, they like it that way. They want you ignorant, because that makes you pliable. It lets them do whatever it is they want with you, your own happiness be damned.” She drained her glass again. “My mother betrayed me. Don’t let yours do the same to you.”

Amelia felt the need to say something, anything. She shrugged a little and attempted: “I don’t think my mother has any plans on finding me a husband, milady.” Elizabeth snorted softly into her tumbler. “But thank you for the advice, all the same.”

Lady Mulvey wasn’t listening. She set her glass down. “I believe I should retire while I can still manage the stairs. Theresa, it is always a pleasure to have you.” She pushed herself to her feet unsteadily, and Amelia leapt up to assist her. Mulvey

batted her hand away. “You two, you’re both very pretty. Just try to be more than that. Or else...” and here she flung her hands down the length of her body. Or else you’ll become me.

The footman appeared at her elbow to help her to the door; Amelia caught a glimpse of a woman in maid’s livery taking her onwards from there.

Amelia was long in finding her own bed, mostly because, once the men joined them in the sitting room, Elizabeth wanted to stay up talking with Harcourt until the small hours of the night. Amelia, Dr. Barry, and Theresa made halting conversation on the other side of the room, Amelia awkwardly aware that she was distant and unsociable, perhaps overtired. Finally they turned to playing cards.

When the two girls finally returned to their room, Elizabeth didn’t even wait until the door was shut before seizing Amelia from behind. “What do you think of him?” she hissed in excitement.

“Think of... who?”

“Francis Harcourt, of course!” Elizabeth squealed, slipping out of her dress and kicking it into a corner.

Blushing, Amelia turned away to take off her own frock. The two of them had dressed and undressed in each other’s company uncountable times over the past month, but Amelia was still struck shy every time. “He seems a... charming gentleman.”

“He is a dream,” Elizabeth sighed, pouring steaming water into the basin. She talked as she scrubbed off her cosmetics.

“He’s clever, he’s witty, he’s... incredibly handsome. Right now I’d tell you that he’s the most handsome man I’ve ever met, but I don’t count myself very reliable at the moment. And,” she added, pausing to raise a finger, “he remembered me.”

In her slip, Amelia sat on the bed, waiting her turn to wash. “You’ve met him before?”

“Once,” the other girl confirmed. “In London, and briefly. But he was just as perfect then.”

“You did seem to enjoy yourself today.” Suddenly, she understood Elizabeth’s distraction all yesterday and the day before. She’d been obsessing over seeing Harcourt again. “He seems like... a good friend.”

“Friend?” Elizabeth snorted. “I’m going to marry that man.” She yielded the basin and slipped into her side of the bed. “Even if it does mean becoming the next Lady Mulvey, eugh.”

Amelia washed silently. Elizabeth was prattling on about their hostess, who to hear the girl tell it, was always maudlin and drunk and full of high principles that she never followed through on. Amelia hardly heard her. It was only after she had crawled into bed herself that she asked, “Elizabeth? We can... we can get married?”

“I plan to,” the other girl answered from under the covers. “Don’t you?”

“But how?” she almost laughed. “You couldn’t keep... everything... a secret from him. Not in the marriage bed.”

“Of course not,” Elizabeth said, and she did laugh. “I’ll have

to tell him at some point. When I know I can trust him. Preferably before he proposes, but after he falls in love with me.”

“You think that’s... possible? For girls like us?” Her voice fell to a whisper. “Love?”

“I refuse to believe that who I am makes me unworthy of love.” A rustling on Elizabeth’s side of the bed resolved into her finger, poking into Amelia’s side. “Nor should you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Posture of a Lady

Monmouthshire, July 1812

“You’re the one saying that I walk like a man,” Amelia pouted, careful about her enunciation and also squinting into the sunlight and balancing a stack of books on her head.

Cordelia watched her from underneath her parasol. “No, you walk like... a milkmaid. Like you are accustomed to carrying heavy buckets while stepping over hillocks of cow shit.” Even the way she said “cow shit” sounded elegant. “Entirely too... rough and tumble. Because your role is that of a lady. You must float.”

“No matter what I do, I’m sure my feet will continue to touch the ground,” the girl groused, and then scowled as she heard her voice drop at the end of of ‘ground.’ Her concentration was split between entirely too many things all at once, and she kept losing control of the details. She tried again, with an upward lilt that made her griping sound like a question: “My feet will continue to touch the ground?” She didn’t really like that, either.

“Good correction,” Cordelia murmured.

Amelia felt a sudden burst of pride, quickly followed by embarrassment at her surging response to this barest portion of praise. This was the way of things, recently: after a lifetime of a muted heart, now every stray circumstance of life caused it to leap or flutter. She touched the corner of her eye to check if she was crying, because recently tears could dribble down her cheeks without her even noticing.

It was frustrating and also exhilarating.

Cordelia took a few steps down the coach path. Amelia watched intently, pretty sure the lady's feet did not, in fact, touch the ground. Her rump also described a perfect figure eight with each pair of steps, setting off corresponding swishes in her skirts. Amelia chided herself to focus. The actress turned and clapped her hands. "Again. Loosen your hips, all your motion should center there."

Amelia carefully swung the right side of her hip forward along with its attached leg, counter-balancing with her opposite shoulder leaning much further back than it was accustomed. The books atop her curls wobbled uncertainly.

"Slow is fine," her tutor advised, not at all for the first time. "You needn't rush. In fact, you shouldn't. You are a lady, you do not rush, you have never in your life had to rush, you do not even know what rushing is."

For a flat coach path leading away from the manor and down to the road, the ground was surprisingly uneven. Amelia discovered that where her foot was falling, the ground dipped; she leaned her weight forward too soon and came down too hard. Amelia saw in her mind's eye the stack of books sliding off her head and into the dirt. But the next moment her hips slipped

forward, her shoulders slid just so, and somehow she maintained her balance.

A half-inch dip in the road, but she had bested it. “Fuck you, dip in the road,” she crowed. But then it all went awry: her voice came out sweet and light, in contrast to her cursing. What might have once been a chuckle at that instead came out of her carefully-positioned vocal tract as a giggle. Surprised, Amelia giggled again, hands darting up to cover her lips, and then she laughed. Her head tipped back and the forgotten books atop it fell, slapping the ground in a clatter.

Cordelia did not chide her, merely watching with bemusement as her pupil knelt to collect the volumes.

“I didn’t... mean to giggle,” Amelia tried to explain without giggling more. “And then I just... lost it.”

Her tutor nodded. “Once everything is aligned, things start working together. Chuckles become giggles. You’ll even sneeze in a feminine fashion. It’s... a good feeling.” She handed Amelia one volume that had tumbled to her own feet.. “Which is why we’re working on your posture. Once you have the posture of a lady, you’ll have the voice of lady. Everything is connected.”

Amelia gathered and carefully stacked the books, corners neatly squared. They’d been a gift in the post from Theresa Chesterley: the five volumes of the new novel *Traits of Nature*, by one of the woman’s friends or co-conspirators. A bluestocking, a former bluestocking; it was unclear. But Chesterley had taken to heart Amelia’s claim to ignorance on women’s issues and apparently sought to amend the situation.

Starting with a novel.

Cordelia clapped. “Again, Miss Wright.”

“I’m a little surprised you’re not making me recite as I do this,” said the girl as she placed the stack of volumes on her head again. But the words came out wrong, or rather right. They were light and bright and playful, and what might have been a good-natured ribbing instead sounded like a coquettish tease.

“Ah, you’ve discerned my plans for the next—” the woman’s answer faltered. “You’re scowling. What is it?”

“That came out wrong.”

“I wasn’t offended.”

“Well, I’m glad, but it still wasn’t how I intended.” She straightened the books and prepared to take steps again. “Actually, the same thing happened in Bath. I think I... flirted... with Doctor Barry.”

“The scotsman that Ashbourne and Mulvey were arguing over yesterday?”

Amelia frowned, stopped her tentative steps. “Scotsman, yes, but I don’t know anything about arguing.”

Cordelia shrugged, a liquid gesture. “Ashbourne worries that Mulvey’s fucking him, but I think Mulvey just wants to get him into the Uskweirs crowd. He’s the protégé of one of Mulvey’s old flames, which also sets Ashbourne’s teeth on edge.” The woman waved a hand, as if she could dismiss a conversation topic with a gesture, like set decorations yanked away on ropes

and pulleys. “Tell me about the flirting.”

Amelia did, haltingly and carefully, while also taking steps forward. She tried to keep her spine ramrod straight without looking like she was keeping it ramrod straight, except she was also supposed to stick her rear out. Her account of the afternoon on the hill was garbled, at best.

But Cordelia nodded. “I can guess at what happened. Before you came here, you were accustomed to making little jokes out of silly implication. In Bath, you pushed the same words through your new voice, appearance, and bearing. But under that presentation, what you implied was no longer silly, but coy.”

Amelia frowned softly at the horizon and attempted to turn around without dropping her books again. “I suppose. One might assume that the same words would mean the same thing, but of course they wouldn’t. Because I had the posture of a lady.” She was moderately sure she’d put the right lilt into that to make it sound humorous.

“Now you’ve got it,” her tutor laughed (which sounded like musical chimes), following along beside her on the grass. She watched three more steps. “You do have to be careful about that, though. It sounds like the doctor was amused; other men will think you are making promises.”

“So no jokes?”

She could see Cordelia’s eloquent shrug in the shadow she cast on the ground. “Different jokes, different deliveries. You’ll get there. Why have you stopped?”

Because Amelia had indeed stopped in her tracks, staring

down the path to where it met the road. Coming up its length, on foot, were Lord Ashbourne and his daughter, both dressed for pleasant company. “Elizabeth?!” Amelia exclaimed. The girl was close enough to hear, as she lifted her head, smiled, and waved.

When the four were closer together, Amelia couldn’t stop herself from saying, “It’s not yet eleven, I’m surprised you’re even out of bed. And coming home, so you must have left even earlier. Whatever could have tempted you to such an adventure?”

“It’s Sunday, you heathen,” was the girl’s laughing reply. She stepped up and embraced Amelia and Cordelia in turn. “We are returning from church.”

Amelia looked from one to the other incredulously. “You attend church services?”

“Of course,” the viscount answered blithely. “The first Saturday you were here I asked if you wanted to join us.”

“I thought you were joking,” Amelia sputtered. “I didn’t think you... forgive me, but I didn’t think the likes of us were... welcome in a place of Christian worship.”

But Ashbourne only smiled. “Well, the advowson for the parish church is part of the Uskweirs estate, so I name the vicar. That goes quite a long way to making it amenable to our attendance. You should come next week.”

“I’d... love to?” Amelia replied helplessly, bid the two of them goodbye, and got back to her posture and gait lessons. As Cordelia had threatened, reciting monologues was shortly added

to her stack of simultaneous tasks.

The next Sunday, Amelia rose and dressed for an early breakfast and set off with the Randalls for services. The walk was pleasant, the weather warm, and her mood anxious. It had been years since she had last set foot in a church, driven from the practice by too many rounds of sharp words. Those who set themselves in judgment had never knowingly targeted her. Instead they had confided their righteous opinions on who deserved smiting under a pervasive assumption that she could only concur. But the vitriol so blithely dispensed and her own secrets so defensively kept always combined to make her skin crawl. So she had fled.

And now, feeling compelled to attend by her host's invitation, she returned. The parish church was a modest affair: a stone chapel that could seat the two hundred souls of the village, set in the midst of a weathered graveyard where the aforementioned village souls had been finding their repose for centuries.

The building did have some brilliant stained glass pieces. Ashbourne pointed these out, explaining that his predecessor had commissioned them. Amelia admitted that she couldn't place the characters or bible scene. "Ruth and Naomi," he supplied, still looking up at the tableau. "Sometimes I think I come here just to admire the glass."

But then it was time for services to start. The sanctuary had filled with villagers in their Sunday best, and Ashbourne led the two ladies to the front pew, smiling and greeting the other parishioners by name. Once at the fore, the viscount occupied

his pride of place with genial satisfaction.

The verger, a grey old man built like a brick wall, gave the gathered congregation a nod of welcome. He then introduced the pastor, who ascended the pulpit with a welcoming air. Amelia was struck by a sudden sense of familiarity, but dismissed it: he was just another smiling pastor in a preaching gown. “May the grace of our Lord greet you this fine morning,” he smiled out across them all. “Please kneel for confession.”

The congregation rose from their seats and then knelt down. Amelia moved along with them out of ancient habit, only struggling a moment with her skirts. There was, at least, a plush cushion for their knees in the viscount’s pew. Elizabeth handed her a book of prayer opened to confession, and a moment later the congregation began to recite in halting unison.

Amelia could not quite put voice to the words that she read, a long litany of self-denigration and supplication before the wisdom of the Lord God.

Then they sat and the vicar read through three psalms, one of them quite lengthy and repetitive about the transcendent glory of divine judgment. When he read, “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?” Amelia could not banish the sick feeling of being singled out, that the entire psalm was somehow directed at her and the past two months of her life.

She began to formulate a plan for how to excuse herself. Perhaps she could faint. She’d never done it before, but it didn’t look too difficult. Just fan yourself, breathe quickly, and fall over. And then Ashbourne would help her stagger out the door into the bright summer sunshine, away from all of this.

“Well that one went on and on forever, didn’t it?” she heard the pastor say, and the congregation laughed. Amelia’s plans for escape ground to a confused halt. It was when he smiled that he looked most familiar. “God’s statutes,” he went on ruefully. “How perfect and unchanging they are, or so we like to believe. It makes us feel safe to think that what is right and good is unchanging. But our first reading of the Old Testament may challenge that facile understanding.”

And then a deacon stepped up to the lectern and announced the reading in Genesis. His voice was reedy and his reading uncertain, and his nervousness in the role shone through. But as he read about Jacob, Rachel, and Leah, a sense of pride seemed to well up in the man, and he was smiling by the end of the reading.

“Poor Jacob,” the vicar called out from the pulpit, and all eyes looked up to him. “He worked seven years for the hand of the pretty girl, and all he got was her old, half-blind sister. So then he worked another seven years to win the hand of Rachel. Now, some may say that this is a story of persistence, and of putting in the work to realize God’s plan for ourselves and for the world. And I don’t think they would be wrong in saying that. Righteous perseverance is one of the greatest forces of change in our fallen world.

“But what most interpretations of this story will just blithely gloss over is that Jacob comes out of this with two wives. God’s plan gives Jacob two wives. Has God’s plan given any of you two wives recently?” And the pastor laughed, a generous guffaw that brought in the whole congregation and turned any uncertainties that they may have harbored into delight. Amelia was certain she’d seen this man before. “What Jacob had is now

called bigamy. It'll get you into trouble with the authorities. It used to get you into trouble with the church authorities, in fact."

The pastor leaned forward, two hands held out over the congregation in entreaty to consider his question, which was thus: "Now. How do we reconcile this story with the psalm that glorified our Lord's unchanging statutes? It seems like either Jacob was wrong then or we are wrong now. And both of these courses, well... let us be tactful and say that they flirt with heresy. Is there a third way?"

He paused, and Amelia could feel the assembled faithful lean forward, eager to hear the resolution to this knotty problem.

"For that we have our next reading, from Romans." He gestured grandly to the lectern and the man behind it. "Deacon, if you will."

The deacon, eager this time, read at some length on prayer, grace, predestination, condemnation, and love. The final verses rose to a crescendo, which the man did his best to give weight and fervor.

"Thank you, deacon, thank you," intoned the pastor from the height of the pulpit again. "Now there's a lot in that reading, and if parts of it mystify you, well then, I'm in good company, because I'm not sure I understand most of it. But I take solace that it begins by recognizing that we do not know what to pray for, but the Spirit of God intercedes for us, for the 'groanings which cannot be uttered.' How comforting to know that when we pray, we do not need the right words. He knows what we pray for; He knows what troubles us; He knows what help we need.

“And then there’s some verses about predestination, and friends, let us recognize that scholars more learned than you or I have debated how any of that operates for centuries. I’m not going to tell you how it works, and I don’t want you to worry about it, because it’s just not important. What is important comes next: the love. The love of God, the sacrifice of Christ. ‘If God be for us, who can be against us?’”

The pastor spread his hands above his head and beamed down at the congregation, exultant, and Amelia was so close to placing where she had seen him before that she could taste it.

“It speaks about those who might condemn, who may lay charges, who might separate us from the love of Christ,” the pastor said, and then paused, pensively, until the entire room paid him rapt attention. “I want to suggest to you that perhaps, on occasion, those who condemned, who laid charges, who tried to separate the Faithful from the love of God... they were men of the cloth. Men like me, like my superiors: respectable church men, condemning what they saw as improper behavior.”

From high above them all, the pastor leaned over the pulpit railing, so far that Amelia worried for a moment that he might tip over and fall out. But he was smiling. “But it is God who justifieth. Not men like me, not our bishop, not even the Archbishop of Canterbury. We read our texts, we make our arguments, we pen panegyrics denouncing each other’s positions. And that is what we call theology.”

He smiled down on his flock, opening both his hands as if to show them all that they were empty. “But theology is not the unchanging statutes of God. They’re just not the same thing... no matter what my colleagues might want you to think.

Theology can only ever be an approximation of God's plan. We see through a glass darkly."

The pastor straightened. "I'd like to take a page from the Cathars, who worshiped Christ a few hundred years ago. And yes, they were heretics. If you've heard me sermonize enough, you'll know by now how I love our heretics." The audience rumbled in response, chuckling with familiar indulgence for their pastor. "They always have one little piece that they got right.

"And the Cathars, they were obsessed with perfection. They called the holiest among themselves Perfects. But to the Cathars, perfection was not a state of being. It wasn't the end; it wasn't the goal. Perfection was a process. Becoming a Perfect was to dedicate yourself to perfection: not to declare that you were perfect, but that you were striving to become more perfect every day.

"I like that idea," the vicar smiled, rubbing his hands together. "Perfection is a process. I think it applies to us. I think it applies to our church. I think it applies to my colleagues, all those learned men exchanging theological panegyrics. I think it applies to you, to each and every one of you, who struggles to better understand, every day, the unchanging statutes of God, and how they apply to your life.

"And will we falter, will we misstep? Of course we will. Perhaps Jacob misstepped in taking a second wife. Perhaps the church misstepped in calling bigamy a crime. We don't know and we don't have to know. All we have to do is try, and keep our eye on the important part: the love. Remember that God loves us, and we can mirror His divine love in our love for each other. If we keep our eye on the love, we will do great things!

“I believe that we are all Perfects.” The pastor pointed down from the pulpit into the pews. “You are a Perfect. You are a Perfect. You and you and you are all Perfects.”

And then he looked down at Amelia, a new face in the front row right next to his pulpit. He smiled down at her directly and extended his hand, as if beckoning her up into the pulpit with him. “And you, my dear: you are a Perfect, as well.”

Amelia didn’t hear the rest of the sermon and numbly play-acted her way through the rest of the service. The pastor blessed them and told them to go out and enjoy the sunshine, and then they were filing out of the church. Ashbourne could have claimed the first exit, but instead he waited for the rest of the church to spill outside. The three of them took up the rear of the procession.

Elizabeth wordlessly handed Amelia her handkerchief; she realized suddenly that she had been crying. She had no idea how long she’d been crying. “Shit,” she muttered, trying to mop up her tears without completely destroying her cosmetics.

“Such language in a place of worship,” Elizabeth teased, but also squeezed her arm.

The pastor stood at the chancel door, shaking hands and saying goodbyes. When it was their turn, he smiled to her. “And you must be Miss Wright. Your hosts have been telling me about you.”

“Have they,” Amelia answered with a sidelong glance, but dropped a curtsey, too, more for practice than manners. “A

pleasure to meet you...”

“Reverend John Kirkswain,” Ashbourne supplied. “And yes, this is our guest, Miss Amelia Wright.”

In response to her curtsy, the reverend snapped his heels together and performed a curt bow. Amelia gasped in recognition. “I saw you at Uskweirs. Dancing.” And now that she had said it aloud, she was certain of it: this was the man who had been dancing out of place, as if he were a woman. That was the exact same bow that he had performed at the end of the dance.

Kirkswain lifted an eyebrow. “I’m afraid that I can’t say that I saw you,” he said carefully, and then sent a slight smirk towards Ashbourne. Apparently the reverend found it amusing to follow the viscount’s Faerieland rules to the letter.

At that moment the verger stepped outside, closing and locking the church doors behind him. “Ah, and you were dancing with him!” Amelia all but cried. The broad, grey man, dressed as smartly then as he was humbly today, came alive in her memory.

“Well of course,” Kirkswain laughed, and reached over to curl his arm around the verger’s middle and pull him close. “It’s terribly gauche, but I never miss a chance to dance with my husband.” And he planted a kiss on the other man’s temple.

The verger’s grey face simultaneously grimaced with worry and smoothed with affection. “People might see,” he hissed.

“Nobody in this town doesn’t know, dear,” the reverend laughed. “Now meet Miss Amelia Wright. My verger, my

sexton, the love of my life, my husband, Mister Whitby.”

Amelia inclined her head, but the only thing that came to her lips was the question, “How is that you haven’t got yourself defrocked, Reverend Kirkswain?”

The pastor raised himself to his full height and placed a hand over his breastbone. “Talent.”

“God watches over fools,” Whitby groused.

“Powerful friends,” Ashbourne answered with a chuckle. “Speaking of which. Gwîl Awst?”

The Reverend took his husband’s hand and executed a twirl as if he’d been led into it. “It’s an opportunity to dance, where else would we be?”

Amelia waited until they were walking home before asking, “What’s Gwîl Awst?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gwîl Awst

Monmouthshire, August 1, 1812

Uskweirs never needed a reason for a party, but neither did it turn down any reason presented. Small parties seemed to manifest spontaneously at the manor house. Guests came and went constantly, so at chaotic intervals, enough bodies would collect that a casual game of lawn croquet and dinner apotheosized into festivities. These were easy enough for Amelia to avoid if she cared to. She could read in her room, go for a ride or walk through the grounds, or play on the piano that she'd found stashed away in an apparently forgotten room on the third floor. Gwîl Awst promised to be another beast entirely.

As Elizabeth described it, Gwîl Awst was a Welsh holiday practiced by the locals and gleefully appropriated by the Uskweirs crowd. While the Welsh villagers were enjoying traditional feasts that they had hiked up onto nearby hilltops, the festivities at Uskweirs promised the manor house's usual fare: dining, dancing, drinking, and sex in the gardens.

Amelia had thus far weathered a small dinner party, a parish church worth of villagers, and a few spontaneous Uskweirs parties. She was more than a little apprehensive at the thought of

attending a party that Elizabeth promised her would be even larger than the one she had found on her first day here. She wondered if the Randalls would think any less of her if she locked herself in her room.

She was about to share her locked-room plan with Elizabeth when the other girl asked, “At Gŵil Awst, would you like me to introduce you to some other women like us? And introduce you to them.”

“There are more of us?” Amelia asked in surprise, sitting down next to her friend on the settee. “I thought we were... rare.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “There’s rare and then there’s rare. Cordelia’s rare to the point of unique, I think. The likes of you and me? There are always a handful of us at the bigger Uskweirs events.”

Amelia folded her hands into her lap. “I think I should like that a great deal,” she confessed. “They won’t think little of me since I am so... new?”

Elizabeth laughed outright. “They’re more likely to adopt you. So it’s settled. I’ll sequester us away so we can gossip in peace.”

It took some time for Amelia to navigate through the Gŵil Awst throng once it had assembled a few weeks later. There were a few familiar faces she’d met in the past months who she had to exchange pleasantries with. Nor could she pass up the sumptuous spread laid out for the guests, since it was sure to be picked over by the time she returned later in the evening. She also got asked to dance a bewildering three times and had to lie

that her card was filled. As she ascended the east stairs, she reflected with some surprise that, while she had never been one for parties, she might actually enjoy herself here... if she didn't have other priorities.

Eventually she made it to an upstairs parlour overlooking the east lawn, usually disregarded by party-goers. By the time she arrived, six women had already gathered there. As Amelia came inside, all eyes turned to her.

They were... stunning. It didn't hurt that they were all decked out in party dresses, of course, but Amelia still boggled as their collective attention settled on her. They were tall, they were short, they were young and old, dark and fair. Some were definitely prettier than others, but even the plainest woman possessed a beauty that all but staggered Amelia. And they were all like her?

She realized that she was standing in front of the open door, lips parted as if about to speak, but absolutely nothing came to mind.

Thankfully, Elizabeth was among the gathering. She skipped across the room, hands out in welcome. "Amelia, come in and meet the girls." This, at least, triggered a sequence of names and "a pleasure to meet you"s that put Amelia on familiar ground. As more women slipped into the room, each was introduced to Amelia and anyone else they hadn't met, and soon the room had more than a dozen women in it, chatting, drinking, and eating hors d'oeuvres.

Not long after, a liveried servant entered bearing a tray of familiar tall amber glasses. The room was immediately filled with a chorus of responses ranging from surprised delight to exaggerrated groans. "I thought it might be convenient,"

Elizabeth explained as she passed them out, “since we were all gathered in one place.”

All but one of the women took a glass, often clinking it against a neighbour’s, and then downing it as quickly as possible. The sole woman who refrained—short, robust, and introduced as Mrs Grace Curtis—demurred quietly, which did nothing to stop someone else teasing, “Oh, is it time for another one already? You two are like rabbits.”

Grace blushed to the general amusement of the room, outside of Amelia. Seeing that the new girl was left out of the joke, Grace ignored the rest to explain: “My husband is like us, but the other way round. He was thought a girl when he was young, and has since corrected things.” She paused and sighed happily. “But we both still wanted children. And Henry hates it, but he grits his teeth and makes it happen.”

It took Amelia a moment. “Oh. So... he... bears the child.”

The other woman nodded. “Once he’s showing, he has to go hide on our farm for months on end. A few neighbours know, but mostly he pretends to be his own sister, visiting during the pregnancy. It’s... very difficult for him, but he says it’s worth it. We have three children so far.”

“And?” Amelia raised her empty glass as the larger part of her unasked question.

Grace smiled. “Among its many other effects, the potion makes us infertile. But only as long as you take it regularly.”

Now it was Amelia’s turn to blush. “Ah. So your husband is... not yet pregnant with your fourth.”

Nearby women chimed in with laughing “Not yet!” and “Give her time!”

But Grace only rolled her eyes. “Not that we know. It’s a complicated business. But until we do know, I’m off the potion and trying not to miss it too much. Lord knows Henry sacrifices more than I do.”

“I do love how you call it a potion,” Elizabeth chimed in with an indulgent smile.

“Well I’m not all high-fallutin’ like you classy folk with your Latin,” Grace responded with a matching smile. “I just raise horses... and provide half of you modish girls your vimus equay yammawhatever.”

“‘Potion’ is so much easier,” Elizabeth laughed, and then nodded to two other ladies, one tall and one short. “Not to denigrate the value of a good education, of course.”

Everyone smiled knowingly, again except for Amelia. It was only a heartbeat before the taller of the two indicated ladies, a Miss Marianne Woods, explained. “We run a ladies’ seminary in Edinburgh,” she said, putting a hand on the shorter woman’s shoulder.

“Used to run,” the latter, Miss Jane Pirie, corrected with a sour smirk.

“...and will again,” her partner rejoined with a smile. She plucked two wine glasses from a passing tray and passed one to Jane. “Elizabeth is one of our graduates, in fact.”

“I still find it difficult to not respond with ‘yes, Miss,’ whenever you speak,” the graduate giggled. “And I’ll tell you up

front that I am ashamed at the collapsed state of my French. But it is lovely seeing you here, this far south.”

Amelia bit her lip. She had no comprehension of ladies’ seminaries, beyond the fact that daughters of family friends would be sent off to one in their awkward early teens and return a few years later graceful, sophisticated, and ready to be married off. All Amelia could think to say is: “Edinburgh? I just met one of your countrymen down in Bath.”

“We don’t know him,” the shorter Jane put in with a smirk. “Edinburgh’s not that small.”

“I wouldn’t imagine,” Amelia demurred, tamping down her hope that an unlikely connection might be worthy of conversation. “He’s a doctor, and a new one. He must have spent the last few years in his studies.”

Marianne tried to forestall a smirk of her own. “Not Doctor James Barry?” When Amelia answered in a surprised affirmative, she laughed. “We do actually know him. We just saw him as he was settling into his new digs in London. Is he here?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “He hasn’t forced himself onto Uskweirs society yet. But I take it he’d fit in?”

Both ladies from Edinburgh bobbed their heads but did not speak further, so Amelia asked, “What took you to London?”

Marianne beamed while Jane scowled. The first one answered: “We filed a libel suit against the lady who ruined our school’s reputation... and we won.”

“I heard some whispers,” Elizabeth admitted. “But nothing

solid. All I know is you lost all your students in a single day.”

“Three days,” Jane grumbled.

Marianne rolled her eyes, and then leaned toward her old student. “Would you like to know what the wicked libel was, Lizzie?”

“I admit to no small measure of desperation.”

The teacher smiled conspiratorially, but did not bother to lower her volume. “Lady Cumming Gordon told all her friends that Jane and I were fucking each other in the girls’ beds.”

Amelia had no response. Elizabeth actually sniggered. Finally Amelia stammered, “But you won the case, so it was... proven untrue. In a court of law.”

Jane scoffed. “As if we’d fuck in the girls’ beds. They’re far too narrow.”

“And hard,” Marianne agreed with a giggle. “But our lawyers made an excellent case and the judges concluded that women fucking other women is as fanciful as witchcraft.”

“Equally imaginary,” Jane quoted, “‘with witchcraft, sorcery, or carnal copulation with the devil.’ I’m so happy,” she went on dourly, “to be compared to Satan.”

“Oh hush, we won,” her partner replied, and clinked their glasses together.

“At what cost,” came the sour reply, shortly doused in drink.

Before Amelia could puzzle out if she could politely inquire what Jane had meant, Elizabeth turned toward the door and

squealed, “Oh, CeeCee!”

Amelia turned, eyes wide. There in the doorway was a striking figure, a tall and regal woman bedecked in an elaborate party dress made out of silk so white it glowed, trimmed in ripples of scarlet red. Her lips were stained the same color. Her raven hair was streaked through with streamers of grey which seemed more like ribbons and pennants than indicators of age. Atop it all she wore a wide-brimmed hat, clearly crafted to match her white and red dress exactly, festooned with roses.

“Miss Amelia Wright,” Elizabeth introduced giddily. “May I introduce you to the Countess Charlotte Catherwood.”

The lady leveled her gaze at Amelia, the corner of her lip twitching upwards. “You’re supposed to be in Iceland, dear.”

“We’ve met,” was all Amelia could manage, barely a whisper. She tried to swallow, but every inch of her throat was a desert. “She’s... she’s my mother’s best friend.”

The countess advanced, looking her up and down appraisingly. “My my, you’ve been busy. Amelia, is it?” She smiled, the same fierce, feral smile that had always scared Amelia as a child. “You must call me CeeCee.”

Amelia stammered for what felt like a full minute. “You can’t possibly,” she said finally, which was at least words even if it wasn’t a sentence.

“I can possibly, and I do certainly,” her mother’s best friend responded regardless, pulling out her hat pins and handing off her exuberantly rosey headpiece to a servant. “Have you been holed up here for the past three months?”

“Since May, milady,” Amelia answered automatically.

The countess raised a single finger. “CeeCee.”

“Since May, CeeCee,” she corrected. “That’s... going to be strange and awkward.”

“Well, I have to learn to call you ‘Amelia,’ now,” came the reply, with a glass raised in toast. “So here’s to mutual difficulties.”

Amelia looked sidelong to Elizabeth for help, which was clearly futile, as the girl’s eyes were wide and smile even giddier at this unexpected development.

“Is she your protégé, Lizzie?” CeeCee asked the other girl, and at her excited confirmation, nodded decisively. “Well done. Both of you.”

Elizabeth patted Amelia’s shoulders proprietarily. “Cordelia helped, too.”

“Well I’m glad she’s earning her keep here,” CeeCee remarked with a droll smirk. “It means she won’t try to come earn her keep at my house.” She lifted an eyebrow at Amelia. “Are you quite well, dear? I won’t bite.”

“Yes you will,” came the quick reply from Elizabeth and at least two others in the room.

CeeCee nodded ruefully. “Yes I will,” she allowed, to much amusement. Amelia realized with sudden dread that they had become the center of attention. The countess cast her eyes left and right, as if she herself was also realizing the same, or more accurately that it was a problem for the new girl. “Amelia, dear,

would you perhaps like to sit?"

She did; most of the others took the hint and drifted to different corners of the room. In a moment just three of them were sitting on a long couch: Amelia, CeeCee, and Elizabeth. The last diplomatically changed the subject. "CeeCee, was your husband well enough to travel?"

"He was," the countess answered, somewhere between polite and pleased. She then waved a hand in the general direction of the south lawn. "I'm sure he's already somewhere in the gardens by now, getting the daylights bugged out of him."

Jonathan Catherwood. Earl, politician, family man, frequent guest at her father's table. And apparently, Amelia learned tonight, a sodomite. A widower remarried to a foreign lady of little name but reportedly good breeding and excellent hospitality, who became the Countess Charlotte, who became, tonight, CeeCee. Who was, and had always been... like Amelia.

"You don't mind?" someone said, and Amelia realized with horror that it was she who had asked.

CeeCee raised her eyebrows. "Mind what, the buggery in the gardens?" She settled back onto the couch cushions. "Honestly, I'm just glad to get the night off. And it's nice for him to get a little variety. It's the spice of life, after all."

Amelia frowned, having received more information than she had actually wanted out of a question she hadn't really intended to ask. "My apologies, mil— CeeCee. That was rude of me to ask."

"Exceedingly, but I got to turn it around and make you regret asking it, so I'm quite pleased with myself." She gave Amelia a

short little smile. “Are you ready to ask the question you actually want the answer to, or haven’t you found it yet?”

Amelia frowned. What question? But the countess had always been like this: fierce, presumptive, and self-satisfied, a combination that had terrified a much younger Amelia. That impression had continued long after she’d attained adulthood. She framed questions that could only be answered one way, the way she wanted you to, and watched you wriggle like a worm on a hook while you tried to figure out how to respond. Whenever the countess had visited, Amelia had dreaded stepping into her mother’s sitting room—

Her mother.

She could feel all the color drain out of her face as she whispered, “Does my mother know? About you? About... all of this?”

CeeCee leaned forward to pat the back of Amelia’s hand. “Your mother knows very little about anything outside the bonds of her own expectation, and therefore absolutely nothing about any of this. I have never seen any of your family here at Uskweirs. You are safe, my dear.”

And suddenly Amelia could breathe again, blinking against the lamplight in the library as if she had been buried underground and just pulled up out of the loamy earth. The countess was intimidating, to be sure, but it hadn’t been her presence that had upset Amelia; it was what her presence implied might also be true. If the Countess Catherwood could be of Uskweirs, there was no telling who else might be.

But not Amelia’s family. She took the countess—CeeCee—at her word. Her acumen had always been razor-sharp. And to

Amelia's surprise, as she sat on the couch watching CeeCee banter with Elizabeth, the woman who had terrified her as a girl transformed into a familiar figure, someone who Amelia might even take comfort in. Someone she could trust.

Hesitantly at first, Amelia joined the conversation of the other two ladies. The talk was not light, not with CeeCee's proclivity for suddenly speaking of the terribly serious or the terribly scandalous as if it were nothing. The habit had always thrilled Amelia's mother. No one gossiped quite like the Countess Catherwood.

When she was younger, Amelia had quailed before the onslaught of surprise and scandal. But tonight it was pleasant, exciting even, and she realized: now she was on the inside of it, just another woman indulging in a little gossip. Slowly a few others joined them on the couch or the nearby chairs, and Amelia sank gratefully into the feeling of sisterly camaraderie.

Other ladies left the parlour for the larger party, being sure to say their goodbyes as they went. Amelia tried to tamp down the thrill of each one using her name as they did so, then realized she could just sit there beaming. Soon there were only a handful of people left, lounging and chatting.

She had thought that CeeCee had been the draw for others to join them, but as talk kept returning to her life, Amelia realized that she was the main attraction. The new girl. But now it didn't feel like she was on display; instead, she was surrounded by new friends eager to get to know her. Unsurprisingly, most of the talk centered around her recent history, what steps she'd taken, and things she'd learned.

She'd grown so comfortable, in fact, that she found herself leaning forward off the couch, saying: "What about—" But her

newfound confidence immediately failed her and she fell back into the couch blushing furiously.

CeeCee's grey eyes roved over her for only a moment before she finished Amelia's question for her. "What about the Snip?"

Amelia covered her face with a hand. "Yes. Although that's a nicer way of putting it than what I was about to say."

"Castration," Jane offered brusquely. Amelia couldn't tell through her fingers if the teacher was trying to be helpful or gamefully goading her.

She lowered her hand resolutely and forced herself to speak. "Yes. Lord Ashbourne mentioned it was... an available option. And suggested I would probably need to think about it before making a decision, and it's been months, and I'm... nowhere near a decision."

Elizabeth placed her cool hand on top of Amelia's. "First of all, there is no rush to make that decision."

"But he suggested it might... hasten the process?" the new girl asked uncertainly. "And that seems like something better done sooner rather than later."

CeeCee shrugged. "I defy you, my dear, to guess which of our present number has been snipped and who hasn't." She gestured grandly around their little circle. "At the end of the day, it makes no difference."

Marianne spoke up with a slight frown on her face. Amelia suspected she was not accustomed to gainsaying nobility. "I'm not sure I'd go that far, milady. *Virus amantis equae* affects every woman differently, so it's impossible to say if, for instance,

I might have had poorer results if I hadn't, as you say, been snipped."

"There are practical concerns, too," Grace added. "If you want children—and before Lizzie interrupts me, if you want children the easy way—the Snip is not for you. Elizabeth will talk your ear off about clever plots and stratagems to acquire children, but they're all complicated and expensive. As much as Henry and I go through for our kids, it's still simpler than the alternatives."

"Speaking of practical concerns, it can change how the associated equipment operates, let's say," added someone else.

"Which is why I've refrained. I think my husband would be quite upset if I couldn't perform my wifely duties," CeeCee opined with a laugh.

"Trust me," Jane cut in, "it's never stopped Marianne." The circle laughed and toasted Marianne, who pretended she wasn't blushing fiercely.

Elizabeth bumped her shoulder against Amelia's. "Is any of this helping? We seem to be as collectively confused as you were individually."

Amelia gave a helpless shrug. "It's a personal decision made for personal reasons steeped in personal history. I don't know what else I was expecting."

The conversation moved on, slowly losing steam and participants. Finally Marianne rose from her seat, delicately stifling a yawn. "I'm afraid my conversation is going to turn into snoring soon if I don't absent myself. It was such a pleasure

making your acquaintance, Miss Wright.”

“Amelia, please,” she answered, holding out her hand to take and squeeze Marianne’s, and then Jane’s as she stood to go, too. “I fear I put far more care into choosing a given name that few will speak than to the surname that most will use.”

Marianne smiled, turned to go, and then turned back. “You mentioned, once you were done with your metamorphosis here at Uskweirs, you might become a governess. Jane and I can help with that. Provide you references as if you were one of our graduates.”

“We’d need to check that you’re competent first,” cautioned Jane, trying and failing to shoot her partner teacher an admonishing look. “We have standards to uphold, even if we no longer have a reputation.”

The gathering did not last much longer after the two left. Grace had to be delicately roused from the doze into which she’d fallen while the others pretended not to notice. CeeCee made Amelia promise to write. As they left the parlour, Elizabeth reminded Amelia that there would be dancing the next evening, too, since she had lied to so many gentlemen about her filled dance card. Amelia had to admit that the prospect was not without its temptations, but her main concern was seeing what was left of the buffet downstairs.

She had just descended the east stairs in search of a well-past-midnight snack when a voice called her name. She turned to find Theresa Chesterley, halfway into shrugging on her traveling coat. The lady crossed the hall, still adjusting the fit. “I had all but given up hope. I’ve been looking for you all night.”

“Oh, I was... upstairs,” Amelia answered awkwardly, and

folded her hands before herself, just to give them something to do. Her empty stomach complained, but she ignored it and hoped it would refrain from complaining audibly. “Did you need me for something?”

Miss Chesterley’s features rippled through a handful of expressions. Finally she settled on a polite smile, although her eyes seemed disappointed. “Nothing specific, just hoping to enjoy your company.”

“At a party like this, there had to be better company than mine,” Amelia laughed tiredly. “Clever minds more to your liking.”

“I’ve never found your company or your mind wanting,” came her quick reply, but a trace of worry clouded the woman’s face. “Did you not... that is to say. I had hoped to talk with you about Sarah’s novel, if nothing else.”

“I haven’t quite finished it,” Amelia hedged, and then pointedly looked at the other woman’s coat. “Are you leaving?”

“I’m afraid I am. There’s a... meeting I need to attend in London.” She patted her pockets. “I thought I could celebrate Gŵil Awst here and make it there in time, too, and I will, but it means cutting short my Uskweirs visit and enduring a tiresomely long coach ride. Perhaps the next occasion we meet we’ll have more time.”

“I’d like that,” Amelia said, more out of instinct than anything else. She could smell chocolate wafting in from the other room.

“Would you?” Chesterley asked, smiling, and then laughed. “My apologies, but I really must go. It was a pleasure seeing

you, if even for a moment.” And then she bustled out the door and into a waiting carriage.

Amelia was halfway through filling her plate from the very depleted buffet before she realized that Theresa Chesterley’s smile had been brighter than she’d ever seen it... and it had lit up when Amelia had said she would like to spend time with her. She put down the tongs and looked back to the long-closed door. “Wait, what just happened?” she asked the empty air.

CHAPTER NINE

The Carriage to Yorkshire

Monmouthshire, October 1812

“Father Father Father Father,” gabbled Elizabeth as she burst into the library with all her usual delicacy. Amelia looked up from the window seat where she was reading. In the other girl’s hands fluttered a short pile of post, topped with the bouncing pages of an opened letter.

Lord Ashbourne barely lifted an eyebrow from his own book. “Yes, my dear?”

“We’ve had a letter. I’ve had a letter,” Elizabeth said in a rush, and absently dropped the unopened post on his writing desk. “From Francis Harcourt.”

“Good to hear he’s literate,” the viscount murmured, nudging through his own post with distaste. “I did expect to see more of him, but he’s been rather scarce.”

“You know he’s been attending to his sick mother in Yorkshire,” his daughter pouted. “And he has written. He’s written five times in four months.”

“And you’ve written...?”

“I’m not sure how many times,” Elizabeth demurred, although Amelia knew from late night chats, including the evening before, that she did and the number was 12. “But in this letter, he’s invited us to visit. His friends are giving a house party, and he’s spoken of me so often that they wish to make my acquaintance.”

“Invited us.”

“Yes.”

“To Yorkshire.”

“Yes.”

“In October.”

“Yes.”

“Like hell I’m traveling to Yorkshire in October. The roads will be abominable.” Ashbourne turned his attention back to his book.

“Father!” Elizabeth all but wailed, dashing the open letter against her thigh.

He waved her off, unmoved. “Take Amelia.”

Elizabeth fell suddenly quiet, glancing over to Amelia, then back to Ashbourne. Her voice quavered with skeptical hope. “To Yorkshire? In the carriage?”

“She can chaperone you, you can chaperone her,” the viscount suggested reasonably. “It’s Yorkshire, not London, so I

imagine you should both be sufficient for each other. Yes?"

She bit her lip. "I mean... it is just the country."

Ashbourne muttered. "Because pretty young things can't get up to exactly the same kinds of trouble in the country as in the Town. I swear the rules of polite society make no sense."

Before he could reconsider or worse, launch into a diatribe, Elizabeth dashed forward to throw her arms around him. "Yes, Father, I think it's a splendid plan. Thank you!"

Ashbourne accepted his daughter's embrace with no small measure of pleasure, and sent a smirk over her shoulder to Amelia. "Now you see the full genius of my plan unfold. Invite you to stay with us, and now I don't have to go to fucking Yorkshire in October."

"This is a terrible plan," Amelia observed as she watched Uskweirs shrink away in the rear window of the carriage.

Sitting opposite her, Elizabeth was vibrating hard enough to rattle the carriage apart. Wide-eyed, she said, "Nonsense. This is fabulous. And you said you would go."

"I am having second thoughts," Amelia confessed, and gestured down the length of her body. "Am I really ready for a whole house party?"

"You've been to a half-dozen house parties en femme."

"At Uskweirs," Amelia pointed out. "This won't be our people."

“Aw, you called us ‘our people.’ Besides, you went to Bath.”

“A dinner party for eight is a very different animal than a house party for fifty.”

“It’s been months, Amelia,” her carriage mate said reasonably. She ticked her points off on her fingers. “You’ve been taking horse potion for months,” (because ever since Gŵil Awst she’d been calling it that) “you’ve been dressing yourself and applying your cosmetics for months, you’ve grown your hair out for months, you’ve been practicing your voice for months. I don’t even remember what you used to look like.”

Amelia scrutinized her hazy reflection in the window. “I do,” she murmured, even if she had to admit she did look different.

Elizabeth swatted her knee. “But more importantly, nobody in Yorkshire does.” When her friend didn’t respond, she elaborated: “You don’t know anybody in the North. No one is going to recognize you. And if you do trip yourself up—which you won’t, but even if you do—then you don’t care, because, again, you don’t know anybody there.”

“But word will spread. Gossip flies faster than... whatever the second half of the aphorism is.”

Elizabeth snorted performatively. “Word will spread. ‘Oh, I was at a party and there was a girl who sneezed and it sounded like a man sneezing. What was her name? I can’t recall.’ It won’t come back to you because, once more, you don’t know anybody there and they don’t know you.”

Amelia picked up her book. “I am choosing to be mollified because this conversation is tedious.”

“And also because I’m in the right.”

Their first overnight stay was at the Randall’s house in Malvern. Elizabeth’s mother, usually in residence there, was conveniently away, giving the two girls the run of the house. The staff seemed happy to see Elizabeth and inclined to indulge her. The cook had prepared all her favorites for their supper and the butler fetched wine bottles for them well into the night.

The next morning, Elizabeth was considerably more subdued in the seat opposite Amelia, wincing at the morning sunlight when it lanced into the carriage. “Last night was a mistake.”

Amelia found it amusing to pretend her slight hangover did not exist, if only to magnify the weight of Elizabeth’s. “You should have switched to lemonade and well water after midnight like I did.” It wasn’t often that Amelia’s experience outweighed Elizabeth’s, and she wasn’t about to miss an opportunity to be wiser and more sophisticated.

“I do not often enjoy this degree of freedom,” Elizabeth mumbled. “I didn’t want to waste it.”

“You may have enjoyed those freedoms a bit too much.”

Elizabeth pulled the shade closed. “I regret nothing.”

Amelia closed one of the shades on her side of the carriage in sympathy, and then leaned close to the other side, its window shade still open to read. She had guiltily packed up all five volumes of *Traits of Nature*, which she had put off even starting for more than a month, now. With four days of travel there and four days of travel back, and with no histories or treatises to

tempt her eye away, she had hoped she'd be able to finish the lot of them.

Thus far, the plan seemed to be working. She was a few pages away from finishing the first volume, and from the light snoring coming from the other side of the carriage, she did not expect any interruptions for the rest of the morning.

The sun was setting, their carriage still half an hour out from their destination for the night, when they stopped at the side of the road. Elizabeth fetched a jug and two earthenware mugs from the luggage and stepped back into the cabin with a grave expression. "This is the real cost to be paid for our little trip. We've no way to chill the horse potion, and... I believe I warned you, it's so much worse when it's warm."

She filled both mugs and passed one over to Amelia, who reeled back in her seat and turned her face away when the smell hit her. "Must we?"

"You can skip," Elizabeth counseled, the fingers of her free hand poised above her nose. "Grace does all the time. But. I can't bring myself to risk it, so..." She pinched her nose, brought the mug to her lips, and choked the concoction down.

"The things we do," Amelia muttered, screwed up her courage, and did the same.

It was so, so much worse warm.

In Stafford, they were to stay with the Grosvenors, family friends of the Randalls. Their hosts came out into the yard to greet them, and Amelia frowned softly at the two figures from

the anonymity of the carriage. “Are they business connections of your father’s or Uskwiars acquaintances?”

“You needn’t worry about that,” Elizabeth told her, a little shortly as she was collecting herself to open the door and get out of the objectively spacious but by now subjectively cramped carriage. “If you haven’t seen them at Uskwiars, treat them as nothing more than social connections.” She paused a moment, squinting out the window. “And that goes double if you, hypothetically, can’t remember.” She threw open the door. “Aunt Vera! It’s been so long!”

Aunt Vera and Sir Richard greeted them warmly, informed them that supper was at their leisure, and citing their own advanced age promptly went to bed, themselves. The two girls had only each other’s company in the dining room and then retired upstairs to bedchambers that had clearly been brought out of mothballs earlier that morning.

Amelia’s room did feature a tall mirror and she found herself standing before it, transfixed. Something about its unfamiliar frame turned her reflection, which should have been familiar, strange and fascinating.

Without pins or ribbons, her hair hung down around her face, now. The tips hung even with her jawline. She’d always known her hair was curly, but once it had been allowed to blossom it corkscrewed and twisted all over.

Her face had changed. Perhaps that was only because her skin was so much thinner (and distressingly prone to bruising), but as she stared, stepping closer to the mirror’s surface, it became plain that that was not all. The corners of her eyes had opened up, making them look bigger and wider. Her cheekbones had gained new prominence. Her lips seemed just the slightest

bit fuller. The sum effect was... significant.

Amelia rechecked that her door was locked before doffing her shift and standing before the mirror naked. That thinner skin made changes here, too. A few veins stood out bolder than they ever had. And there were other changes.

She ran her hands down her sides, which had subtly shifted in ways she could never quite pin down. Perhaps it was the more supple skin. Perhaps something underneath had changed just slightly. But her belly was rounder and softer. Her waist was more pronounced. Her hips, if she could call them that, curved ever so gently outward, ever so slightly higher than she expected them to.

She placed her hands underneath her bosom, which... projected, now. She could not exactly lift what was there, but she could support the warm weight in her hands. The same thought came to her that had come to her every few weeks for months, now: “These are real breasts. I’m not just fooling myself. What I had two weeks ago was sort of breast shaped, but these are... very breast shaped.” She marveled at them, as she had marveled at them before, as she expected to marvel at them again. No matter how “very breast shaped” they got, somehow they always seemed to become even more “very breast shaped” shortly thereafter.

Amelia sighed, let herself get a little overwhelmed with emotion, and then chuckled at herself. She’d been told this would happen, by people to whom it had happened, and yet somehow she was still surprised when it happened to her. She put her hands on her hips and huffed at herself. And then she started to turn, planning to find her nightgown, and one hand slipped off its hip while the other lifted up on its own—

Her heart lurched. Did she just—

Frowning in consternation, Amelia squared herself to the mirror again and stared. She placed one careful hand on her side, cocked her hip and... made her heart skip a beat again.

Amelia was struck with the strangest sense of embarrassment.

Her own reflection was eliciting a lusty response... from herself. This could not be right.

She did it again.

Once they had set off the next morning, Amelia tried to lose herself in her book again, to little success. Finally she put the second volume aside and groaned, "I have an indelicate question."

Elizabeth was all smiles. "Oh, it's been a while so you've had embarrassing questions for me."

"Not embarrassing," Amelia lied, "just... indelicate."

"I'm all ears."

"Have you ever..." Amelia began, halted, pressed on: "in the mirror. Has your image ever... provoked your own libido?"

The other girl's smile turned knowing. "Oh, did Amelia have a diverting evening alone last night?"

Amelia rolled her eyes. "I'm going to say yes just so you have the satisfaction of feeling like I'm embarrassed, which will hopefully make you more amenable to giving me my own

answer.”

“You are embarrassed,” Elizabeth teased. “Your cheeks are flushed beet red. But in answer to your question, no, I haven’t. But then I’ve no libidinous interest in the fairer sex. So it stands to reason that my own image isn’t going to provoke anything.”

And then the girl, very uncharacteristically, dropped the subject and turned back to her book. Amelia frowned softly at her own feet, scowled out the window, and then forced her attention onto the pages of *Traits of Nature*.

The roads were in fact abominable. But when the carriage was stuck in a particularly deep rut filled with mud, Elizabeth and Amelia were lifted from the carriage door by the groom and deposited under a tree. They huddled there under the umbrella while the groom, ankle-deep in sludge, single-handedly shoved the carriage while also knickering at the horses to pull. The palms of Amelia’s hands itched to help, but she was also grateful, when it was over, to be lifted back up and placed on the lip of the now-liberated carriage, still clean and dry.

“Now I have a stupid question,” Amelia said, breaking the silence.

“No questions are stupid,” Elizabeth answered immediately, without even looking up. Amelia wondered briefly if the other girl realized she was quoting her father.

“It’s stupid insofar as I think I know the answer, but I feel compelled to ask the question regardless.”

Elizabeth looked up now, with a gentle smile. “I am familiar

with that impulse. Ask away.”

“Women like us,” Amelia began, and immediately regretted it. “That is. We direct a great deal of effort at fitting into roles which we were denied.”

The other girl looked a little skeptical. “Yes?”

“And those roles are complex,” Amelia fumbled along. “Elaborate. There’s lots of bits and pieces to them, and perhaps not all of them are... appropriate to each and every one of us.”

“I’ve been telling you since the start that you don’t have to do any part of this that doesn’t feel like it fits right.”

Amelia groaned. “Yes, but there are the parts that are obviously parts that can be discarded and there are parts that are more subtly interwoven into the fabric of the role.”

Elizabeth sighed and sat back in her seat. “Whatever this is, you’re devoting far too many words to it. Spit it out.”

The new girl threw her arms to her sides, slapping the third volume of *Traits of Nature* against the seat cushion. “I thought. When I started, I thought that... beforehand, when I had looked at women it was envy. I wanted what they had. Call it femininity.”

Her friend bobbed her head. “Right.”

“Which thanks to the incredible generosity of yourself and your father, I have... at least begun to acquire for myself.” Here Elizabeth snorted at ‘begun’ and Amelia ignored her, pressing on. “But I had assumed that part of that femininity... would be... an appreciation for the male sex.”

Her friend carefully schooled her expression and nodded. “Go on.”

“That has not happened,” she explained flatly. “And perhaps when I used to look at women, what I experienced was not always simply envy.”

Elizabeth’s face was the picture of attentive listening, but her eyes flashed. She asked, “What else might you have been experiencing in that moment, Amelia?”

“You are toying with me,” the girl gasped, and pinched tears out of the corners of her eyes.

“Oh no, don’t cry, please don’t,” Elizabeth exclaimed, and crossed the carriage to sit next to Amelia, embracing her tightly. “Pay no attention to my silly face. It’s always ten times as wicked as my thoughts truly are.”

Amelia pressed her cheek against Elizabeth’s neck and relaxed into her arms. “We both know that isn’t the case. Your thoughts are always wicked.”

The wicked thinker herself giggled. “And my stupid face always puts them on display, magnified for all to see. But ignore that for a moment, and tell me what you wanted to say.”

Her thoughts and emotions were a tangle all coiled up beneath her sternum, and she imagined them rising up to her throat and splitting her mouth open to escape her body. “Lust,” she gasped, “it’s lust, not envy. Or both, usually. Or sometimes.”

Elizabeth petted her hair. “There we go. Not that hard, was it?”

“That was very hard,” she grumbled, and righted herself a little within the circuit of her friend’s arms. “But. Women like us. Sometimes we... retain a man’s interest in women?”

“Eugh, I think that’s the worst possible way to frame it,” came the answer, and then Elizabeth loosed a sigh full of compassion. “Oh, did you think... did you think it made you any less a woman?”

“It occurred to me,” Amelia allowed, feeling stupid. However her question remained unanswered. “But. You know more of us. Are there women like us who...”

“You’ve met Miss Woods and Miss Pirie,” Elizabeth pointed out with slight indignity.

With a sickening lurch, Amelia realized that she had discounted the teachers because their avowed lusts had been for each other. Their attraction was to femininities which had been constructed, femininities which she had, treacherously, presumed to be different and lesser. What did she really think of her own constructed femininity, she wondered, and then worried. Did Elizabeth realize what traitorous thoughts were apparently living in her head? Ashamed, she hid the thought away from herself.

She mumbled something that even she didn’t understand, and Elizabeth squeezed her tighter. “Shhh, don’t worry your head too much. It all gets rather confusing sometimes. But you’ll make it through.”

Amelia mumbled some more, cried, apologized, and at some point fell asleep.

Their last overnight stop was a modest parsonage in

Mansfield. Their host and hostess were gracious, the supper filling, and the conversation diverting until well into the night.

The girls shared the sole guest room, and when it came time to climb into bed, Amelia hesitated. “It feels strange sharing a bed with you when you know... where my interests lie.”

Eyes half-lidded, Elizabeth snorted. “We’ve shared a bed countless times, and I’ve known you were a lesbian for months. I don’t see how this evening should be any different.”

Amelia forced her body into motion and gingerly pulled the bedclothes over herself. Of course the other girl had known before even Amelia did. “How could you tell I was...?”

“You’re not subtle,” Elizabeth murmured.

“But you’re... not,” she whispered, trying to settle her head into the pillow roll. “A lesbian.” The word wasn’t new to Amelia, but she had only heard it used with disdain. Perhaps she could try using it as cavalierly as Elizabeth did.

The other girl sighed dreamily. “Alas. I am cursed to fancy only men, in all their multitudinous foibles and frustrations. Pray for me.” And then she was asleep.

Amelia did as she was told, and was shortly dreaming, as well.

Halfway through the next day, it became clear that Amelia could start the fifth and final volume of the novel, but she would not finish it by the time they arrived. The last thing she wanted to do was to carry a half-read book into a house party, her attentions constantly torn between being a gracious guest and

sneaking away to steal an hour reading. And this book would be hanging on her mind.

She started the fifth volume, anyway.

“It’s strange,” she observed at a chapter break. “I’ve never been one for novels, but this one has... captivated me. I am utterly focused on poor Adela and Lady Delacour and Lady Rosalvan, and all their piteous overthrows.”

Elizabeth, having exhausted her own reading already, looked over from the window with a slight smile. “Perhaps this is the first novel you are reading where you feel comfortable focusing your attentions on the characters to whom you experience the most sympathy.”

“I don’t follow?”

“The women,” her friend pointed out. “You listed off three women, and none of their lovers. Is it really any surprise if you find the struggles of male characters less engaging?”

Amelia looked back down at her book, frowning softly. “An intriguing theory,” she muttered, feeling slightly and queerly ashamed. Had she been reading novels incorrectly this entire time? What had she missed before? Should she go back and reread them?

Before she plunged back in, she considered the short stack of four discarded volumes at her side. “It’s a shame there are no literary heroines who romance other heroines. I think I’d like to see that, if only to imagine what it might be like.”

“Mmm,” Elizabeth murmured. “Perhaps you should write your own.” Which struck Amelia as an unfair challenge,

considering that Elizabeth herself was perfectly happy reading about women swept off their feet by the sole gentleman of good character in their acquaintance.

Even though all the fictional women in her book pined only for men, they kept Amelia company for the rest of the day. Their carriage passed through Ripon and onto the grounds of the local manor house, a blocky amber square thing set amidst stunning landscape, just as the sun set.

CHAPTER TEN

Brotherly and Sisterly Love

Yorkshire, October 1812

The garden party spread out across the west lawn in a series of shining white pavillions and bleached wicker seating. The tableau of bright white on emerald green promised a bustling and expansive experience. In comparison, the house itself provided the barest lip of a patio. Since the lawn sloped down to the miniature lake at its foot, the patio afforded the two girls a good vantage from which to survey the party and the day ahead of them.

“You see?” Elizabeth was saying triumphantly. “Strangers, all. Well-dressed and a good spread of ages, I should think. Some our peers, many more our elders.” She leaned over to nudge Amelia’s shoulder with her own. The silk of their jackets—hers scarlet, Amelia’s pale blue—whispered against each other. “Think of them all as practice dummies.”

“Doctor Barry said something similar once,” the nervous girl murmured. “And you know no one here? No Uskweirs people?”

“We might as well be in a different country here; there’s precious little chance that we’ll encounter— oh shit.” Elizabeth

seized on Amelia's arm. "You see the young lady all in black? She just stepped out from behind the main tent."

"In the riding coat? Striding across the lawn with such purpose, do you think there's an emergency?"

"There's no emergency; she's just like that. Stay away from her," Elizabeth advised. "You're not ready."

Amelia snorted, a little less delicately than she might have liked. "What, not ready to exchange pleasantries over cucumber sandwiches?"

"She will chew you up and spit you out," her friend warned. "Then you'll thank her for it and waste away pining after her."

"You're making her sound more intriguing than dangerous," Amelia laughed. "Who is she?"

"Anne Lister," Elizabeth answered with a sigh. She pulled Amelia close. "Promise me, Amelia; keep your distance. I— What is it?"

Because Amelia had gone white as a sheet, staring down the slope. Shakily she nodded down at one of the figures. "The tall, ruddy gentleman in the wine-colored vest, just stepping away from the musicians?" She paused until Elizabeth had spied him. "That's my brother."

Elizabeth did not quite gasp, but her sharp intake of breath whistled across her teeth. "Lord Marbury is your brother?"

Amelia's stomach dropped. "You know him? CeeCee said none of my family attended Uskweirs."

But Elizabeth shook her head. "I met him in Town. Last

year, when I debuted.” She frowned softly, and shifted her grip on her friend to place a gentle hand on Amelia’s upper arm. “I can make excuses if you want to retire—”

“Elizabeth, Miss Wright!” It was Francis Harcourt, coming out of the house to join the party. “How is it that you’ve beaten me to the field?”

“Because we started getting ready hours ago,” Elizabeth replied, unable to keep a gleeful smile off her lips.

“Time well spent; you both look lovely,” he rejoined, although his admiring gaze slid off of Amelia and lingered on her friend. He gestured down to the party and playfully proffered both his arms. “May I introduce you to our hostess?”

Elizabeth slid her arm into his. “I’m afraid Miss Wright might—”

But Amelia took the man’s other arm and pasted on a fierce smile. “Lead the way, Mister Harcourt. We have practice dummies to meet.”

They descended into the party with an air of leisure which Amelia did not feel but gratefully employed to center herself. It had been months, she reminded herself. She walked completely differently, she talked completely differently, she dressed completely differently, she looked... mostly different. And besides, it was a large party; she could probably avoid her brother entirely. At a distance, she was certain, she was unrecognizable.

Harcourt led their trio to meet another trio, this one made up of a plump, mature woman and two reedy-looking young men. “Miss Crawley, may I introduce Miss Elizabeth Randall and

Miss Amelia Wright.” He nodded at each of them in turn, and then reversed it all. “Misses Randall and Wright, may I introduce Miss Mathilda Crawley.”

Miss Crawley beamed in response. “Welcome, young people! More charming faces to add to the party. Splendid. And I’ve been looking forward to making your acquaintance for weeks, Miss Randall. Francis speaks of nothing else when he visits. These are my nephews,” she added, gesturing to either side of her. “Rawdon,” she said with a smile, which then drained off of her face, “...and Pitt.”

They exchanged pleasantries, recapping their trip from Monmouthshire, checking to see if their social circles overlapped at all, and asking about the health of relations. Neither of the nephews said much and let their aunt direct the flow of conversation.

Amelia almost felt like she had her feet underneath her when Miss Crawley said, “Oh, and here’s Lord Marbury. I’ll make introductions.”

Because her brother had crept up beside them, two glasses of sparkling wine in hand. The spare he handed to their host. “I’m not sure that’s necessary,” he told her with what Amelia well knew was false gaiety. “I know Mister Harcourt and Miss Randall, and...” His gaze settled on Amelia. “Do forgive me, but have we been introduced?”

Her heart pounding, Amelia dropped a curtsey and carefully positioned her lips and tongue to speak. “I don’t think we have, Milord.”

“Oh good, I’m of some use,” Miss Crawley chuckled. “Miss Wright, this is Eustace Sommerset, the Lord Marbury. Eustace,

this is Miss Amelia Wright.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, then,” her brother replied, a strange look persisting across his features. A beat later, he asked, “Any relation to Professor Anthony Wright, at Cambridge?”

She was, in fact; both of them were. The professor was a favorite cousin and had been a frequent guest at the family home in their youth. She had always coveted his humble but industrious surname, and had subsequently stolen it. But she said, “If we are, I’m afraid it is a relation more distant than I can trace. There are many Wrights in the world.”

“May we all pray that our world has more rights than wrongs,” Harcourt quipped, to assorted groans, laughter, and a playful swat from Elizabeth. From there the conversation turned to Miss Crawley’s charity work, and thence to the comparative strengths of various northern towns. Francis played double duty engaging in the petty urban rivalries while also explaining the local humor to Elizabeth and Amelia.

But as the conversation rambled, Marbury’s participation went from gameful to distracted. Instead he stole quizzical looks at Amelia, first briefly but with increasing duration and intensity. More than once he had to be roused back into the ebb and flow of small talk. Amelia did her best to ignore what were becoming stares.

“We’ve been so miserly with your attention!” Miss Crawley exclaimed suddenly, and reached behind her to seize a nephew by the shoulder. “Pitt, I think Miss Wright requires refreshment. And some more introductions. Take her for a turn around the lawn, why don’t you.”

“I could—” Marbury began to say, but was cut off.

“You could tell me about this canal scheme of yours,” Crawley insisted. “We told you all about our towns and their industries, but you seek to knit them together, yes?” She turned towards Amelia’s brother while all but flinging the nephew at her.

Amelia grabbed for the man’s arm, in fact had to tug it into place at his side, and turned them both away from the others. A moment later he marshalled his legs into motion and they were slowly taking their leave.

“Thank you for showing me around the party, Mister Crawley,” she said, casting about for conversation to be made. “Tell me, what is Yorkshire society mostly concerned with?”

“I’m not sure I rightly know,” was his timid answer. “I’m no socialite. I spend most of my time at my father’s manor, conducting my inquiries and reviewing my papers.”

“Well that sounds more interesting than Yorkshire gossip, at least,” the girl replied with a laugh.

“I doubt you’ll find it so,” he dissembled. “It’s hardly a topic of interest to a lady such as yourself.”

“You hardly know me, Mister Crawley,” she chided playfully (and checked herself on accidentally playing more coy than she meant to). “Try me and let’s see if my interests align with yours.” (Nope, that was definitely a double entendre.)

But if he noticed he didn’t show any sign. Instead, he heaved a sigh. “I am preparing a pamphlet of scientific inquiry into... into mould.” He cringed at his confession, as if expecting a blow.

That was hardly what Amelia was expecting, but it only took her a moment to respond, “Are you comparing rates of decomposition?”

Pitt’s eyebrows nearly flew off his face. “Yes!” he cried, then moderated his tone. “That is, yes, I am studying their rates of decomposition, especially in environments of different characteristics.” He explained his methods, his expectations, and his conclusions; Amelia asked questions as they occurred to her. His conversation was slow, and Amelia could not quite tell if it stemmed entirely from learned hesitation or was simply his nature.

“Oh dear Lord, mould again?” cried a matronly lady nearby. Their steps had brought them under the main pavillion and its many tables festooned with food and drink. A small knot of ladies stood at one corner of the tent, the most prominent of them scowling at Amelia’s companion. “Mister Crawley, you cannot subject young ladies to your tedious and disgusting hobbies. Now introduce us.”

He did so, almost fearfully, and once the job was done she glared at him until he retreated.

“There,” she sniffed, and nodded Amelia towards the buffet. “The ham is divine. Do come join us once you’ve filled a plate.”

Amelia did as she was told, uncertain if it was wise to do otherwise. There was no rescuing Pitt, so she might as well practice with this new set of training dummies. She helped herself to a demure collection of small square sandwiches, fruit, and stalks of asparagus. She then followed after the group of ladies, who had crossed to a neighboring tent of tables.

“...she is half-Indian and all brown,” the matronly lady was

saying, “and I told her if she is to have any standing in life, she must make herself a spectacle of moral rectitude sufficient to offset her foreign characteristics. People will judge.” She nodded Amelia towards an empty chair, and explained, “My granddaughter. She has lost her parents and I am struggling to show her how to make a way through this world.”

“Poor thing,” Amelia answered automatically. “How lucky that she has you.”

“We shall see if she calls it luck by the time she is through,” another lady jibed. “It’s not an easy thing you’re asking her to do.”

“She was always going to be gossiped about,” said the grandmother with a diffident shrug. “This, at least, is gossip over which she can exert some control.”

The conversation lulled as the ladies considered the girl’s situation. Amelia cleared her throat. “Forgive me, milady, but I feel like I know your name but cannot place it.”

“Which lady?” one of the other ladies asked brightly.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t clear.” Amelia nodded to the grandmother. “Lady Gordon?”

“Perhaps because Crawley mangled it,” the lady in question grouched. “It’s the Lady Cumming Gordon. Of Edinburgh.”

“Oh, you’re—” Amelia started, then stumbled to a stop. Lady Cumming Gordon, the lady who had pulled her granddaughter out of the school run by Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie, the lady who had destroyed their reputation by publicizing their lesbian love, the lady who had been taken to

court for libel and lost. That Lady Cumming Gordon. But now after Amelia's stutter, all the other ladies turned as one to regard her curiously. She couldn't stop now. "Your granddaughter was... at that school."

Lady Cumming Gordon nodded wearily. "She was. And she was too good for that school. That's all I'm allowed to say on that."

"It is positively unjust that you must seal your lips by legal decree," cried another. "And that they'll profit off of your bravery to speak out."

But the silenced lady only shook her head. "I will appeal. Again. This time to the House of Lords." She allowed herself a smile of grim satisfaction. "My lawyers are certain that we can draw it out for years. Those two will never see a penny, and in the mean time, my granddaughter, who will become recognized as the pious paragon fighting against immorality that she is, will marry well."

Amelia scowled, and then heard herself say, "But is making those school teachers into casualties really necessary?"

"I wish it weren't," Lady Cumming Gordon replied diffidently, and then raised helpless hands before her. "For one to go up, others must go down. It's a vicious world we live in."

The ladies put up a murmured chorus of assent. Their exact words were inaudible, but the expressions on their faces ranged from resigned to vindictive.

"It's true," came a voice from behind Amelia. "It is a vicious world we live in." The crowd of ladies looked past Amelia and their varied expressions all snapped into a unified front of

disgust.

Amelia turned as gracefully as possible to see who was speaking. The lady at the table behind her had set down a dainty plate topped with a small mountain of ham sandwiches. She was clad all in black, with striking features. She could not have been older than her early twenties.

“I knew a girl once,” the young woman went on. “Brown like yours. Which is to say, I’m well aware of the difficulties that they face. It’s terrible. But it’s part and parcel, isn’t it, of our terrible world. Red in tooth and claw.” She selected a square sandwich, considered it for a moment, and popped it into her mouth.

“Are you going riding, Miss Lister?” asked Lady Cumming Gordon, steel alloyed into her voice. “You’re dressed for the hunt, not a garden party.”

Anne Lister met the older lady’s eye placidly, then slid her own gaze to Amelia. Her lips twitched minutely: a ghost of a smile. “Maybe I am on the hunt.” And then she looked back to the grandmother. “Red in tooth and claw, this world of ours,” she repeated. “Such a pity, don’t you think, that we can’t all choose to live peaceably with one other, in brotherly Christian love.” Her eyes slid back to Amelia. “Or sisterly love, as the case may be.”

Lady Cumming Gordon bolted to her feet, jostling the table as she did so. The sudden noise of rattling cutlery snapped Amelia’s head back around to the older lady, who seethed, “I will not stand here and be mocked.”

Lister took her time selecting another sandwich. “Well, you

could sit back down.”

“I do not sit and eat with the likes of you,” the lady hissed in response. Amelia looked back and forth between the two of them, feeling like a puppet on strings tugged by a violent master. The other ladies were getting up, as well. While they collected themselves, Lady Cumming Gordon leaned over her table towards Lister and spat, “Hellion!”

Then she whirled and stalked off, followed by her coterie. They did not look back.

Lister let the silence stretch for a while before asking, “You’re not joining them?”

Amelia’s eyes watched the retreating ladies, but all her attention was behind her, on the woman who had chased them off. She wasn’t sure she could move. She now knew what it was like, she thought, to be a mouse quivering in a cluttered corner while a cat prowled a foot away. And now the cat had spoken to her and it would be rude not to reply, but that would give herself away, wouldn’t it? Then in a flash, Amelia realized that the mouse hoped that the cat wouldn’t see her, which was not her own situation at all, was it? She turned around.

“I think I prefer my present company,” she said lightly, and this time she put every effort into making her voice sound as coy as possible.

The other woman smiled, and for one brief moment Amelia contemplated a life dedicated to making that smile happen again and again. A distant, muted voice in the back of her head observed that Elizabeth’s warning was perfectly reasonable. When Lister suggested they take a turn around the lawn, Amelia

could not have said no even if she wanted.

They exchanged names, where they had grown up, the sprawling networks of their family relations (Amelia's carefully edited). She insisted that Amelia call her Anne; Amelia helplessly responded in kind. They talked about books. Anne had read and was excited about *A Journal of a Tour in Iceland*, which Amelia had all but memorized to bolster her letters home. They walked down the length of the lawn to the water's edge.

They watched a game of croquet. Each of them claimed one of the players, complete strangers to both, to back in their private commentary on the progress of the game. Each of them lauded the incredible mastery of their player and derided their competition as sorry excuses who should by rights quit the field. Neither of their chosen players won. They stood side by side, close enough that their shoulders and the backs of their hands grazed each other.

Anne leaned over, her lips a few inches from Amelia's ear. Warm breath tickled down her neck. Anne asked, "Forgive the question, Amelia, but do you happen to be engaged?"

"What? No," she answered, as if denying a shameful rumor. "Not engaged, and... no plans to ever be engaged."

Anne smiled in satisfaction. "That is good to hear. But it does leave open the question of the gentleman staring at us from across the hoops."

The sound of frustrated disgust that came out of Amelia's mouth surprised even her. "Lord Marbury." She had been trying and failing to ignore her brother's stares since they'd reached the water's edge. "Also from Sussex. Here to seek investments for

his canal scheme, as I understand it.”

“Is he bothering you? I can make him stop.” Anne’s voice was surprisingly hot and fierce. Something deep inside Amelia melted at the woman’s offer. But then the hellion added, “I can duel him.”

Amelia’s hands flew to Anne’s arm, as if to restrain her from drawing the sword she was not wearing. “Oh, that... that won’t be necessary.”

Anne looked down at Amelia’s restraining hand and, before she could withdraw it, covered it with her own. “Then let’s get you out of his sight, hm?”

Given that she suddenly lost the power of speech, Amelia simply nodded.

Anne guided the two of them along the lakeside, away from the party. Shortly they were behind the draping cover of the willows that grew along the water’s edge. The air was cool and smelled of green things. The murmur of the party’s conversation faded away to nothing. Somewhere along the walk, their arms had become intertwined.

“Ah, there it is,” Anne exclaimed, pointing to an older tree, sitting atop a mossy rise beside the placid water. Its broad and gnarled trunk was barely visible through the curtain of its own leaves. “I must show you this. Someone, generations back, carved the cleverest little face into the trunk...” She pulled Amelia under the whispering green canopy.

“It’s hard to spot,” she said, loosing Amelia’s arm to gesture. “You go around that way and I’ll go around this way; look

carefully.”

Confused, bemused, and missing the warm touch of Anne’s arm, Amelia complied with a giggle. She made a slow circuit around the trunk, scouring its surface to find the carving. But she came all the way around the tree without finding anything. She turned towards Anne to report as much and found the lady standing just behind her, looking down at her with a wolfish smile.

“I must confess something,” the lady in black murmured, leaning forward. Amelia tried to step back to give the other woman space but the uneven surface of the trunk pressed up against her rump. A miniscule gasp escaped her, which only curled the corners of Anne’s lips. She purred, “There’s nothing carved into this tree. Yet.”

Amelia bid farewell to caution. She licked her lips, smiled up into Anne’s face, and said, “Then I invite you to make your mark.” And if that was not clear enough, she wrapped her arms around the other woman’s neck.

Anne descended, her hands landing on Amelia’s waist, her lips crushing against her mouth. The kiss was hungry: testing and demanding more and more. Anne pulled her close and hard. Amelia yielded like a rag doll into her grip, holding on as best she could while the rest of her body unraveled into the cool, moist air.

It was not Amelia’s first kiss, but it was the first time she had been kissed. She told the voice in the back of her head musing about grammar to be quiet. And it was the first time, the voice went on, that the kisses were applied to her own face, not the mask she had worn all her life. She tried very hard to ignore the analytical voice, but it persisted. This was very nice, but it was

going to be so much nicer when it was Theresa Chesterley doing the kissing.

Which is when Amelia's whole body froze, pulling everything back from the heady hazy feeling of dissolving into the damp air. Her arms around Anne's neck quavered.

Anne pulled back, looking concerned. "What was that?" When all Amelia could do is stammer, the lady in black stood up straighter, pulling out of her tangled arms.

"That was... that was very nice," Amelia said, well aware that she made it sound like an apology. "But... I don't think... my heart is in it." She staggered a few steps away from Anne and the tree, wrapping her arms around herself for lack of anything else to do with them.

The other lady regarded her for a long moment. Finally, she asked, "Is there another?"

"Yes, or rather... not really," Amelia groaned. "I don't know." She tilted her head for Anne to follow and then slipped out of the willow canopy. They walked a few paces in silence as Amelia tried to find words. Finally she settled on saying, "It's nothing... official."

"The likes of you and I are not afforded the dignity of official love," Anne observed gravely, walking alongside her. "I've found it's best to take what we can get when we can get it."

"Yes, but I shouldn't think of her when I kiss you. It's not fair to you."

Anne chuckled. "Miss Wright, I certainly don't mind."

"Amelia," she corrected with a glance back and an apologetic

smile. "I hope we can remain friends?"

"We can be whatever you like," came her smiling reply. She was about to say more, but instead said, "Lord Marbury."

They were just about to break out of the willows; Amelia's brother was striding into them. He came up short at the sight of the two ladies. "Ah. Excuse me, I... was hoping to have a word with Miss Wright."

Despite everything else, Anne stepped up alongside her, chest puffed out like a gamecock. Amelia threw up her hands and dragged her back. If this was going to happen, there was nothing that either of them could do about it. But Anne didn't need to get caught up in Amelia's brother confronting her about her new life living as a woman, or her old life mistaken as a man. She shooed the other woman away. "It's fine, Anne."

Anne regarded her for a long moment. How much of Amelia's disquiet was legible to her? Impossible to tell. Finally, she said, "Crawley's put me up in the Stanhope room, on the third floor, if you want to continue our conversation." Amelia marveled how she managed to make it sound perfectly innocent. "I'll walk with you both until you're within sight of the party?"

Her brother turned on his heel to walk alongside them both, out of the seclusion of the willows. Amelia hesitated for only a moment before following. She'd rather hoped to have this confrontation in private. Perhaps they might step out into view of the crowd while still remaining out of earshot.

But it was not to be. Once they were in the sunshine, Anne peeled away towards the nearest buffet pavillion and he kept going. More than once Amelia slowed her steps, trying to guide her brother into stopping to "have a word," but he seemed intent

on walking them both into the thick of the party.

Amelia swallowed her panic, casting about. Anne was already gone. She spied Elizabeth within casual hailing distance; in fact the other girl waved cheerily. Did Amelia want to call her over to participate in the explosion of scandal? She didn't want her friend to become collateral damage. She waved back with a smile she hoped looked genuine at a distance.

Finally he stopped and turned to face her. Amelia couldn't help but notice that Mathilda Crawley was in easy earshot. Here it was, then.

“Miss Wright, I owe you an apology,” said her brother, with his best look of contrition. The same one he'd wheel out for Mother when she was upset. “I've behaved abominably and no measure of my confusion excuses the lack of courtesy and consideration that I showed you. I'm sure you are a charming, lovely, and innocent girl. It would aggrieve me no end if my behaviour today did anything to besmirch your character.”

Amelia stood stunned. The conversation around them had dropped down to a murmur as everyone within range of her brother's baritone eavesdropped shamelessly. Now the chatter around them rebounded to a little louder than its former level. Out of the corner of her eye, Amelia spied Miss Crawley giving her brother a gentle, approving nod.

“Thank you,” she finally stammered, “Lord Marbury. I'm sure you bore me no untoward attention. Sometimes people just... look strangely familiar. I think everyone has been confounded by that feeling before.” She paused a beat, and then extended her hand, palm down. “But you need not worry any further. I accept your apology.”

He grasped her hand lightly and gave her a short nod. She walked away towards Elizabeth, who looked ready to explode from giddiness over the drama. The other girl squeezed her hand and pulled her close to put her lips up to Amelia's ear. There she repeated her brother's words back in a giggling whisper, the same words that echoed in Amelia's head: "I'm sure you are a charming, lovely, and innocent girl."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

To Bridewell

Monmouthshire, November 1812

Amelia found Lord Ashbourne in the library. After he had greeted her and asked how she had found Yorkshire, she said, “Milord, may ask some clarification on Uskweirs’ rules about invitations?” He inclined his head, and she went on: “I am not to invite anyone here, which makes sense on the face of it when it’s someone new, and I suppose just so it’s never written down, of course. But... if one were staying at Uskweirs and wished the pleasure of a visit from someone who is already acquainted with the place—and if milord were amenable, of course—how might I... word that in a letter?”

One thing had occupied Amelia’s mind, ever since she had been kissed in Yorkshire and she’d thought not of the girl kissing her, but of Theresa Chesterley. The rest of the garden party, the whole of the ride home, the two days she’d dithered in her rooms uncertain, she had thought only of seeing Chesterley again. Finally she had resolved to write her, but that presented its own obstacles, too.

The viscount waved a hand dismissively. “I should like to see you, please visit, you know where I can be found. Et cetera.

Who should you like to come visit?"

Amelia folded her hands over her half-written (more like quarter-written) letter, trying and failing not to blush. "Theresa Chesterley, milord."

He frowned softly at that. "Ah, then I can spare you the trouble of writing; she can't visit."

"Has she... done something wrong?" Amelia asked, suddenly worried. "Is she not welcome at Uskweirs?"

"Oh no, she's quite welcome here, she's just not visiting anybody, because, you see..." the viscount trailed off, directing a pained look at the girl. "I'm afraid she's in prison."

Amelia backed into a chair and sat down without any grace.

"She shouldn't be there long—mere months," he explained, all sympathy.

But a short prison sentence was no consolation for Amelia's astonished distress. "What has she done?"

He waved a hand. "She published a pamphlet with more zeal than sense, claiming that men conspire to keep women ignorant and powerless in order to exploit them. A certain magistrate took exception to her language and, on the argument that if all men are members of this conspiracy, that included every lord in England and every member of parliament, at which point she was guilty of criminal libel." He added a moment later, "And he threatened to bring her up on treason the next time."

"He couldn't possibly."

Ashbourne shrugged. "He can, even though it would

probably be unwise. He'd look a fool for a few weeks but she'd be transported to the colonies for much longer. As it is, I'm sure he hopes a few months in Bridewell will crush her. Mostly because he doesn't know her like you and I do. I'll be happy if she comes out the other end with a basic sense of discretion."

"Bridewell, at least," Amelia murmured, "I've read how they've sought to improve conditions there." She glanced out the windows, where grey autumnal clouds filled the sky. "But it sounds like she'll be there for the worst of winter."

The viscount studied her for a long moment, and then rapped on his desktop. "This sounds like a change of topic, but it isn't. Are you done with Cordelia?"

"Done with?" the girl responded, at a loss. "I... well, I practice with her every day, but... she has told me that there's nothing more for her to teach me. It really is just practice, now. Why do you ask?"

Ashbourne fished into his desk and withdrew a folded letter. "I've been meaning to make an introduction for her, but did not want to curtail your education before it was complete." He unfolded the letter and glanced over it. "If she impresses Sam as much as I suspect, she will be leaving us for a bright future."

Amelia folded her hands in her lap. "I'll miss her, but I would like to see her happy. I think she's bored, here."

"She has a limited audience here," the viscount smirked. "Well then, that settles it. We'll leave for London on Monday. While I introduce Cordelia to Sam Arnold, you can visit Chesterley in Bridewell."

Amelia's heart leapt into her throat. "Milord, that's... very

kind. Thank you.”

“I already have more than half a reason to go, so it has the benefit of being both kind and convenient,” he assured her with an avuncular smile, with collapsed a moment later. “And of course Elizabeth will insist on calling on every modiste in Mayfair.”

When Monday came, Amelia was surprised that it was not Cordelia who boarded the carriage but Ned. The girl had seen Cordelia’s “other half” only a handful of times in the months they’d been at Uskweirs, and thought that her tutor rather preferred being Cordelia over being Ned. But perhaps, she thought to herself, that was her own bias creeping into her perceptions.

“No Cordelia?” she asked innocently.

Ned shook his head. “Not if we’re going to talk business. That gets handled as Ned; people are more likely to try and take advantage when you’re wearing skirts.”

“How convenient that must be,” Elizabeth laughed as she settled in next to Amelia. “To switch whenever it suits. I imagine it’s also much easier to pack for Ned than Cordelia.”

“One pair of breeches folds considerably smaller than three layers of skirts,” Ned smiled in response, and Amelia all but gasped at the rakish tilt he had summoned to his lips. The actor’s transformation to masculine demeanor was nothing short of incredible. He was a man of compact stature, precise dress, and valuable expression—not exactly the most masculine of traits—but he was still inescapably a man in every respect.

Not for the first time, Amelia wondered if her tutor had grown up being called a girl or a boy.

The weather was worse than their trip to Yorkshire, but the roads were much better. Starting at the break of dawn, they raced down the hill to catch the first ferry to Bristol. Elizabeth called this “the Ashbourne Morning Comet” without any affection, on account of how early she had been made to wake and dress. Her father remarked that she didn’t actually have to come to London to buy a ridiculous number of dresses and in fact could be dropped off at Bristol to make her own way home, at which point she thanked him for waking him before the cock crowed.

The first night was spent at Mulvey’s house at Bath. The mistress of the house had returned to Hertfordshire for the winter; Lord Mulvey spread a generous table and plied them all with far too much wine. Ned was goaded into performing his *Lear*, and then felt obliged to give his *Tamburlaine* to demonstrate some finer point of dramaturgy that was lost on his more-than-tipsy audience. Amelia did not remember finding her bed, but that was where she was awakened the next morning by a raging headache.

The carriage then made haste to Oxford. Halfway there, Amelia watched for and spotted the crossroads where, with a different turn, the carriage might have taken her to her family home. As she watched the signpost recede into the distance, she was dimly grateful for how fuzzy her head still was. When the hangover eventually abated, it was just in time for her to worry about crossing paths in Oxford with someone she knew from school, or worse, her professor cousin. But once there, the carriage rattled into the modest courtyard of a country house where Ashbourne’s sons lived while they were at school. No one

beyond the house staff saw them disembark, dine, retire to bed, breakfast, or board the coach in the morning.

London was a smoke stain across the horizon before it was anything else. As it slowly blossomed into sooty glory before them, the number and frequency of buildings on either side of the road increased dramatically. The sun had not even touched the horizon when they reached Ashbourne's townhouse. Elizabeth jokingly welcomed Amelia to "Uskweirs on Piccadilly" only to be wearily corrected by her father that Randall House was not a part of the Uskweirs estate, but actually part of the Viscounty of Monmouthshire. The visibly haggard viscount was about to go into further detail when he stopped himself, claimed exhaustion from travel, and retired for the evening.

But at least Randall House was equipped to chill their virus *amantis equae*, a luxury over which both girls expressed relief at dinner. Ned made companionable conversation through the final course and then excused himself, leaving the girls alone.

"So tell me, my darling Amelia," said Elizabeth, smirking across the table, eyes flashing through the candles. "Do you want me to come along with you to Bridewell tomorrow? Or would you rather it just be the two of you?"

Amelia suddenly found the last remnant of her cake fascinating, picking it apart with her fork. "Oh, I... didn't think you'd even be interested." Her answer layered on an affected nonchalance the credibility of which she herself was wholly incapable of evaluating.

"Chesty's my friend, too," the dark-haired girl pointed out, unoffended.

"I don't know why you call her that," Amelia said instead of

answering.

Elizabeth snorted into her wine. “Yes, you do.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “You’re teasing me again.”

“I’m always teasing you, it’s how I show affection,” Elizabeth countered. “But if you tell me to stop, I’ll stop. And if you don’t want to talk about this, we don’t have to. But like I told you before, Amelia: you’re not subtle. It’s as plain as day what’s going on, here.”

“I wish it were plain to me!” Amelia cried, and only with the application of all her willpower set down her fork instead of dashing it into the table.

Elizabeth cocked her head. “You don’t know how you feel about her?”

“No, I—” Amelia started, stopped, and levelled a finger across the table. She thought about accusing her friend of trying to entrap her (“if you know how you feel why don’t you just say it out loud?”), and then gave up on it. “I know how I feel. I know what I want, or at least I know what I... want to find out. What I don’t know is how she feels. I don’t even know if she... well...”

Elizabeth lifted her eyebrows expectantly. “If she fancies the ladies?”

Amelia slumped into her chair and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “Yes.”

Her friend waved a wine glass at her. “I could have told you that ages ago if you’d just asked. As if it weren’t patently clear. But yes, she is a Disciple of Sappho. A connoisseur of soft

curves. She's that kind of girl."

Relief washed over Amelia, and she scoffed good-naturedly. "I thought we were that kind of girl."

"We're the other that kind of girl," her friend replied, and then giggled. "Although I guess you're both that kinds of girl."

Amelia's laugh dwindled. She almost didn't ask, but then forced herself to push the question through her lips: "Do you know if she's... amenable to our that kind of girl?"

Elizabeth gave her friend a pained smile and didn't answer at first. "I can't help you there, Mellie."

Amelia squinted through the candles. "Mellie?"

"You don't like it?" her friend giggled, shrugged as if it had been worth a try, and then pointed an accusing finger across the table. "Why don't you call me Lizzie?"

Amelia pressed herself against the back of her chair, suddenly timorous. "You've never asked me to." She'd never wanted to take too much for granted in the magical house that might as well have really been in Faerieland, or with its residents.

"Please call me Lizzie," said Lizzie, and decisively set her glass on the table. She rose from her seat, smiling at how she had successfully flustered her friend enough with nicknames that she had completely forgotten about Theresa Chesterley's unknown thoughts on their that kind of girl. "Let me show you to your room and then I'm going to go sleep until noon."

Bridewell had once been a royal palace, which only went to

show how much all institutional buildings inevitably resemble each other. There was a tall gate, a wide cobbled yard, a bank of stairs, and a pair of double doors. The only thing that changed was the grime. The prison entrance had been the service entrance, and it was still flanked by stacks of crates, tubs of washing water, and billows of chicken feathers.

Amelia crossed the yard toting a wicker basket filled with meat pies, oranges, woolen gloves, and a very thick blanket. Atop all that, secured by her thumb and forefinger pinched tight on the paper, fluttered a sealed letter from Ashbourne.

He'd given it to her in the carriage ride over, saying, "Hand this to the warden and no one else. He or his underlings may ask you for money, tell them it's all in the letter. The bribe has been taken care of."

"Bribe?" Amelia echoed, eyes wide.

Ned, riding along on the way to his introduction, chuckled. "It's a prison; it runs on bribes. The warden paid good money for his position so he could collect those bribes. Don't want to disappoint him, do we?"

Ashbourne chuckled, too, as he watched the prison gates approach. He turned to Amelia, brow furrowed. "I don't know how much you know, Amelia, so forgive me if I seem to condescend. I want to make explicitly sure that you understand the situation you are walking into." He paused to take a deep breath and considered his words. "Chesterley's position is... delicate. She has no husband, no father, no brother. She lives on a stipend that keeps her independent. But that also means that there is no check on her, which some find difficult to accept."

“Some... magistrates, specifically?” Amelia hazarded.

He nodded. “I’m sure they found great joy in jailing her for libel, but that won’t last. The permanent solution is committing her to bedlam. And she’s protected from that, but imperfectly. No father, no husband, no legally responsible relative to recommend her to an asylum.”

Ashbourne looked out the window as the gates of the prison slid past. “So it’s dreadfully important, Amelia, that any visitor she receives is seen to be her friend,” he said, voice clipped and exacting, and then he turned his steely grey eyes onto her, “and not her lover.”

Amelia’s heart very nearly stopped in her chest. She closed her eyes, took one deep breath, and nodded. Then she asked, “Why does everyone know?”

Ned shrugged. “You’re not exactly subtle.”

“Her criminal history combined with witness to unconventional desires would be enough to commit her,” Ashbourne went on, quietly but equally urgent. “Do not trust any apparent privacy you are given.”

“It’s a prison that used to be a palace,” Ned put in. “The walls have ears.”

And so with warnings ringing in her own ears, Amelia strode up to the door, flashed the seal of the Viscount of Monmouthshire, and asked to see the warden.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Out of Bridewell

London, November 1812

Theresa Chesterley was wearing a dress, and not a flattering one. The work dress was too large for her and not at all fitted, doubtless recycled through inmates and washings until the pattern, which might have once been white and blue, was now just mottled grey. Sitting at the bare desk in this bare little room, she looked like a pile of laundry piled on top of the chair.

“Miss Wright,” she exclaimed, rising at Amelia’s entry. Emotions flashed across her face like startled fish in a pond. “What a lovely surprise.”

Amelia stepped in, followed by the warden who, after reading the viscount’s letter, had turned incredibly solicitous. Still, she checked her expression and gestures as she crossed the room. She clasped Theresa’s forearms instead of embracing her as she wanted to. Even that was still the most contact they’d had since Theresa marched her through Uskweirs to see Ashbourne. She gave the woman’s arms a gentle squeeze and smiled at her—whoops, wrong smile, more placid, more family friend calling on an unfortunate acquaintance.

She sat down carefully on the only other chair in the room.

“I’ll give you ladies some privacy,” the warden said. He was a florid man, dressed just well enough to distinguish himself from the inmates and prison guards that must have made up most of his day. Halfway out the door, hand on the knob, he said, “We serve luncheon in two hours and wouldn’t want Miss Chesterley to miss her meal; will that be enough time for your visit, Miss Wright?”

“I think so, sir,” she answered with a gentle nod.

The inmate in question waited until the door closed before snorting. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard it called ‘luncheon’ here.”

Not knowing what else to say, Amelia patted the handle of the basket that she put down between them. “I brought you some food from outside. The pies won’t last long, but there are oranges, too.”

Chesterley looked down at the basket as if it were full of puppies. “And a blanket.”

“I worry about you freezing in your cell once winter comes,” she explained. “There are gloves somewhere in there, too.”

She looked back up at Amelia, eyes shining. “That’s very kind of you, Miss Wright.” Her voice was tight and constrained. She pressed her lips together, folded her hands in her lap, and then looked significantly past and above Amelia. The girl turned to look and found a grate, set high in the wall behind her. A shadow moved behind it.

Well at least everyone in the room understood that the

privacy promised by the warden was a lie.

Amelia had to say something, anything, so she started with the banal: “When I heard that you were... here... I was so saddened, and well, a little shocked, to be honest. I knew I had to come see you. I had actually hoped that you’d come see me, and was asking Ashbourne if he’d mind your visit when he told me where you were. It’s just ghastly, Miss Chesterley, that you’re in such a place. I can’t see the sense in it. And I know they’ve worked hard to make things better here, but prison? It feels so absurd to think of you here. And I know it’s a short sentence, but even a few months of you here seems silly. If it weren’t for the deprivation and all, I suppose. No, not silly, silly’s the wrong word. What did I say before? Absurd. I think that’s... more... apt.”

As the torrent of words flowing out of her mouth wound down, Amelia became aware that Chesterley was simply watching her talk, a soft smile on her lips. Amelia rolled her eyes and looked out the single window onto the featureless white sky. “I’m the silly one, here.”

The woman opposite her didn’t respond at first, long enough to make Amelia wonder if she’d botched it, if she had proven herself nothing more than a silly girl. When Chesterley finally spoke, she said, “You hoped that I might visit you?”

Amelia looked back, met her eyes, looked down. “I was going to write.” She could feel her cheeks burning, and the only thought in her head was: no, she wasn’t subtle at all, was she?

“I would love to call on you at my earliest convenience,” Chesterley said, voice lilting just a touch too much to fit into the formal cant that she affected. “How does four months from now

sound?”

“I’d like that,” Amelia smiled, and managed to maintain eye contact for more than a moment. “But you’ll have to give me a list of books to read by then. I finished *Traits of Nature* and I’m not sure what to pick up next.”

Chesterley’s answering smile broadened. “I won’t let you leave without a reading list. And a few booksellers: some titles are hard to find. But first tell me what you thought of the book.”

And so they talked about the novel and its characters and how it highlighted problems in the real world and what it all might mean. Amelia was surprised to find Chesterley receptive, even eager to hear her thoughts; on the few occasions that she pushed back on some impetuous thing that came tumbling out of Amelia’s mouth, the girl listened intently. She was pointedly but not painfully aware that Chesterley had far more experience living as a woman, and had also paid attention to the mechanisms of society in ways that Amelia had never thought to. She found the conversation both dizzying and fascinating.

“Which is why staying here has given me a greater appreciation for our mothers’ insistence that the best thing for women is education for all,” Theresa was saying. “And better access to divorce; there’s so many women in here because of their husbands. But I like to think being able to read and having a better understanding of the wider world might mean fewer poorly-thought-out marriages in the first place.”

“What are your, erm, fellow prisoners like?” Amelia couldn’t help but ask.

“Poor, mostly,” the other woman sighed. “And imprisoned for the crime of being poor. Sometimes literally. For every

woman who stole bread to feed her children, there's four more who are here because they missed rent and ended up vagrants." She shook her head. "I've never been more grateful for my aunt's forethought in creating my trust. When I leave here, I'll go right back to my life, hardly interrupted."

"And them?"

"Most will be hired, which sounds good, but... well." Chesterley smiled sourly. "The men, they get apprenticed, taught a trade, hired out. Lots of rope-makers, to supply John Bull's ships. They leave here tradesmen. But the women don't get trades, they go into service: maids, sculleries, washer-women, maybe a position as cook for the lucky ones. And somehow I don't think it's the houses that pay the best and respect their servants the most that hire staff out of prison."

Amelia frowned softly. "Better than vagrancy, at least?"

"More better for those who'd like a surplus of cheap labour, and a little less better for the cheap labour," came the sour response. She went on, and Amelia paid rapt attention, just... not to the woman's words.

It's not that Amelia hadn't noticed Theresa Chesterley before. Her first impression had been set off-kilter by the woman's masculine dress that first night, not to mention her casual offer to dispose of Amelia's body. After that night, though, she had seen her a handful of times—no wait, had it only been twice? regardless—she had left an impression. And this despite the fact that at the time Amelia had, uselessly, been waiting for her eyes to start trailing after well-proportioned men.

Theresa Chesterley was rather well-proportioned in her own

way.

Warm brown eyes that flashed whenever she spoke, set above high, round cheeks. Her lips could have been a sculpture. Even with her hair pulled into a tight, utilitarian prison bun, Amelia marvelled at how it curled and coiled into shape. And yes, Amelia knew exactly why Lizzie called her ‘Miss Chesty.’

Reminded of their conversation last night, a thought occurred to Amelia and before she could quash it, she all but blurted out: “May I call you Theresa?”

The woman had been in the middle of a sentence, itself in the middle of a panegyric on the disregarded value of women’s time, but she stopped and—was Amelia imagining it, or did she blush? She smiled, regardless. “I’d be honored.”

Giddy heat pooled in Amelia’s belly, and she reached out to clasp her friend’s hand. “And you must call me Amelia.”

Theresa turned her hand so that the pads of her fingers grazed Amelia’s palm. “As you like. But in the future I might find something better to call you, if that’s all right.”

Amelia wasn’t even sure what that meant, but her ears burned, anyway. “I... look forward to hearing it.”

“On the topic of futures, Amelia,” the inmate said, drawing out her name with a smile, “what does yours look like? You’ve said that marriage isn’t for you, and until you become a hardened criminal like me, neither is the Bridewell work program, so...”

“I think I’d like to find work as a governess,” she answered, knowing that her plans for after Uskweirs were shallow, at best. “I’ve always loved children, and learning. I’ve...” Here she

stumbled, having to translate ‘spent entirely too many aimless years at Oxford’ into something appropriate to her realized gender. “I’ve read a great deal. I do love a library.”

“Is that the appeal of your present lodgings? Ashbourne’s library?”

“It’s a wonderful collection,” Amelia demurred, thinking: oh good, more scrambling for a plausible story, both for the ears in the walls and for Theresa, who doesn’t even know how awkward the question’s real answer would be. “But I think the appeal is more the company. Lizzie and I have become... rather fast friends.”

Theresa nodded, a ghost of sympathy passing over her face. “I do worry about her being lonely, even with the... flow of people through her father’s house. I’m glad you’re there for her.” She smiled, and the heat in Amelia’s belly coiled up her spine. The feeling only intensified when she realized Theresa was looking her over with an air of concentration. When she saw Amelia noting her look, she explained, “I’m trying to imagine you as a governess.”

Amelia looked into her lap. “Is it so hard to imagine?”

“Not at all. You’ll be wonderful.” She waited until Amelia, beaming, met her eye. And then Theresa tipped her head to the side, considering. “I do worry that it will grind you down, though. Children can be lovely, and they can also be little holy terrors. Alternating in the blink of an eye, depending on who is looking their way.”

Amelia smirked. “Do I detect a trace of memory in your description, Theresa?”

The woman scoffed. “Except I was never lovely.”

Amelia’s heart leap up into her throat as she heard herself say, “I beg to differ.” She smiled, falteringly, but the answering smile was warm. Then she flicked her eyes back up to the grate in the wall: this next bit is for the audience. “I’m sure you were a lovely child.”

“My own governess would disagree,” the inmate laughed. “You can confer with her later, under the aegis of professional courtesy.” She then told Amelia a story from her childhood that involved a visiting cousin with a sharp tongue, a pair of her bloomers, and a frog from the creek.

Amelia responded with a story of her own, minimally adapted, which featured her brother, a rare family dinner due to visiting clergy, and a deftly-delivered dose of epicac.

Theresa then described her long-running relationship with the local rector’s wife, who was, at first accidentally and then in increasingly intentional circumstances, regularly scandalized by her childhood antics. Theresa’s long-standing love of trousers had only been the beginning. The epic of needling and pestering eventually expanded to encompass ruined Easter pastries, ‘impertinent’ commentary on bible stories, and a dozen moths smuggled into the vestry closet. Finally she played nice for months to ingratiate herself in the eyes of the minister’s wife, securing the role of Mary in the Christmas pageant, only to go off-script standing above the manger to deliver a diatribe about the plight of women to the captive audience.

“How am I not surprised you were a precocious child?”

“I was raised by bluestockings,” Theresa answered with a shrug, and then raised a single finger. “They found my sermon

delightful. The rest of the village, not so much. Oh! I meant to give you a list of books. You've said you enjoy histories; have you read Macaulay's?"

Amelia had not had the foresight to bring writing materials to take notes, so as Chesterley rattled off her essential reading list, she nodded and repeated each author and title, desperate to commit some, if not even most, to memory. She paid especial attention to the much shorter list of booksellers, and couldn't help giggling as she said, "I'll drag Elizabeth out of the modistes to come book shopping with me."

"Oh, is she in town with you?"

"She might even be awake by now," Amelia said by way of confirmation, smiling. "Lizzie did ask if I wanted her to come along today," she added, not wanting Theresa to think her friend had abandoned her, and only after she'd started talking did she realize the import of revealing her answer last night. She couldn't very well trail off like a buffoon, so she committed to it and smiled. "I told her I wanted you all to myself."

Both Theresa's answering smile and her words were uncharacteristically soft. "Did you?" She did not elaborate, and neither did Amelia; they sat in companionable silence for some time.

Finally there was some distant commotion beyond the door, and Theresa roused herself a little. "That will be... ahem, 'luncheon.'" She leaned forward to take Amelia's hand in hers, squeezing gently. "It was so good of you to visit."

"I couldn't very well not." She tried to do Theresa's hand-turning trick to stroke her palm, too, but it was trickier than it had

seemed.

The prisoner stood up. “Well it’s been the highlight of my incarceration,” she smiled. There were footsteps, now, approaching the door. “How did you manage it? You’re hardly staying close to London.”

“Lord Ashbourne arranged it. I’m so terribly grateful.”

Chesterley snorted softly at that. “The viscount does enjoy playing fairy godmother to all of us, doesn’t he?”

But then the door squealed open and the warden ducked his head inside. “Miss Wright, Miss Chesterley. Luncheon is being served; I trust you’ve completed your visit?”

“We have.” Amelia turned to give Theresa’s forearms one final squeeze, trying to push into that brief contact every swelling emotion roiling in her heart, smiled demurely instead of kissing her cheek, and they said all the typical pleasantries of leavetaking. She promised to write, and turned to go.

As she followed the warden out to the entrance, Amelia realized that not once had she paid attention to her voice, and not once had it dropped out. She shook her head. Would she ever get to have a moment of emotion without some part of her brain evaluating her performance? She sighed gustily, told the warden that no, she wasn’t sighing at him, and yes, she would be very grateful if he could hail her a hackney.

There were only three of them in the carriage on the way out of London, two days later. Ned had indeed impressed his introduction and was staying on. His luggage—as well as Cordelia’s luggage—would be sent along via post. His empty

seat was taken up by a sizeable stack of books.

Amelia buried herself in her reading, or tried to, but kept finding herself staring out the window at the pale autumn skies. Finally she turned to Ashbourne. “Milord, I have been put in a frame of mind to think about my future.”

He lifted his gaze from the book that he had pinched from her stack and was already halfway through. His eyebrows lifted even further. “Oh?”

“You’ve been so terribly generous with your hospitality,” Amelia said, “but I can’t remain your guest forever.”

The viscount closed the book soundlessly and gave her a soft smile. “You’ve been nothing but a joy in my home, my dear, and a good friend to Elizabeth.”

“You can’t be meaning to leave us!” his daughter squealed in dismay. “I’ve become so accustomed to your company, Amelia; I wouldn’t know what to do without you in the house.”

“Yes, but you’re not going to be in your father’s house forever, either,” Amelia reminded her gently, with the barest curl at the corner of her lip. Elizabeth blushed, rolled her eyes at her own response, and looked out her window again. “Besides, I’m not talking about ending my visit, not unless I’ve worn out my welcome.”

“You have not,” Ashbourne put in quietly, so as not to interrupt her.

“But I am thinking about what happens after my visit does eventually end,” she went on, “and how I should like to leave Uskweirs. In what...condition. Which is to say.” She took a

deep breath. “You mentioned, milord, that you knew a surgeon.”

“Ooo!” Elizabeth squealed again, this time in excitement. “Are you ready for The Snip, Mellie?”

Amelia winced and laughed. “Please don’t call me that.”

“Are you ready for the Snip, Amy?” Elizabeth tried, instead. “Ames? Lia?” She quietted as Ashbourne placed a hand over hers.

Amelia focused on Ashbourne. If Theresa was going to be in prison until spring, she might as well get herself gelded and recover through the dreary winter months. “But yes. I think I’m ready for your surgeon to... make things rather permanent.”

“Very well.” The viscount nodded. “I’ll write to him as soon as we’re home.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Hot Day in Sussex

Summer

Her father's house was broiling: the kind of Sussex summer's day that flattens the world with relentless sunshine and narry a wisp of wind. The golden light squeezed in through the shutters and around the front door frame; soon the staff would throw it all open in the hopes of a breeze, but for now everyone in the house baked in half-light, trying to hold onto the last remnants of the morning's coolth.

Her mother would be in a bath by now, water changed every hour; there she would stay until sundown. She spied her father's back as he stepped into his study, but the door closed with a rather final-sounding click, and she knew he didn't want to be disturbed. Her brother had left home ages ago and hardly ever visited. She was left to her own devices. Alone.

Amelia threw open the front door and staggered out onto the grounds. Was it cooler outside or in? She couldn't tell. She should wear short pants; they were cooler. But no, she didn't wear short pants any longer, she should wear... dresses. Why was that so hard to think of? It was so damn hot. She looked down at her body. A waistcoat and trousers? Of course. This is

what she wore at her father's house. She couldn't very well wear a dress here.

The sheep were out grazing in the south lawn, a mottled white cloud spread across the ground instead of up in the blazingly blue and perfectly clear sky above. She skirted around them, half-listening to their muttering bleats, as she strode down towards the welcoming deep green shade of the brook. Surely it would be cooler there.

It wasn't.

At least not appreciably. The water babbled and rippled, the dappled shade scattered patches of dark and light across the ground. The air was close, damp, and cloying. She followed the course of the water, the stream growing wider and deeper, the ground squishing underfoot. In the best of times, the fishing pond was her idyllic retreat from the rest of the world. Now it was a swamp.

Amelia stood on the muddy bank, peering down at the water, caught in confusion for an indeterminate stretch of time. She'd like to go for a swim. Throw off her clothes and leap naked into the bracing water. Did girls do that? Why didn't she know if girls went swimming? That seemed like something she would know, since she herself was...

Wet slapped across her forehead. Something must have splashed into the pond. Amelia leaned into the cool water dripping down her face. A miraculous breeze, one that did not stir the trees around her, played across her damp skin, providing the barest shred of relief.

A plaintive bleat interrupted the moment, and Amelia, frowning, looked down to find a sheep struggling through the

mud towards her. She looked up and around; the rest of the herd was nowhere in sight.

It was young; no more than a yearling. Careful with her own footing on the squelching ground, Amelia bent over, trying to redirect it up the slight slope to the grassy lawn above. It wasn't cooperative. After nudges and shoves and no small amount of slipping in the mud, Amelia lifted the suddenly-surprised animal up and over her shoulders.

She trudged up the bank and across the lawn. It was so hot. Her trousers were painfully tight. With the beast's legs dangling around her face, she could see nips and spatters of blood across them. She craned her neck around, cheek buried in the yearling's spare wool and against its warm flank, and saw more wounds around its face and neck.

Amelia reached the edge of the herd, slung the animal off her shoulders and back onto the ground. It scrambled to its feet, bleated once, and bent over to graze. Only a moment later, however, a ram shouldered its way through the flock and shoved the yearling away from the herd.

"No, stop," Amelia cried, hands thrust forward, but she couldn't grip the ram's coat.

The ram battered the yearling twice, nipped at its face, and bleated angrily. The yearling fled, faster than Amelia could chase.

She turned to scowl down at the ram. "You little shit."

Amelia wasn't equipped to chase down and return the yearling, so she scanned the short horizon of the manor grounds. Yes, there. Groundskeepers, two of them. Maybe one of them

was the shepherd, Hawthorne. They were speaking with a gentleman, by his dress. His back was turned to Amelia, but it only took her a moment to recognize the shape and breadth of her father's shoulders.

She set off to speak with them, but they didn't seem to grow any closer. She hastened her pace, she ran; the men seemed to slide away farther from her. She called out—

Wet pressed against her forehead again. Cool water trickled over her cheeks. She staggered to a stop, huffing in the heat, settling back to sit on the grass, to lay down. She sighed in relief as the wet was replenished, another wave of chilly water now trickling back into her hairline, pooling inside her ears. Was her head resting on a sheep? She didn't care.

Elizabeth murmured something, and Amelia made appreciative noises. She couldn't quite form words, but she hoped she could convey the sense of, "Yes, please, more of that."

Instead she got dizzy and the ground seemed to wobble and spin underneath her. A lock of sweat-plastered hair was stuck to her face and she couldn't seem to brush it off. Amelia pushed herself up onto hands and knees, blearily looking across the grounds, and that's when the first kick landed in her belly.

She cried out in surprise, only to be answered by jeers and shouts. Schoolboy shoes smashed into her stomach, into her thighs, into her crotch. They really liked kicking her in the crotch.

She couldn't tell how many boys surrounded her; she wasn't even sure they had a definitive number. They were just a mob, and they were kicking her in a circle, which was generally considered one of the highlights of formal education. They

shouted insults at her; they shouted encouragements at each other; occasionally they pointed out to a friend the best place to stand or the best place to kick.

They left her broken and sobbing on the ground, which is where she stayed for a long while. She crawled across the lawn to the house, finding every foot or so another patch of cool grass to press her face against.

At some point hands reached under her arms and lifted her up; she was carried inside. One or more voices called for a doctor, and he materialized, either a moment or a day later.

He was a spare, compact little man, in a punctilious suit in a strange and foreign cut. He wore spectacles and a trimmed moustache. He spoke with a pinched Roman accent. He was Dottore Bruno.

Bruno pushed his face into Amelia's, prying open each of her eyes in turn and palpating her throat. He made concerned sounds and spoke to someone just out of sight. He brushed away the sweaty lock of hair, and for this single gesture Amelia would be grateful to him until the end of her days.

"There are two approaches to medicine," Dottore Bruno said, or had said. Perhaps it was a day later, and they were having supper. Bruno sat at her right hand, ladling soup into her bowl.

"The first," he said, every word clipped and precise, "is that all bodies are essentially the same: same organs, same functions, same rules by which they all operate. We are united in a common humanity; we are all easily comprehensible in that humanity; and we are, each of us, nothing special."

She sipped her soup; it tasted a lot like horse piss. But at

least it was liquid and cool. She was so thirsty.

“The second is that every body is particular, idiosyncratic, and capable of its own singular beauty.” The doctor smiled; it was clear which approach he favored. “There are patterns and themes, of course, but every body interacts with and participates in those themes in its own way. The goal of medicine then, indeed the goal of all our lives, is to unlock every body’s signature beauty.”

The good doctor loomed over her again. Were they even at the table any more? Dottore Bruno floated above her, spinning slowly along with the rest of the room. “The first approach is veterinary,” he said. “Humanity as a herd to be managed. The second, though, is symphonic: the cultivation of each individual potential to join the chorus of all, lifted in song to glorify the universe.”

Music swelled around him as he rose up into the bedroom ceiling, and Amelia was in the midst of an opera, a whole concert hall of musicians hidden somewhere underneath her bed, and the whole universe sang along with her. It went on and on, for hours, for days, for years, and Amelia was a part of it. She was beautiful and she was singing along with everyone else. She cried, and her tears were part of the music, too.

Eventually, though, the grandeur faded and the heat rose and thirst turned her throat to ash. She thrashed her limbs; something or someone tried to restrain her, to hobble her. The schoolboys? Why didn’t the schoolboys want to sing along with her? One pounded a fist down, over and over, between her legs. She aimed a kick at where his face should be and connected with nothing but air. But her tormentors seemed to scatter away into the darkness.

She lay there, burning, thirsty, crotch aching, alone and hopeless. Wet pressed against her forehead again; no—someone, a person, pressed something wet and cool against her forehead. Perhaps she wasn't alone. She tried to ask who was there, but the words wouldn't come. Her lips didn't want to move. It was so hard just to breathe.

She gathered up all her focus, concentrating for what felt like hours. Finally, she pushed herself up to sitting.

She was in bed. She was in a bedroom. She was in her bedroom, in her father's house. The window was open to the night air, drifting in only a touch cooler than the glowering heat trapped inside the house. False dawn glimmered on the horizon.

Amelia slumped out of bed to the window, pushing her head and shoulders outside, hoping to cool off. It didn't work. Frustrated, she ducked back inside, wrenched off her thick nightgown and kicked it into a corner. She bared her naked breasts and shoulders to the silver light of the moon. What would Mother think, she sniggered absently, trying to distract herself from the heat that she could still feel radiating off her skin.

A sound echoed up out of the house behind her, and Amelia pulled her head back inside. She stood stock still in the middle of the room and listened.

It was Elizabeth. Crying. Somewhere near, but muffled. Amelia's heart leapt into her throat. Her friend.

Was she in the next room? Amelia went out into the hall and one door down, running half-naked down her father's halls, but she didn't care. She threw open the door, but her friend wasn't there, either. Lizzie alternated between short bursts of sobs and

little mewling sounds and sniffing. Was she behind one of the servants' entrances? Amelia tried the door but it wouldn't budge. She pressed her ear up against the door.

"What is it, dear?" came Ashbourne's voice, all gentle solicitousness. "She's fine, or will be; the doctor said she's on her way to recovery."

"It's not that," his daughter sniffed. "It's just... oh Papa, I'm so ashamed." Ashbourne said something mollifying, but Lizzie was having none of it. "I've sat here thinking the cruelest thoughts, Papa. That finally something was hard for her. Everything else came so easily and so quickly, and..." She blew her nose. "I've been jealous, which I know is silly, but that doesn't keep this... sick green want out of my heart. Oh, Miss Pirie would be so disappointed in me."

"Miss Pirie's standards are insurmountable," Ashbourne chuckled, and Lizzie's sniffles were muffled, presumably by his embrace. He said something else, something too low for Amelia to hear through the door.

"I haven't been a good friend," Lizzie said, with an air of vehement remonstrance, disagreeing with her father's soothing. "I've been friendly. Because I ought to. The lady of the house. I wanted to be friends, I did all the things a friend would do. But all of that despite... oh Papa, despite the most vicious thoughts." Here she collapsed again into sobs, her father murmuring to her, and slowly the sound of their voices faded away and Amelia wasn't pressed against the servant's door, anymore.

She was in London, on a busy thoroughfare. The muggy heat of the town surrounded her, swallowed her, threatened so suffocate her. She was just down St James' street from her father's club. And there he was, up ahead in the press of bodies.

She pushed forward, shouted his name. He kept walking away. He mounted the steps to the front entrance of his club, nodded to the doorman, and slipped inside. Amelia stopped in her tracks. She wasn't a member; she'd be turned away at the door.

But she stood there on the street, contemplating the entrance to the club and the doorman who studiously ignored her presence. Absently she twirled her parasol on her shoulder as she thought.

Why did she want to go in there in the first place? She'd been in there before, as her father's guest. It was dark inside, lit by golden lamps reflecting on burnished wood, everything obscured by clouds of cigar smoke. He had led her through the halls and rooms, greeting various gentlemen of name, introducing her but never looking back to her, never taking in her face. He wanted to show her where he went when in town, where she might go if she joined the same club. He never once paused to ask if she wanted to be there, then or ever.

She remembered men roaming the halls or perched on armchairs, glowering at each other in always-unspoken challenge. She never wanted their company; she only wanted his. But he lived in this world of contests and challenges, and in that world she lost to him every time. Her endless losing streak and therefore lesser status was such a foregone conclusion he never even bothered to face her.

Amelia wrenched herself out of memory and turned away from the gentlemen's club. Across the street was a coffee house; sitting at the window was Lizzie. Amelia dashed across the street, skirt billowing around her feet, and flung herself into the seat opposite her friend. Amelia smiled and said, "I've been looking all over for you."

Elizabeth looked up in surprise and laughed. “Have you, now? Been ranging all over looking for me?”

“For ever so long,” Amelia agreed, nodding, and looked back in confusion at her wrought-iron chair, which had somehow sprouted a pillow roll. The more she looked at it, the more it became clear that the chair was actually her bed. She looked back at Lizzie, sitting at her bedside. One hand held a washcloth over a bowl filled with ice water.

“Quite the adventurer,” Lizzie giggled. “For what it’s worth, I think you are the first person in the world to try laudanum mixed with horse piss.” She set the bowl aside and leaned over Amelia’s bed. “Oh, it is so good to have you back, my dear.”

It came back in fragments rather quickly. They’d returned to Uskweirs. Ashbourne had sent for the surgeon. He’d arrived: an Italian named Dottore Bruno. Ashbourne welcomed him to his table, where he proved himself a lively conversationalist. But he waited until they were not eating to describe his career creating castrati for the opera houses of Europe, how he had fled the fighting and ended up in England of all places, and how his skills could benefit Amelia.

“It’s a little late to make you a soprano,” he’d said, “but you’ve done very well on your own. Your voice is beautiful.”

Amelia blushed then, and blushed now, in her bed.

Lizzie filled in the rest. The surgery was completed to Bruno’s satisfaction, but the next day Amelia came down with a fever. The wound became inflamed and infected.

“No no,” Elizabeth said, holding back Amelia’s own questing fingers, reaching for her crotch. “It’s fine, now, but you mustn’t

disturb the dressings.”

“Fever,” Amelia breathed in fear. Fever and infection had taken Anthony. She raised the back of her hand to her own forehead, as much good as that would do. “Is it?”

Lizzie leaned forward to place her own, cooler hand beside Amelia’s. “Broken. Which is not to say you’re ready to get out of bed. The good doctor says you’ll need a few weeks of rest even after the fever abates.”

“How long have I...?”

“Fifteen days,” was the response. “We very nearly lost hope.”

“But you didn’t,” Amelia said, struggling to reach forward and take Lizzie’s hand in hers. She remembered fragments of the conversation that she must have overheard between Elizabeth and her father. She squeezed her hand as best she could. “You have been an excellent friend to me, Lizzie. Truly. Both through this ordeal and the months before. I am so incredibly lucky to have you.”

The girl blushed and looked away. “It’s what anyone else would have done.”

“Bullshit,” Amelia spat, and coughed a bit. Then she tried again, with a little less vehemence: “Bullshit. You have gone above and beyond any expectation of compassion or hospitality. You have been such a friend to me, and I treasure you and your friendship more than anything.”

Lizzie giggled despite her blush. “More than anything? Even more than you treasure your breasts?”

Amelia rolled her eyes and settled back against the headboard. “Elizabeth Randall, I treasure you greater than even my tits.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Llangollen

Monmouthshire, February 1813

Recovery was interminable. Amelia never came down with fever again, but the healing was slow and the throbbing pain ever-present. She tried to read, but her attention and concentration eluded her. She'd idled, bored, in her bed for more than a month; two months if you counted the stretch of time she'd lost to fever dreams.

When she had finally healed enough to rise, she did not go far. She'd spent days simply walking the length of her room and back before collapsing back into bed. Then a week of hobbling down the hall and back, by then with a teeth-gritting determination to push herself. Because then it was Christmas, and Elizabeth never stopped talking about Christmas dinner, and Amelia meant to sit at the table for that. She achieved that lofty goal, and then retired back to bed immediately thereafter.

Ashbourne left for London after the holidays to sit at Parliament. Amelia missed her host but was endlessly touched when he addressed his frequent letters to both Elizabeth and Amelia with the simple salutation "Girls—". Sometimes he sent packages of fabric and ribbons and once two new complete

frocks, one for each of them. His letters never failed to ask after Amelia's health, and otherwise betrayed his frustration with politics and his desire to return home. For her part, Amelia only wanted the opposite: to leave the house.

She finally made it outside in the new year, although Elizabeth rushed her back into the warm house almost before she'd filled her lungs with crisp, fresh air. She walked, she rested; by creeping progress her walks grew longer and her rests grew shorter. But being restrained for so long, by both Elizabeth and by her weakened body, put her in a foul mood that persisted even after her friend stopped reining her in and it was just her recovering body holding her back.

She hadn't called Elizabeth her jailer out loud more than twice. The girl had responded with a longsuffering patience that Amelia recognized as Ashbourne's demeanor when he had to deal with a trying house guest. That recognition only served to frustrate Amelia, because she wasn't being a poor guest, she was just... hurting and frustrated and impatient to see Theresa again. She tried to banish her sulk by writing to the inmate. Which is why she was in the library, the room of the manor which captured the most of the thin winter light, when the post came in.

"Oh," murmured Elizabeth, who was looking over the latest dispatch from London. Then she blushed and folded the letter, as if to put it away before Amelia could read it.

The invalid was having none of it. "What is it? What has he written?"

Her friend sheepishly handed over the letter. "It seems Misses Woods and Pirie are back on the chopping block."

Ashbourne's letter was curt and acerbic, a sure sign that his

frustration was at its height. Lady Cumming Gordon had appealed to the House of Lords, as she had promised. The judgement was therefore suspended and she need not pay her penalty to the two teachers. The salt in the wound, however, was that as soon as her appeal had been accepted for consideration, it had been tabled. Ashbourne expected it to be swept under the rug and rolled over to the following session, which would forestall any payment until next year at the earliest.

Amelia crushed the note into her lap in despair. A moment later she thought better of the gesture and moved to smooth it back out, and then the next moment threw it to the floor in frustration. “And in the mean time, what are Marianne and Jane to do? They cannot start a new school without the settlement, they cannot teach anywhere else thanks to Cumming Gordon’s slander. Do they starve?”

“They have friends,” Elizabeth said, bending over to pick up the letter. “My father among them. They will not starve.”

“But they will not live their lives, either,” Amelia spat. “They’ll be trapped, penned in, unable to take any steps forward, losing time!”

Her friend lifted an eyebrow.

Amelia raised a warning finger at her friend. “I’m not talking about me,” she insisted. “I’m talking about them. But also me. Because that is, I fear, all that I have to look forward to once I leave here. Is a life even possible for a woman like me? Unless I marry a man, no matter how good or cherished a governess I become, I am doomed to spinsterhood on the margins of society.”

“The margins aren’t so bad.”

Amelia bunched up her lips to prevent herself from sneering at her friend. Her friend who was going to marry a lord, become a lady, and have everything she'd ever wanted. "It's not a life!" she said instead. "You can't have a whole life on the margins. They'll never let you. They'll never let me."

Elizabeth pursed her lips, considering. Finally, she said, "You've walked all the way to church and back, twice now. Do you think you could ride in a carriage for a couple days?"

Still caught up in her own hauteur, Amelia wasn't sure if she should scowl at her friend's change of subject or squeal at the prospect of leaving the house. Warily, she answered, "I think I can."

Elizabeth clapped her hands together. "Good. Then we're going to Llangollen tomorrow."

Preferring to ask forgiveness rather than seek permission, Elizabeth ordered her father's carriage and team prepared and they set out northward without so much as an invitation to the famous house that was their destination.

Amelia tried not to wince every time the carriage hit a bump or rut in the road. "It's a... literary sort of place?" she hazarded when they reached what promised to be a level bit of good road. She was only vaguely aware of Llangollen's fame and had the impression that it had something to do with poets and novelists escaping London for the country. Northern Wales seemed a bit excessive for that, though, so she might be mistaken.

"They attract colourful guests," was Elizabeth's only reply. "You'll see."

When night fell, they stopped outside a crossroads inn and for the first time that day Elizabeth betrayed a trace of uncertainty. "I'm pretty sure this is the right place," she muttered as she disembarked. It was; the innkeeper knew her from years of visits made memorable by her father's coin purse. He showed them to his finest room, which was modest but clean.

It was just past midday the next morning when they arrived in the village of Llangollen. Extracting an oversized wicker basket from the back of the carriage, Elizabeth hustled Amelia into the local butcher's, the greengrocer's, and then the haberdashery. At each store she added more items to the basket, which was promptly overflowing. "By way of apology for dropping in without invitation," the girl explained.

Back in the carriage, they jostled and rocked their way along winding local roads up and down surprisingly severe slopes. Amelia had thought she was doing well, but now balled up her fists at every shudder of the carriage.

At last they came upon a sizeable cottage surrounded by exuberant gardens. Flashes of reflected sunlight betrayed more than one greenhouse hiding amidst the foliage. The sign on the gate read Plas Newydd.

As the carriage rolled into the short yard, Amelia took in the gothic exterior that looked to have been bolted onto the front of the much older building. Stained glass winked and shone from every window. Creeping vines had overtaken half the building's exterior, covering it in a verdant green blanket.

The whole house exuded the sort of air that some would enthusiastically call "charming" while others offered "quaint" through lips drawn tight in distaste.

They hadn't finished descending from the carriage when a woman's voice called out, "Is that Lizzie Randall?"

Elizabeth, basket clutched in one arm, turned towards the voice, beamed and waved. "Sarah! I brought the biggest ham I could find!"

From the gardens on the side of the house emerged a curious figure, clad in a muslin work apron draped over a black riding habit. The old woman stooped over to beat the dirt where it had been pressed into her apron, scooped up a gardening basket, and strode forward. She couldn't have come up to Elizabeth's shoulder. "Well, isn't she a pretty ham," she said, looking Amelia up and down with a teasing smirk. Her voice bore the barest trace of an Irish accent.

"This is Miss Amelia Wright," Lizzie corrected with exaggerated exasperation. "Amelia, this is Miss Sarah Ponsonby."

Amelia dropped a curtsy; Ponsonby lifted her skirt an inch and then executed an unsteady twirl, ending with a feeble backwards kick. "Welcome to Plas Newydd, dear. Always a pleasure to meet new people." She shifted her basket onto her left and twined her free arm around Elizabeth's. "Let's see if we can find Eleanor, shall we? At this hour, she'll be reading in the library—through the backs of her eyelids."

They stomped into the cottage, making enough noise that by the time they reached the library, Miss Eleanor Butler was awake, if only just. This lady was at least ten years older than the first, dressed in similar riding habit. Where Sarah was short, spare, and energetic, Eleanor was tall, stolid, and reserved. She welcomed the girls into their home and bid them sit in the

library; she would call for some tea.

In the close proximity of the indoors, Amelia noted that both ladies were wearing powdered wigs.

“You must be patient with our girl,” Eleanor told Lizzie and Amelia quietly when the serving girl bustled out of the room to fetch something she’d forgotten. “Local girl, not professionally trained.”

“And she’s the only one here, taking care of absolutely everything in the house, so she’s stretched thin,” Sarah put in with a roll of her eyes. “Eleanor forgets that and thinks everyone should be as capable as Mary was, when we were both spry enough not to need as much help as we do now.”

The other lady merely sniffed in response.

“She’s been gone two years, now,” Sarah went on with a sigh, “and we still miss her. Not just for her tea. Ah, here we are.” The serving girl returned with a plate of tiny sandwiches that looked to have been slapped together in the last ten minutes. Sarah gave the girl an encouraging smile and Eleanor nodded approvingly as everything was laid out. “We’ll pour ourselves, dear. I’m sure you have things to do.” When the girl was gone, she told the room, “She’s beating out the rugs today, poor thing.”

Eleanor poured out a cup and handed it to Lizzie. “I do enjoy your visits, my dear, although we are used to a little prior notice. What brings you to our corner of the world with such alacrity?”

Elizabeth accepted the cup, blushing. “I do apologize, Miss Butler. I saw a need and an opportunity and I leapt on it. Father is away in London, you see, and he left the carriage at home—”

“An adventure,” Sarah giggled. “That’s the opportunity, but what was the need?”

Elizabeth exchanged a look with Amelia, for once asking for permission. The latter girl half-nodded, still uncertain where her friend was going. Lizzie smiled impishly and explained, “Amelia despairs of sharing her life with a woman she loves.”

“And so you brought her here,” Eleanor observed drily. “Are we to serve as your object lesson?”

“Of course she brought her here,” Sarah retorted, beaming at Amelia. “Oh my, let’s see, where to begin?”

Eleanor gestured feebly with a tea biscuit. “Here we are. We exist. Surprise. I think that’s all there is to it.”

Sarah swatted the other lady’s knee playfully. “That is not all there is and you know it. You forget what it’s like being young and—forgive me, dears—not knowing anything. Because no one tells you.”

“They lie to you,” Eleanor corrected. “And when that doesn’t work, they threaten you.”

The other lady nodded, conceding. “It’s really not a happy story, is it? Our families were absolutely beastly about it all.” She took a deep breath and a small sip of tea. “But we’re telling this all wrong. Just a pair of doddering old ladies nattering away.”

“I first met Sarah forty-five years ago,” Eleanor said matter-of-factly. But as she continued, her tone shifted, softened, and warmed. “She was just a girl, then, and I was an old maid. But she was already the most beautiful person I had ever seen.”

“Eleanor was so elegant, and so clever,” the other lady said wistfully, and reached over to put a hand on the other lady’s knee. “I remember thinking that she’d read every book in Kilkenny.”

“I had; there wasn’t much there.” She placed her hand on top of Sarah’s.

“I didn’t know what I was feeling, not at first,” Sarah went on. “My guardian, Sir Fownes, he said it was a girlish infatuation. He wanted me to marry him, you see.”

“And she held him off for ten years,” Eleanor interrupted with all the air of the victor of a prize fight. “That was long enough for us to make our plans, put away a little money, and prepare.”

“And convince Mary to help us,” Sarah added. “She was indispensable. She booked us our fares, you see. We couldn’t very well go down to the docks on our own. Not without my guardian or her family noticing.”

“We convinced our families we were visiting each other to buy us a head start. Rushed down to the docks and we were away.” Eleanor chuckled nostalgically. “We made it all the way across the Irish Sea before they caught up to us.”

“And by that time, we were out from under their thumbs,” Sarah looked sidelong at Eleanor, a wistful smile on her lips. “You should have seen it. Eleanor’s father and my guardian all bristling with indignation, and Eleanor bristling right back at them, spitting nails and threatening to make a scene so scandalous that they’d hear about it all the way back in Kilkenny.” She laughed, delighted at the memory. “I fell in love

with her all over again that day.”

Eleanor squeezed Sarah’s hand. “The rest is boring, I’m afraid. We toured Wales, we found this place, we invited Mary to join us, and we settled in. August will make it thirty-three years.”

“It’s not boring, it’s our whole lives!” the other lady chided in good humour, and then looked back to Amelia, eyes shining. “We made this place the picture of our dreams. You saw the facade out front. And we’ve added so many greenhouses and gardens. We are surrounded by beauty and books and green, growing things. We have so many fascinating guests come visit us—we have a sort of notoriety, now. But it brings us fresh young faces like yours.”

It took some time before Amelia asked the real question—until supper that evening was cleared and, Amelia imagined, the ladies were just on the cusp of excusing themselves to bed. “But how does it work?” she asked, and blushed at her lack of context. They had been talking about Sarah’s flowers.

But Eleanor understood the question immediately. “How can two ladies afford to keep house together, in terms of both finances and reputation?” She smirked when Amelia gave her an hesitant nod. “It takes some doing.”

“Money does help,” Sarah offered, with a wan smile.

But Eleanor huffed. “Money is essential. We were lucky to gather enough to get ourselves away from Ireland. Squirreled away our pin money, embezzled bits and bobs with carefully-worded requests to the holders of our purse-strings. It was the work of years. And then, and only under threat of scandal, my father begrudgingly supported us as long as we kept our distance.

After he passed, my brother reduced that allowance—better insulated from scandal.”

“But we had Plas Newydd by then,” Sarah took up the narrative with a bright smile. Her eyes shone in the candlelight. “We have our gardens and fruit trees and chickens and even our own little dairy.”

“It’s not enough to feed the household, but that, plus renting out the fields, comes close,” Eleanor explained gravely. “Enough that the generosity of friends and visitors can close the gap.”

That ridiculous ham, thought Amelia, nestled in Lizzie’s deep basket of other necessities. It could probably feed two elderly ladies and a maid for a week.

Eleanor was saying: “...which is where the reputation comes in. Or notoriety, as Sarah said over tea.”

“Visitors aren’t... scandalized?” Amelia couldn’t help but ask.

“They always think they will be,” the younger old lady explained with a titter, “and then they see that we are pleasant company and keep a charming home, and isn’t it convenient that we are along the way between London and Dublin. We’ve even had the Queen here.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “Which got it in our heads to try for a royal pension, and that was years of letter-writing to finally secure a pleasant promise from the crown—and a flurry of regrets from the treasury that the pension account is perpetually devoid of funds. We have better luck with artists.”

“They’re better company, too,” Sarah smiled. “So dramatic,

effusive with praise over the smallest details of our home. It goes to my head every time but I certainly don't mind. To hear them talk, we walk on clouds."

"We are often praised for our sisterly devotion," Eleanor said, with a lofty cadence that ended in a soft, derisive snort. "Suffice to say, we walk a fine line, balancing the attraction of scandal against the assurances of respectability."

"It sounds exhausting."

Sarah shook her head, which shifted her wig back and forth. Eleanor merely shrugged. "Sometimes I tire of our maintenance always implicitly dangling from our ability to play hostess—no, Lizzie, this is different; we are so happy to meet Amelia—but playing hostess for our suppers is better than being shut up in a convent."

"Or marriage to an old man."

Eleanor reached over to clasp her partner's hand. "And despite the difficulties, we are happy. And have been happy for many years." She fixed her eye on Amelia. "It can be done, my dear."

It was only as the carriage was pulling out of the little yard on the way home that Amelia asked Elizabeth: "But do they... you know?"

Lizzie lifted one eyebrow. "What, fuck?"

Amelia tilted her head back and forth. "Well. Yes."

The other girl laughed. “They gave us each our own bedrooms, but they share one bedroom themselves. And there’s only one bed in there.”

“That’s not... definitive.”

Lizzie glanced out the window, smirked at Amelia, and tapped the glass. “Look.”

Back in the courtyard stood Eleanor and Sarah, having seen off their guests. Their hands fell into each other’s with the familiarity of long habit, and then Eleanor slid her arm around the shorter woman’s waist. They laughed at a shared joke and Eleanor pulled her close. Sarah’s grin was visible fifty paces away, full of surprise and anticipation.

Eleanor dipped Sarah back. Sarah stroked her hands up her partner’s arms (and surrepticiously braced her foot behind her to take her own weight off Eleanor’s arms). And then they took what seemed like all the time in the world to kiss.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Garden Party at Malvern

Malvern, March 1813

Amelia breathed deep, looking out the window as the party came together on the lawn of the Randalls' Malvern House. White tents and pavilions, which might have been exact matches to those from the Yorkshire party last October, were spread out across a much flatter lawn. House staff and borrowed servants from neighbouring estates bustled about in the dewy morning air, preparing. Amelia rested her hands on her belly to feel her own breathing. Steady. Controlled. She could do this.

It was a simple party thrown for a wonderful purpose, burdened with personal complications that she was resolved to weather, for the sake of her friend.

Francis Harcourt had written to report that his mother had recovered her illness and that he should like to see Elizabeth. Ever the proper gentleman: he did not ask for an invitation, but clearly implied his need for same.

Spoiling to renew their long-delayed courtship, Lizzie despaired of her inability to invite him to Uskweirs. But Lizzie being Lizzie, she enthusiastically turned obstacle into

opportunity. If she could not ask him to Uskweirs, she could ask him to Malvern House, which came with the added benefit of his meeting her mother. And if he would meet her mother, she would like to meet his, and so an invitation to visit turned into an invitation to a garden party to celebrate the start of spring, and would not his mother like to accompany him?

All of which was well and good until Ashbourne came home from Parliament and took Amelia aside. After the Tory victory in November, Ashbourne's position on a few key issues required careful politicking and alliances. If he (or, properly speaking, his wife) were to host a garden party during the current session of Parliament, he would have to invite some new allies—including the Duke of Suffolk.

Amelia's father.

So both of her parents were here, one floor down and two doors over.

Both Ashbourne and Lizzie had made it perfectly clear that Amelia was not required to attend, either by the rules of hospitality or friendship. But it had also been clear that Elizabeth wanted her friend there when she met her suitor after so long a hiatus. And Amelia had not undergone everything in the past year just to be a coward.

Her last encounter with her brother, now some five months past, gave her both hope in her presentation as well as lessons learned. She could not trust the bustle of a party to keep her apart from her parents—especially with two of them here. So she had enlisted the help of her friends to arrange an introduction early in the day.

“Are you ready, my dear?” asked CeeCee from the bedroom door. The lady herself was of course the picture of poise, decked out in pale lavender silks and lace typically reserved for young ladies—not that CeeCee cared one whit about typical reservations.

“We’ll find out, shortly, won’t we?” Amelia answered, smoothing her frock over her bustle-embellished hips. She was wearing pale pink, almost white, the most unremarkable and unobjectionable gown she possessed in her narrow wardrobe. She had applied her cosmetics with as light a hand as she dared. At least her hair, she was certain from uncountable glances in the mirror, was perfect—finally long enough on its own to suffice without clipped-in curls.

CeeCee took her by the arm and together they marched downstairs and out to the solarium, which opened onto the lawns and the party. Elizabeth looked up from where she waited at the door. “My my, don’t you look amazing,” she said with a smile. “And you don’t look too bad either, CeeCee.”

“Are they out?”

Lizzie nodded. “Father has detained them on the outskirts of the party. I can’t tell if he’s keeping them there by talking politics or just by sheer force of hospitality.”

“And we’re sure this won’t make things difficult for him if it goes poorly?” Amelia asked, not for the first time.

CeeCee patted her arm. “We introduce you as my friend, who I brought along to the party, with no connection to the Randalls.” It wasn’t the first time she’d given the same answer, either. “But it won’t go poorly, dear; you look like nothing more

than an attractive, empty-headed young lady hoping to find a rugged yet respectable man to whisk her away to a life of matrimonial drudgery—”

“Enough, enough!” Amelia couldn’t help but giggle. “Fine. Cry havoc and loose the dogs of war.”

“Are you calling me a bitch?” laughed CeeCee as she pushed open the greenhouse door. She kept Amelia’s attention diverted as they crossed the lawn so she did not have a chance to worry, and then they were stepping up to Ashbourne, her father, and her mother.

“CeeCee, I’ve been looking for you!” smiled Amelia’s mother. Her gaze transferred from her friend to Amelia where she hung on the lady’s arm. Her mother’s eyes flicked down and then back up Amelia’s body, taking in all of her presentation in half a second and, Amelia knew from long experience, forming a judgement of her entire character and probable family history. She raised her eyebrows and looked to CeeCee for an introduction.

“Enid, may I introduce Miss Amelia Wright,” CeeCee obliged. “Amelia, this is Charles Sommerset, the Duke of Suffolk, and his wife, Enid. One of my favourite friends.” She sniffed, and added playfully, “Enid, that is. I’ve never cared much for Charles.”

Amelia curtseyed. “A pleasure to make your acquaintances, your grace, milady.”

Her father gave her half a glance, less than half of a nod, and then went back to talking to Ashbourne. About as much as Amelia had ever got from him, she mused, no matter what she

was wearing.

Enid Sommerset, on the other hand, took a step forward, her eyes falling on Amelia's hand curled around CeeCee's arm. Ah. Was she presenting as a rival to her mother's best friendship? She dropped her hands to her sides. But her mother extended a hand to clasp, and Amelia's now-free hand was available, so she did so. Her mother's hands were always cold, but she put a gentle squeeze into the gesture that prevented it feeling like clasping a dead fish.

"Please tell me," her mother said, not releasing her hand, "that you're here to save me from all this talk about politics."

"Charles, I'm stealing your wife again," CeeCee declared, and pulled both Amelia and her mother away from the two politicians. She spared Amelia a glance to ensure she wasn't panicking (she was, but only a little, and not enough to show on her face), and then they were off, floating across the lawn in the general direction of the punch bowl. Elizabeth trailed after, scanning the party hopefully.

"How do the two of you know each other?" her mother asked, and Amelia could not tell if she was making conversation or probing to see how much a threat she presented to the old friendship.

"Oh, I've known Amelia since she was a little girl," CeeCee answered blithely. "I've been friendly with the family ever since coming to England." Lizzie snorted softly, and then covered it by pretending to sneeze.

"Odd you've never mentioned them," Mother mused.

“Wright, though? Any relation to the Wrights of Cambridge?”

“It’s such a common name,” Amelia dissembled with a shake of her head. “There seems to be Wrights everywhere you look.”

“My youngest sister married a Professor Anthony Wright,” her mother explained, and then described her own cousin to her: “Charming man, although what he studies exactly eludes me at the moment. Some divinity something-or-other. A lively conversationalist, despite all that, and a good shot, if my husband’s word is to be believed.”

“About hunting, at least,” CeeCee muttered darkly, to her friend Enid’s visible amusement.

“My sister has been very happy in her marriage to an academic, though, despite our early doubts.” She looked sidelong at Amelia. “Do you have any marriage prospects, Miss Wright? Or is CeeCee touring you around for some other purpose?”

“I have no prospects,” Amelia answered with what she hoped was a lighthearted laugh. “Nor am I looking for any. I hope to become a governess.”

“Your hopes aren’t so desperate as that?” her mother all but gasped.

“But I rather like children,” Amelia tried to protest, and when she saw on her mother’s face that that was not going to work, she grabbed Lizzie and pulled her between them like a shield. “But Elizabeth has prospects!”

While the ladies cooed at the thought of love in the offing,

Elizabeth hissed at her, “You villain! I will make you pay for this.” Somehow she was also grinning at the same time. Giddy.

Amelia kissed her cheek by way of apology, not for what she had done, but what she was about to do. “And he’s here today,” she told the ladies. “With his mother.”

“What are you possibly doing with us, child?” cried Amelia’s mother, and suddenly their quartet became a scouting party to locate the Harcourts for the lovesick girl.

It did not take long to find both of them, chatting with Elizabeth’s own mother under the tent where the string quartet were playing. CeeCee shooed Elizabeth forward while the three of them hung back, watching the ensuing conversation from just far enough away not to be rude.

Francis made introductions, hands were clasped, some humour was employed to alleviate the tension, and everyone was smiling. When the two lovers peeled off to take a turn around the party, the two mothers watched them go. On both their faces were displayed pride and hope, which, when they turned to make conversation with each other, they tried to convert into sentiment and nostalgia for young love.

“Neither wants to ruin their child’s chances by looking desperate,” Amelia’s mother observed.

“It’s a good match for them both,” CeeCee observed. “Harcourt needs a wife who knows how things are done in the circles where he’ll circulate once he inherits. Lizzie’s a fifth child, third daughter; marrying a man of title would be quite a victory.”

Amelia looked across the lawn at the two lovers, walking and laughing. “I have great hopes for them,” she admitted. “They’re both besotted.”

“Then let us hope other considerations do not rob them of their happiness,” her mother observed drily.

CeeCee found a passing plate of cordials and passed one to her friend. “Not everyone is as bullheaded as your son, Enid.”

And thank the heavens for that, Amelia thought but did not say. Since she was not supposed to know her own brother, she politely remained quiet.

But her mother was apparently content to air her dirty laundry in front of a new acquaintance. “My son Eustace made an... ill-considered match,” she told Amelia, “one that I counseled against, but he refused to listen. They were infatuated with each other at first, but...” She shrugged. “It apparently escaped the both of them that they were completely different people. And now he is unhappy, and his wife is unhappy, and his children are unhappy.”

“How terrible that must be,” was the best that Amelia could respond with. She remembered the fights over her brother’s courtship that raged through the family’s townhouse, which had completely failed to stop the rushed marriage. There was no small surprise when there was no child born within the first year; then after the honeymoon his new wife had been first aloof and then rather acerbic. Mother, never one to back down from a fight, had returned heat with fire, and everything had gone downhill from there. Amelia got herself her own cordial; this did not seem like a conversation for which she wanted to be sober.

“I wouldn’t mind so much if in his bungling of everything he hadn’t managed to turn her against me,” her mother went on. “Somehow I am the harridan who forced his hand, and she is loathe to let me so much as see my own grandchildren.”

“His spending doesn’t help matters,” CeeCee put it, rolling her eyes at Amelia over her mother’s head.

Enid Sommerset tossed her hands. “That’s men’s business, and I neither have nor want any part in it. Although I would rather prefer the men have their arguments at a lower volume.” She looked over at Amelia, as if suddenly remembering that she was there. “Perhaps your plans to be a governess and avoid marriage have some merit, after all, dear. You don’t have to deal with a husband and it’s not your children, it’s other people’s. If they’re terrible, you can always find other employment and start again with a fresh set.”

For all the absurdity of the statement, her mother’s eyes remained on Amelia, expecting some response. She smiled, but this did not dissuade the woman from waiting. Finally, somewhere between desperate and panicked, she blurted, “What of your other children? The rest of your set?”

CeeCee stared saucers at Amelia over her mother’s head, then waved her hands around her ears as if to say, “Whatever happens now is on your head, fool girl.”

“Oh, ‘youngest?’” her mother scoffed. “That’s how all the correspondence is signed, now. ‘Your youngest.’ And said correspondence comes from Iceland, of all places.”

Amelia clutched her glass of cordial and asked, “Iceland?”

Why Iceland?” as innocently as she could manage.

“Because ‘youngest’ has aspirations to scientific illustration? Or discovery? It’s all very muddled,” she spat, and then gestured with her empty glass. “The letters trade in vagueries as often as detail. As if I’m not clever enough to follow along. Which hurts, let me tell you. Because it was I, not a governess—no offense—who taught ‘youngest’ to read in the first place.”

Amelia looked down into her own glass. “That does sound... trying. I’m so sorry that... that your children are so difficult.” She spied CeeCee rolling her eyes at her.

“It’s my fault, anyway,” her mother grouched, and traded her empty for a full glass from a passing tray. “I never should have turned the children over to their father. You’re supposed to, of course, when they get to a certain age. They go to school, they learn their place in life, which is always going to be away from you.” She sipped at her cordial. “They were so sweet when I had them, when they were young. But then Charles took them, and he broke them. The eldest got hard and flinty, which I suppose is what Charles wanted. And the youngest... youngest just wilted.”

This was not the childhood that Amelia remembered; not exactly. She remembered her mother in the nursery, in her deepest, fuzziest memories. And she never did have a governess, which the boys at school had always thought strange. But memories of her time with Mother as warm and caring... she could not recall it. All she could recall was her mother’s frown, the twitch of her lips signalling her distate and disappointment.

But was that then, or was it later? When she came home from school with poor marks and chiding letters from teachers

and headmaster, when she could never tell any stories about her friends, when she had to be told to go ask to dance at a ball. Her mother scowling, frustrated that Amelia couldn't just be the young man she was supposed to be.

The same scowl that sat on her mother's face right now. But in this moment, her mother was not frustrated with her, with Amelia; her mother was frustrated with herself, for doing what everyone had told her that mothers are supposed to do.

Who had Mother been frustrated at, back then?

"I just hope," her mother was saying, "that the climate in Iceland is invigorating. Perhaps that's what youngest needs."

Before Amelia could respond, Lizzie and Francis all but skipped back under the shade of the pavilion and made a beeline towards her.

"Can we borrow Miss Wright for a minute?" Francis asked as he slipped his arm into hers.

"Or a little more than that," Lizzie amended, with a wink towards CeeCee.

When Amelia looked back to her mother, the lady merely waved her off. "Go with your friends. Be young and happy. It was a pleasure meeting you, dear."

"For me, as well," she managed before her friends dragged her away. When they were out of earshot, she said, "So that was... strange."

"All of CeeCee's friends are strange," Lizzie said quickly, and lifted significant eyebrows at her. Distracted, it took Amelia

a moment to remember that she still had to watch what she said around Francis. She nodded to her friend, who grinned, then added, "...although I like to think that I'm the strangest."

Amelia giggled, and the three of them bantered back and forth for a few minutes before she became aware that their little trio were not wandering the party, but striking a very determined course across it. She looked from Elizabeth to Francis and back. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see," was the only answer she got, but they were quickly approaching a closed-sided tent. Serving staff with empty trays went in; servers with full trays came out. But her friends directed her towards neither entrance nor exit, but around the side. "And here we are!"

Amelia gasped. There, standing in the shade on the far side of the tent, was none other than Theresa Chesterley. The lady was back in her waistcoat and breeches, these in deep purple; in her hand was a slim volume, and on her face an uncertain smile. "I hope you like surprises," she said as she stepped forward.

"You're out!" was all that Amelia could think to say. "But I thought—" She meant to say something articulate, like, "But I thought your scheduled release date was still two weeks hence." Instead, all her words collided inside her mouth and failed to make it past her lips.

"I may have pulled some strings," Lizzie crowed, undampered by false modesty. "By which I mean Father pulled some strings, but still. There you go, Amelia. And there you go, Miss Chesty. And now here we go, Francis, away from here."

The two of them moved to go, and Amelia reached out to

clasp Lizzie's forearm, to squeeze her thank yous since her mouth wasn't working. Her friend squeezed back her your welcome, and then dragged her beau away. Amelia turned, breath hitching, to face Theresa Chesterley.

The lady advanced on her with slow steps, looking up and down the length of her. As she drank Amelia in, the uncertainty in her smile slowly turned into delight. Hot blood rushed to Amelia's cheeks, a detail that did not go unnoticed by Theresa. Delight turned into triumph.

"I brought you a book," she said, lifting it demonstrably and then letting it fall into the grass. "But first, there's something that I've been meaning to do."

She had stepped close enough that Amelia could feel the lady's breath on her collarbone. Theresa's left hand came to rest on Amelia's side and then slid around to the small of her back. Her right, recently divested of the book, brushed Amelia's curls aside to graze along her jawline and then further back. Her fingertips finally nestled into the hair above the nape of Amelias neck.

Theresa pulled gently, and Amelia melted.

She lost track of where any particular part of her body was, outside of her lips. Most of the rest of her was pressed up against Theresa, soft skin and quilted cotton against warm wool and generous curves. What was she supposed to do with her hands, what was she doing with her hands? They flopped and flailed and clutched at the backs of Theresa's shoulders before finally stilling, as if realizing how futile their quest was, because Theresa was holding her in her arms and wasn't letting go. And

their lips—

Theresa had drawn Amelia's lips down to her own, tasted along their length with the pointed tip of her tongue, and pressed gently, insistently. She opened her lips and Amelia's parted in unthinking sympathy. Theresa's tongue teased her wider and then her lips closed around Amelia's bottom lip; caressed, sucked, pulled.

Amelia squealed. Her knees had suddenly turned to water and she held onto Theresa for dear life.

Her lover broke the kiss with a chuckle, shifting her grip on Amelia to favor stability over caresses. She tipped her head back and considered Amelia's face for a moment (Amelia thought; her eyes weren't doing a very good job focusing). Finally she nodded, once, satisfied.

"If anybody comes around the corner of the tent," Theresa said a moment later, "we're going to pretend that you're drunk on punch and I have to hold you upright."

"Close enough to the truth," Amelia breathed, marshalling her legs and spine to a very poor rendition of the posture Cordelia had drilled into her. With a final contented sigh, she squeezed Theresa's upper arm and straightened herself. She looked down at the ground, struggling for something to say. "Um. You mentioned a book?"