



SEASONS
BOOK TWO

SPRING'S TENDER HEART

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Chapter 1



Lady Emma Randolph pushed her horse to travel as fast as she dared on the rain- and ice-soaked roads. The rain had turned to sleet a mile back, and now a heavy, wet snow slammed against her. The wind was fierce as it pelted the huge flakes into her eyes with such brutality that she couldn't see her hand in front of her face. She had to trust her horse to stay on the road.

She reached behind her and felt for the two bags she'd tied to the saddle. They contained as many of her possessions as she could stuff into the large canvas satchels. She would purchase anything else she might need once she reached America. Once she was safe.

Emma's fur-lined gloves were no match for the blustery chill, and her shins above her riding boots now prickled with frostbite where the wind kept sweeping away the protection of her skirts. Her riding habit would have been warmer, but she had not dared to draw attention to the fact that she intended to leave.

"Just going for a short walk," she had said.

She drew her cloak tighter around her and prayed for the sun to peek through the roiling clouds.

Her hood was drawn as low as possible over her forehead, but already she could feel icy frost forming on her brows. The wind had escalated to a point where it was becoming impossible to protect herself.

Still, what she thought was a curse when it first started snowing had turned out to be a blessing. Drifts covered her tracks almost as soon as she made them. No one would be able to follow her. With any luck she'd be able to stay ahead of anyone who tried. Once she reached London she'd board the first ship to America and she'd be safe.

Emma leaned over the horse and buried her gloved fingers in the horse's mane. She gave the horse a free rein, praying the mare would instinctively find

shelter somewhere. Her teeth chattered relentlessly now, and her body shook with jarring shivers. She was so tired she could scarcely keep her eyes open. But she needed to stay awake. She'd heard tales of people who had fallen asleep and frozen to death.

Emma forced her eyes to open and remain open. Then, from above her, she heard a loud snap followed closely by an even louder crack. Her horse shied, but Emma held the reins tighter to keep her mare from bolting. There was another loud snap and her mare reared, nearly unseating Emma.

In the next instant she heard an explosion, loud, like a booming cannon. Her horse bolted and Emma lost her hold on her mount and landed in the snow. She looked up just as a large limb crashed down on top of her.

The pain was unbearable. She pushed at the large branch, trying desperately to free herself, but it was no use. The branch was too heavy. And she was too weak.

Emma lay in the snow, exhausted beyond belief. She continued to push on the heavy tree trunk, but she was unable to move it. With a cry of frustration she dropped her arm in the snow and lay there. The more time that passed, the less her arm and shoulder hurt.

Eventually, a sense of peace wrapped around her. She'd never been afraid of death. She knew without a doubt that when she died God would take her to heaven. That when she died, she would no longer have to fight her stepbrother and the evil he intended.

Emma closed her eyes and accepted the peaceful rest. And she slept.

~■~

Jonah Mason, Earl of Glassborough, filled his tumbler again and took a small sip of the fine brandy he kept in his wine cellar. Fine brandy was one of the few extravagances he afforded himself. One of the only extravagances he *could* afford these days, because it had been aging in his cellar for over a hundred years.

After he took an appreciative sip, he sat forward in his large leather wing-back chair behind his desk and lifted his pen to add the column of numbers in his ledger. This was his third attempt to add this particular column, and when he finished, he came up with a different total this time, too.

The oil lamp flickered. He'd meant to fill it earlier in the evening, but it was late now and he was tired. It was time to quit for the night.

He pushed away his ledger. He'd work on his accounts again tomorrow. He doubted any money would magically appear overnight.

Jonah placed his pen back in its holder and concentrated on watching the brandy swirl in his glass. He swiped his hand down his face and felt the scar that ran from his temple to just beneath his jaw. Even though the feel of it shouldn't shock him anymore, the puckering intrusion of his disfigurement was impossible to ignore.

His scar was just one more excuse the citizens of Glastonbury had to convince them that Jonah was a monster. It wasn't that it was such a hideous thing, really. It had more to do with the stories that had cropped up after the tragedy. All silly conjecture, of course. But in his own stunned grief he had let the stories run rampant so that now, six years later, nothing he could say or do would change the villagers' minds. The death of his fiancé on the day of their wedding was all the proof anyone needed to seal the belief that he was a beast with blood on his hands.

Jonah lifted the brandy to his mouth and took another large swallow, then paused, surprised by a knock on his study door at this late hour.

"What is it, Carter?"

"My lord," his butler said when he stepped into the room. "Farley requests a word with you."

"Send him in," Jonah said, then set his glass down.

Something must be amiss. He could count on one hand the number of times his stable master had come to the house to see him. It was the man's habit to conduct any business when Jonah went to the stables. Which he did every day, except on days like today when the weather was so inclement it wasn't safe to take any of his horses out.

Jonah watched Patrick Farley enter the room. He held his cap in front of him and turned the sweat-stained felt cap in jerky circles. Something was definitely wrong.

"What is it, Farley?"

"A riderless horse, my lord. Galloped into the yard a few minutes ago."

Jonah sat forward in his chair. "A horse with no rider?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Have you seen the horse before?"

"No, my lord. It's not from around here."

"There's something else, Farley. What is it?"

“There were two bags tied to the saddle.” Farley clenched his felt hat tighter in his hands. “I know I shouldn’t have taken the liberty, my lord, but I opened one of the bags to see what was inside.”

“No, that’s exactly what you should have done.”

Farley breathed a sigh of relief.

“What did you find?”

“Clothes, my lord. Lady’s clothes.”

Jonah sat back in his chair and considered his options. He wanted to remain where he was and forget Farley had told him about the horse that had ridden into his stable. But that wasn’t an option.

He rose from his chair. “Farley, have Carter fetch some blankets, then saddle Jupiter.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Jonah watched Farley leave the room, then braced his hands atop his desk. He lowered his head between his outstretched arms and closed his eyes. Damn the female who left him no choice but to go after her. Damn any female for forcing her way into his life when all he wanted was to live the remainder of his days isolated from the outside world.

Jonah pushed himself away from the desk and stalked through the room. Carter was waiting at the front door with Jonah’s heavy caped Ulster coat and gloves. Jonah pushed his arms through its sleeves, then raised the cape and buttoned it beneath his chin to form a hood before he stormed from the house.

“Would you want me or one of the boys to go with you, my lord?” Farley asked when he reached the stable.

“No,” Jonah barked after he’d mounted Jupiter. And then he thought again. “You take the lane toward the ridge. Only that far, then right back. I’ll go east, but only as far as the fork.”

“Very well, my lord.”

“You might tell Mrs. Jefferies to prepare a room in the event we bring someone back alive.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And take the clothes to her.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Jonah rode from the yard considering what he’d just said.

In the event that we bring someone back alive.

If it was a female who had been thrown from the horse, what were the chances that he’d find her alive? What were the chances that even if she hadn’t

died from her fall, she hadn't frozen to death? Not that he cared. His life would be a great deal less complicated if she hadn't survived.

An ugly twinge of guilt assaulted him, then slipped away.

Jonah lowered his head to keep the brunt of the forceful winter wind and snow from pelting him in the face. He pushed Jupiter as hard as he dared through the mounting snow. The sooner he found the rider, the sooner he would find himself before a roaring fire with a glass of brandy back in his hands.

~■~

The farther he traveled, the more convinced Jonah was that if and when he found the woman he was looking for — *if* he found her in the blinding snow — it was doubtful she'd be alive. If she'd been out in this weather any length of time, she was more than likely frozen to death. It was even more likely she was dead if she'd been injured.

Jonah pushed back the hood of his coat and looked as far as he could see into the distance. He scoured the ditches that lined the road and checked often to see if someone had tried to take shelter behind the rock wall that bordered the track.

Annoying clumps of snow kept dropping from the high branches that overhung the narrow road. They hit with a solid *thwack*, like the snowballs he'd launched at his schoolmates in better times.

As soon as he rounded the last curve before the fork he could see there was something ahead, in the middle of the road. He pushed Jupiter to wade through the drifts until it was possible to see that a large limb from a tree had fallen, blocking the road.

When he reached the fallen limb, he dismounted. That's when he saw it. A scrap of blue velvet visible in the blanket of white beneath the twisted limb.

Jonah's heart ramped up as it always had when a need for rescue presented itself. But this was no battlefield. The country lane was drifted hip-deep in places, making his progress maddeningly slow. At last he reached the spot where a woman lay tangled in the broken branches.

He removed one of his gloves and knelt in the snow beside her. Her face was visible. Her hair was wet and plastered to her forehead and her face was pale and lifeless. Jonah was certain she was dead, but when he pressed his finger to her neck, he felt a pulse. It wasn't strong, but weak and slow. At least she was alive. For now.

Jonah strained to lift the log that had fallen across the young lady's arm and shoulder, but it was too heavy to move. He slogged his way back to Jupiter and brought him forward. After securing a rope between the log and his saddle, Jonah urged Jupiter forward. The log moved enough that Jonah could free the woman from beneath it.

"I've got you now," he muttered, more to himself than to the woman who couldn't hear him.

Jonah untied the rope from around the log, then turned to lift the woman. No matter how gently he moved her, she cried out in pain. It wrenched his heart to know that he had no way to ease her suffering.

Her cry wasn't loud, nor did it indicate she had any amount of strength, but it told Jonah that the woman he'd found half buried in the snow was alive. Alive enough to feel pain.

Jonah placed her over his shoulder and mounted Jupiter, then lowered her to his lap and placed the blankets he'd brought around her. She was light as a feather, no more than a limp bundle in his arms, even with her sodden clothes that hung heavily about his boots.

Jonah nestled her close to him and cradled her in his arms as tightly as he could without causing her more pain. She was injured. How severely, he wasn't sure. All he knew was that when he lifted her from the ground, his gloves came away stained with blood.

Jonah pushed Jupiter to return to Glassborough Manor as quickly as possible. Already the familiar mantle of obligation was settling over him. He'd known it several times during the war, when he helped to recover a fallen man only to discover he now felt responsible for the man's entire future.

It was a familiar burden, yet unique. For some inexplicable reason he felt a strange connection to the woman in his arms. He didn't know her. He'd never seen her before, but he sensed a desperation in her. Only a desperate female would travel alone in weather as nasty as this. He looked down on her and wondered what was so important that she would risk her health and her life to flee from the safety of her home.

Jupiter stepped on a patch of ice that caused him to lose his footing and skitter a few steps until Jonah got him under control. The female in his arms shifted, then moaned in pain. Jonah held her tenderly until her breathing calmed and she seemed to rest more comfortably. He pushed Jupiter to continue on his way, then reached down to bring her velvet cloak over her face to keep the snow from hitting her.

If he were any judge, the clothes she wore indicated she wasn't a country lass, but someone from Society. Perhaps someone with a title. Perhaps someone who was running away from an unwanted marriage. Why else would she venture out in such foul weather? Why else would she risk her life?

If anyone knew the lengths to which a woman would go in order to avoid marriage with a man she could not tolerate, that man was Jonah. He had firsthand knowledge of what a woman might put herself through in order to escape marriage to a man she detested. To a man she considered a monster.

Chapter 2



Jonah sat at the lady's bedside and watched her sleep. The fact that she hadn't wakened yet caused him to worry. The fact that her fever was still so high caused him even greater concern. Just as the fact that she shivered so violently from a chill was a telling sign. Not a good sign.

It had been four days since he'd found her and she didn't seem to be improving.

"Has she said anything, my lord?" Mrs. Jefferies asked when she entered the room.

Jonah only shook his head.

"I brought some broth and tea. Do you want me to try to get her to eat or drink something?"

Jonah shook his head again. "No, I'll try to get something down her when she stirs."

"Very well, my lord. I'll be back in a little while to sit with her. You've hardly slept since you returned with her."

Jonah didn't answer. He listened until his housekeeper left the room, then he lifted the lady's head and brought the tea to her lips.

"No," she moaned, then turned her head to the side.

"You really must drink something. You won't survive if you don't."

Jonah knew he must have been mistaken, but he thought he saw a smile lift the corners of her lips. The smile was ever so faint, but it was a smile.

Was that it? Did she welcome death?

"Here," he said more forcefully. "Drink this."

When she didn't turn her head to drink any of the tea, he spoke louder and more harshly. "You heard me! Drink this!"

She slowly turned her head and Jonah saw condemnation in her gaze. He felt contrite, and worked hard to soften his expression into something halfway

encouraging as he held the cup to her lips. She opened her mouth and took a swallow, then a second swallow, then held up her hand to indicate that she'd had enough.

Her eyes opened fully and locked with his.

Jonah saw her surprise. Her shock. And it held no surprise for him. That was the usual reaction when anyone saw his scarred face for the first time.

"Now, get more rest," he muttered.

She closed her eyes and if Jonah hadn't been watching, he would have missed the tears that squeezed through her lashes and spilled down her cheeks. Were they tears of pain? Tears of regret that she hadn't managed to die? Tears of horror from the sight of him?

Jonah placed the cup back on the bedside table and retreated from the room. He'd had quite enough of women who longed for death. He took the stairs two at a time until he reached the bottom and met Mrs. Jefferies coming from the kitchen.

"Go see to our...guest," he bellowed, then stormed into his study and slammed the door shut behind him. He went to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of brandy. He took a large swallow, then filled his glass again.

He didn't know why he was angry. He didn't know why having the stranger in his house was so disturbing. Yet, he did. He knew exactly why.

He took another swallow of his brandy, then sat in the chair behind his desk. He dropped his head to rest on the back of it. The female's face flashed before him the second he closed his eyes.

Her hair was a rich, dark coffee, her lush curls spilling with abandon across her pillow. Her complexion was clear, except for the bruises she'd sustained from her fall and from the tree limb that had pinned her to the ground.

Her lips were full and enticing, her eyelids nearly translucent, closed over her large eyes that he knew were an arresting, vibrant blue. She was beautiful. One of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen.

Why she affected him as she did was a mystery to him. He had sworn he wouldn't be drawn in by another female ever again. Not after Constance. Not after the woman he thought he would marry had instead destroyed his reputation and his life. Not after the woman with whom he thought he would share his life had turned his heart into a cold, bitter stone that was incapable of emotion.

Jonah rose to fill his glass, then sat back behind his desk. He intended to drink until he couldn't remember that fateful day, until his past was nothing

but a distant memory. Even though he thought he was beyond the need to drink himself into oblivion, he obviously wasn't.

And it was all her fault. The first time his house guest looked at him, tears had run down her cheeks, the same as tears of fright escaped the eyes of every woman who saw his monstrously scarred features. Why should he expect her to be any different?

~■~

It had been more than a week since she'd seen Jonah Mason, Earl of Glassborough. Emma was glad. The longer he left her alone, the more peaceful her life was.

She only knew his name because the housekeeper, Mrs. Jefferies, had told her who he was. She'd also told her that his bark was worse than his bite, but Emma doubted that was true. She'd heard him bellow instructions to the servants in his deep, harsh tone.

At first she'd been frightened to death at the sound of his loud voice and abrasive tone. Yet, none of the servants seemed to mind. In fact, they entered her room each morning with smiles on their faces, giggling as if they considered their master's bad mood a hilarious joke.

Emma tried to recall his physical features. Other than to remember how large he was and how broad his shoulders were, she had little memory of the man. But she did recall how easily he'd lifted her in his arms and how effortlessly he'd placed her over his shoulder, then mounted his horse with her in his arms. She did recall how safe he'd made her feel.

Emma closed her eyes and tried to remember more but there was a knock on the door and Mrs. Jefferies entered the room with a tray in her hands.

"Good morning, my lady," she said placing the tray on the bedside table.

"Good morning, Mrs. Jefferies."

After the woman helped Emma sit, she straightened the bed covers and placed the four-legged breakfast tray across Emma's lap.

"How did you sleep last night, my lady?"

"Very well, Mrs. Jefferies. Thank you."

"Lord Glassborough asked after you."

Emma lifted her head and locked her gaze with the housekeeper's. "He did?"

"Yes, my lady. He wanted to make sure you were progressing."

"What did you tell him?"

“I told him you were progressing nicely, but you were far from ready to be up and about.”

“Please tell him I shouldn’t have to impose on his hospitality much longer. I feel much better and I’m sure I’ll be well enough to be on my way in a day or two.”

The housekeeper scoffed as if mocking a willful child. “You most certainly will not be ready to travel in a day or two, my lady. Perhaps in a week or two. But definitely not before that.”

Emma remembered the Earl of Glassborough’s harsh words and the angry tone of his voice as he impatiently scolded her to drink her tea. “I know how desperately his lordship wants me gone, Mrs. Jefferies. I will do everything in my power to comply with his wishes.”

“Oh, miss. Don’t be put off by his lordship’s curtness. It’s just that he’s not used to having guests at Glassborough Manor. I fear he’s forgotten how to conduct himself around company. Especially female company.”

“Does he deal with the staff harshly?”

“Ach, no,” Mrs. Jefferies answered on a laugh. “The master would never harm anyone. Even if the town fools think he might.”

That was an odd thing to say.

“Why do they think that?” Emma asked.

“No doubt because of what happened some six years ago.”

“What happened, Mrs. Jefferies?”

“’Tis nothing I can talk about. The master will tell you in his own good time.”

“I doubt that,” Emma said, taking a sip of the hot chocolate Mrs. Jefferies brought her each morning. “He hasn’t called on me once since he brought me here.”

“No doubt because he’s uncomfortable talking to strangers. Especially female strangers.”

“And the reason for that would be?”

Mrs. Jefferies paused straightening the bedclothes. “That will be for his lordship to share with you.”

“I see,” Emma said as she drank more of her hot chocolate and ate a piece of buttered toast.

“Can I get you anything else, my lady?” Mrs. Jefferies asked as she moved to the door.

“No, thank you,” Emma answered. When she was alone, Emma sank back against the pillows. She couldn’t remain in this position for long. There were several scratches on her back from the tree trunk that had fallen on her. The deep scratches prevented her from putting any pressure on her back.

Emma placed the breakfast tray to the side and gently turned in her bed. The mere effort of eating had completely worn her out.

She settled on her side to lessen the painful pressure on her back, then closed her eyes and slept.

~■~

Jonah paced the hallway beyond the room where his houseguest slept. He stilled his breath, intent upon listening. He thought he heard a noise and stepped close to her door, in case she was calling out for help. He was about to retreat when he heard it again.

She was crying out as if she was terrified of something. As if she was in pain.

“No!” he heard her cry out again. “No!”

He placed his hand on the latch of the bedroom door and pressed down. Another cry for help tore through the silence and he rushed into the room.

Lady Emma Randolph’s hair whipped about as she thrashed from side to side. She raised her delicate arms to shield her face as if to protect herself from blows she anticipated striking her. Jonah felt a hitch in his own breathing as he viewed the desperate beauty of the scene playing out before him.

Without hesitation he rushed to her side and gathered her in his arms. “Everything is fine, my lady. You are safe.”

She struggled a little while longer, then relaxed as he continued to comfort her. Her cries gradually lessened to whimpers that seemed to beg for protection.

“Help me. Please.”

Jonah couldn’t help but assure her. “You’re safe now. No one can harm you.”

The lady in his arms breathed a shuddering sigh, then struggled to return from the nightmare that had terrified her. Her eyes fluttered, then opened for a second. Then, longer.

Jonah knew the moment she realized he was holding her. He felt her stiffen.

“You have nothing to fear. You’re safe now.”

Her eyes closed and her breathing gradually calmed. "I'm sorry I disturbed you. A silly nightmare, I'm afraid."

"A very real nightmare, if I were to hazard a guess."

Her vibrant blue eyes closed tightly. "Yes, a very real nightmare."

"Who are you afraid of?"

When she didn't answer, Jonah changed his question. "Who were you running away from?"

When she refused to answer a second time, Jonah gently released her and filled a glass with water. "You might as well answer me. I won't give up until you do."

He held the glass to her lips and let her drink. When she finished, he sat beside her on the bed. "Who?"

"My stepbrother," she answered without shifting her gaze from his.

"Why?" Jonah hardened his gaze and steadied her chin with his forefinger when she tried to look away from him. "Why?"

She breathed a steady breath. "My father is...was...the Marquess of Willowbrook."

Jonah couldn't hide the surprise from his face.

"Did you know him?"

"Yes. I knew and admired him. As did most of London." Jonah also knew the marquess was one of the wealthiest men in England. As well as one of the most influential men in the House of Lords. "I was sorry to hear of his passing."

"Thank you."

"So why were you running away?"

"On my twenty-first birthday, I will receive a trust from my father worth several hundred thousand pounds."

Jonah couldn't stop the look of surprise. "And when will that be?"

"In six months."

"Then, let me guess. Your stepbrother has arranged for you to marry someone you find unacceptable."

Jonah watched as Lady Emma nodded.

"Is the gentleman your brother has arranged for you to marry that reprehensible?"

"Yes, he is. He is one of the most disgusting men in Society. Not only do I refuse to marry him, but I decided years ago that I will never marry anyone."

"You don't intend to marry?"

“No.”

“Must I guess the reason?”

The lady lifted her penetrating gaze but did not shift it from his face.

“Don’t say it as if it’s some petty girlish whim. I have yet to meet a man who can love *me* and not just my money.”

“I see,” Jonah said.

“Do you, Lord Glassborough? How very astute of you.”

Jonah chuckled. The woman was clearly convinced that a man’s motive couldn’t be trusted, so why should she expect him, an unworthy man, to understand circumstances that had brought her to that conclusion?

She couldn’t know that she wasn’t the only one in the room who had been betrayed in the name of love.

A memory of the heart-wrenching scream when a maid discovered Jonah’s fiancé’s dead body the morning of their wedding wiped the smile from his face. A vision of his last sight of his betrothed as she vowed to her mother that she’d rather be dead than marry a man she could never love—a monster of a man who frightened her to death—clouded his vision.

He heard Constance’s trembling voice as she told her mother that she could never abide allowing such a loathsome monster to touch her. Let alone make love to her.

And she had put truth to her words by killing herself.

But that was his story, not Lady Emma’s. He refocused his attention on her.

“Do you think it so impossible for anyone to love you for yourself?”

“Oh, they all profess their undying love. Until I tell them that the money they think they will inherit after we marry will not come with me.”

“I don’t understand,” Jonah said.

“It’s a choice I give them. They can marry me if they truly love me, but the money they’ve heard I will inherit will not come with me.”

“So, you’ve managed to tie it up somehow?”

She saw the skepticism in his eyes.

“I had my father attach a codicil to the legal documents that stated no amount over fifty pounds could be withdrawn without my signature until I’m twenty-five.” She smiled. “That had a remarkably cooling effect on their affections, I can assure you.”

“Has no one agreed to your terms?”

“No, my lord. Money is a powerful magnet. Even men who have a great deal of their own wealth crave more. It kills them to let my wealth sit in

idleness when they can become more influential and powerful if they can combine their wealth with mine. But those who are desperate for what I have are eager to pass me over when they realize they will have to wheedle it out of me a few pounds at a time. They are quite happy to turn away in search of a female desperate enough to marry them even though she will never be loved.”

“Which you will never consider doing,” Jonah said, not as a question, but as a statement.

“No. Which I will never do.” Emma pressed her head into the pillow and closed her eyes. “Greed is a very powerful motive. I have found that words of love spill from their mouths quite easily when there is a possibility the money they will inherit when they marry me will make them rich.”

There were so many arguments he could offer her, so many choices she could make other than the one she had set upon. But Jonah looked at her closed eyes. It was obvious she was tired. “You need to rest,” he said, then pushed himself from the bed. “We’ll talk later. If you will excuse me,” he said, and left the room.

As he closed the door he knew he’d missed his moment. He should have told her she wouldn’t have to worry about him wanting to marry her for her wealth. Love was too precious a thing to let something like money thwart it. Even though he was on the brink of losing everything he owned, he would never consider marrying another female for the money that would come with her.

Never.

At least, not a second time.

Chapter 3



Emma took a few steps across the room, then turned and made her way back to her bed. She rested a few moments, then repeated the trek from one side of the room to the other. After she'd rested a few more minutes, she rang for Mrs. Jefferies.

"Yes, my lady," the housekeeper said when she entered Emma's room. "Did you need something?"

"Yes, Mrs. Jefferies. I believe I'm well enough to get up for a while. Would you help me down the stairs? I'd like to visit the library and choose something to read."

"Are you quite sure, my lady?"

"Yes." Emma pushed herself from the bed. "I need to get stronger and I won't do that lying in bed all day."

"Would you like me to get one of the footmen to help you?"

"No, Mrs. Jefferies. I'm sure I can make it down with your assistance."

"Very well, my lady."

Mrs. Jefferies helped her to her feet, secured Emma's dressing gown at her waist, then wrapped her arm around Emma's shoulders and guided her from the room. "The master has an excellent library, my lady. I'm sure you'll find something to your liking."

"I'm sure I will," Emma said as she made her way down the stairs.

Emma kept her hand looped through Mrs. Jefferies' arm as they made their way across the foyer.

"Careful now."

Mrs. Jefferies slowed their pace to guide Emma through the upheaval in the front hall. Everything was shrouded in tarpaulins that covered the floor and windows. Scaffolding reached from floor to ceiling, and a small stockpile of building supplies was neatly confined to the corner by the front door. Hearing

a noise, Emma looked up and was surprised to see that at the very top, looking for all he was worth like Michaelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, the Earl of Glassborough lay on his back applying spackling mud to exposed joints in the beamed ceiling.

“My lord, whatever are you doing?”

She watched him carefully stow his trowel before he turned to his belly and greeted her. Her breath caught in her throat at the handsome sight. Creamy mud streaked his cheeks and jaw, highlighting his strong features that seemed practically rakish with a swatch of auburn hair plastered across his forehead.

“I almost had it repaired before this early spring snowstorm hit, but...now I have to do it all over again. The weight of the snow weakened my temporary mend, you see, and the roof seems to have landed there, there, and all the way over there.”

He swept an arm downward, and now she saw the small drifts of snow that had collected in corners of the scaffolding. Bits of broken timber were littered across the floor, evidence of the collapse that must have happened sometime in the night.

Emma smiled. “You’re putting some poor craftsman out of work, my lord. Surely you should put this kind of job out for hire, I would think.”

His pleasant, relaxed features transformed into something that spoke of discomfort. “Yes. Well. Under normal circumstances one surely would.”

With a gruff nod he flipped to his back and continued his work, slapping each beat of the trowel a bit harder than truly seemed necessary.

Emma glided away, feeling the need to tiptoe across the littered floor until they entered a long hallway.

That had been an odd encounter. She wondered what she’d said to cause such a reaction.

“I didn’t mean to upset his lordship, Mrs. Jefferies.”

“Ach, not to worry, my lady. The master meant no harm. He’ll be pleased, he will, to find you in the library later. He does love his books.”

Mrs. Jefferies reached a hand forward, beckoning Emma to continue, but a large double door on her right caught her eye.

“What room is this?” Emma asked.

“The drawing room, my lady.”

“May I see it?”

Mrs. Jefferies hesitated as if debating whether Lord Glassborough would object or not. But in a moment, the housekeeper opened the door and let

Emma enter the room.

It was dark and musty, the drapery drawn tightly across the windows and the furniture covered with dust cloths.

“Is this room never used?”

“No, my lady. There’s no longer a need. His lordship doesn’t entertain.”

Emma stepped back quickly, pulling the doors closed against the chill that had pervaded the gloomy room.

“And this one?” she asked when they reached the next closed door.

“The morning room, my lady.”

“May I see it?”

“It’s much the same as the drawing room, my lady.”

“The windows must face the east, though, if it’s called the morning room,” Emma said.

“Yes, my lady. When the drapery is open, the windows allow the morning sun to flood the room.”

“But the curtains are drawn?”

“Yes, my lady.”

Emma didn’t wait for permission to enter the room, but turned the knob on the door and entered.

The high-ceilinged morning room was much the same as the drawing room they’d previously entered. The heavy window coverings were closed, there was no fire in either of the room’s two fireplaces, and protective cloths covered the furniture.

“Does Lord Glassborough never have guests?”

“No, my lady,” Mrs. Jefferies answered after a brief hesitation.

Something was amiss. Lord Glassborough was an earl. He was titled. Surely he was well thought of in the area.

“Why does he lack visitors?” Emma asked.

The expression on Mrs. Jefferies’ face made it obvious that she had no intention of answering. Emma turned to exit the room and Mrs. Jefferies followed behind her. She led Emma to the library and opened the door.

“Oh,” Emma said when the door swung wide. “What a beautiful room.” Emma stepped to the center and turned in a slow circle to admire the magnificent collection of books arranged on beautifully polished carved wood shelving.

Two of the walls contained shelf after shelf of books covering all manner of farming practices and animal husbandry. The other two walls held everything

from simple cloth-bound books to magnificent leather-bound tomes. “Lord Glassborough must love to read,” she said when she reached shelves that contained the classics.

“Yes, my lady. He is an avid reader.”

Emma continued to browse the shelves where, to her surprise, she even found several Gothic romances.

“I don’t want to take up more of your time, Mrs. Jefferies. I’m sure you have other duties to take care of, and I can get along by myself.”

“Are you sure, my lady?”

“Yes, I’m sure. But I would like to bother you for a tea tray before you go, if you don’t mind.”

A smile lit the housekeeper’s face. “Of course not, my lady.”

“And please, bring the tea into the morning room. I would like to read there.”

The smile faded from the woman’s face. “Are you sure, my lady?”

“Yes, quite.”

“Very well,” she said, then bobbed a curtsy before leaving the room.

Emma considered the choices she might make. She could have taken a dozen or more books to read, but limited her choice to three that interested her. When she finished her selection, she left the library and returned to the morning room.

The tea tray, bearing scones and clotted cream, was waiting for her when she reached the morning room, but the heavy velvet draping was still drawn across the windows and the dust covers were still over the furniture. Emma wondered why the housekeeper hadn’t at least uncovered one of the chairs or the sofa. But she shoved the question out of her mind.

Before Emma poured herself a cup of tea, she walked around the room and pulled back the heavy brocade drapery. The windows were massive and when she removed the elegant, dark fabrics, the sun flooded into the room. By the end of one circuit across the eastern wall she had freed each window from its dark shroud and felt the glorious, welcome rays of the sun begin to warm her shoulders.

She stepped back and brought her hands to her mouth to cover a sigh of great pleasure. The room was beautiful with the wood of the furnishings bathed in morning light. Emma couldn’t resist rushing to a covered sofa to drag away its drab covering. But as the last corner swept away from the sofa, she gasped.

A huge gash had been cut in the fabric from the back of one corner to the front of the opposite corner. Its gorgeous tapestry had been rendered useless by the jagged gash, where stuffing and rope lacings protruded crudely.

Emma turned to what appeared from its shrouded shape to be a matching love seat. With a quick pull she dragged away its cover, revealing much the same vandalization. One damaged piece could have been an unfortunate accident. But two?

In a mere moment she discovered that no piece of upholstered furniture in the room had escape the brutal slashing. Stunned, she carefully straightened the covers, leaving bare only one overstuffed chair that seemed to have received the least damage. With great care she dragged it to a window alcove, covering its flayed seat with a low pillow.

It was here that she sat with her books, steadying her heartbeat as she set about breathing new life back into the room.

~■~

Jonah walked down the hallway to his study, rubbing at a kink in his back. He'd spent far too long up on that scaffolding, but if he hadn't made the repair when he did, the snowmelt would run into the walls and cause who knew how much rot. That would be a costly reconstruction he could never undertake by himself.

Startled by shafts of light illuminating the usually gloomy hall, he stopped short near the entrance to the morning room where the door stood ajar. He stepped inside. The sunlight that streamed through the undraped windows nearly blinded him.

He hadn't set foot in the room since the morning he'd drawn the curtains and ordered the furniture covered, desperate to blot out evidence of his late bride's rage. He'd spent a small fortune updating the furnishings in preparation for his new wife to occupy Glassborough Manor. And she'd shown him just how despicable she felt he was by decimating the first thing he'd ever chosen for her.

Jonah's stomach raged at the memory of it. So much so that he didn't see Emma at first. He only saw the open draperies. It wasn't until he stepped into the room that he noticed her. She sat in an overstuffed chair near the window with a book in her lap.

Her eyes were closed and her head rested against the chair.

Jonah had no intention of waking her. He couldn't. His tongue had turned to leather and his hands were frozen at his sides. The room seemed to have rendered him mute.

He could only watch her.

She slept soundly, her breast rising and falling in a peaceful rhythm that seemed to ease his own embattled heart. He had every intention of escaping before she woke. He just wanted to watch her for a few moments. He wanted to memorize her features so when she was gone, he would have a pleasant memory to replace the horrific nightmare that Constance had left him with.

He knew there was no explanation for what had happened when he and Lady Emma had first met, but the moment he'd lifted her in his arms, his entire body had reacted to her feminine softness. Every night his arms ached to hold her again, and now, it was impossible to tear his eyes away from her.

What was there about her that haunted him so? What was there about her that mesmerized him enough that he was finally able to forget Constance and how she'd chosen death over life as his wife?

A cold sweat washed over him when he remembered Constance's lifeless body on the morning of their wedding, sprawled across the bed alongside the open packets of sleeping draughts that had taken her from this world. He quickly shifted his gaze to the lady sleeping in the chair next to him and was engulfed by an overwhelming calm.

The woman he'd rescued from the storm hadn't chosen death to escape something she found unacceptable. Instead, she'd summoned the courage to solve her predicament. She'd shown a strength Constance hadn't possessed.

Jonah watched Lady Emma for several moments before he realized that her sleep was slowly becoming less restful, agitated, as if she remembered something she didn't want to recall. She sucked in a harsh breath, then stiffened in her chair. Her breathing escalated as her eyes opened wide in fright.

She sat for several moments without noticing that he was there, then slowly turned her head until her gaze locked with his.

"Oh," she said on a gasp. "Oh...I'm sorry. I fell asleep."

Jonah walked to the bell pull to summon Carter. "Perhaps a glass of wine, my lady?"

"Yes, thank you. I would welcome that."

Her answer drew a smile as Jonah relayed his request to his butler who appeared a moment later. Constance had refused to be in the same room with

him. Not even long enough to enjoy a glass of wine. As soon as he suggested anything that would put them alone in the same room, she had made her excuse and escaped.

“Thank you,” Emma said when Jonah handed her the wine that arrived swiftly.

“Are you the one who opened the room to the light?”

“Yes. It was I. This room is far too beautiful to keep it hidden in the dark, my lord.”

“It meets with your approval?”

“Oh, yes,” she answered on a sigh. “It’s a beautiful room. It feels...I don’t know, somehow as if it’s seen tragedy it doesn’t deserve. Or wants to forget.”

“I suppose it has,” he answered her, then turned away lest she see the emotion their conversation evoked. How was it possible to be so comfortable with this woman even when speaking of the most horrendous moment in his life?

“Why do you keep all your rooms closed off?”

Jonah was intrigued. She didn’t seem the least frightened of him. Everyone in the countryside was. It wasn’t that he hadn’t heard the rumors that circulated about him. It wasn’t that he didn’t know what everyone thought. They all thought he’d killed his fiancé. Some of them had even guessed the truth—that his fiancé was so terrified of him that she’d killed herself rather than spend the rest of her life with such a monster.

Jonah shook off his thoughts of the past and remembered the question she’d asked. “Because there’s no need to keep them open,” he answered.

“Do you have no visitors?”

She wasn’t shy, that much was obvious. “No, Lady Emma. I have no visitors.”

“Why ever not?” She took another sip of her wine, then locked her gaze with his as if waiting for an answer to her question.

“You don’t know?”

“No, Lord Glassborough. I do not know. I asked Mrs. Jefferies but she refused to answer.”

Jonah rose from the sofa on which he’d been sitting and walked to the opposite side of the room. He stood before the multi-paned French doors and looked out onto the garden. There were no flowers in bloom yet, only a blanket of slowly melting snow to make everything seem cold and barren.

“Do you mean to tell me that you are not frightened of me?” he asked.

“Frightened of you? Why should I be frightened of you?”

Jonah turned to face her. “Perhaps because of my size. Or my harsh features. Or my gruff voice. Or the scar that runs the length of my face.”

“To be honest, my lord, I hadn’t noticed any of those attributes.”

“You hadn’t?”

“No.”

Jonah walked back to her and sat on the ottoman at her feet. “Then what have you noticed about me?”

“That you are a brave man who came out in the middle of a spring snow storm to rescue me. And that you are a very compassionate man who held me carefully while we made our way back to your manor house. A very caring man who encouraged me to keep breathing and not give up.”

She tilted her head to the side as if evaluating every detail she could remember. “You are also the man who watched over me that very first night. And several after that.”

Jonah was surprised. “How did you know I sat with you that first week? You didn’t wake once.”

“I felt your presence, my lord.”

“It could have been Mrs. Jefferies. Or one of the maids.”

She shook her head. “No, it was you. Your presence was too powerful. Too...comforting.”

Jonah took a swallow of the liquor in his glass, then placed his glass on an ornamental table. “What are you running from, my lady?”

For a moment he thought she wouldn’t answer. But when the lady’s gaze shifted, then locked with his, her words were not what he had expected. “What are you *hiding* from, Lord Glassborough?”

Jonah couldn’t stop the smile from lifting the corners of his mouth. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d smiled. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d sparred with a female. Both felt good.

“Perhaps you’d like to answer my question first,” he said.

“Only if you guarantee you’ll answer *my* question.”

“I’ll answer your question. Besides, it’s only a matter of time until you discover why I live in solitude.”

The lady emptied her glass, then set it on the table next to his tumbler. He expected her to lower her gaze or avoid looking directly at him. But, she didn’t. She faced him directly and exhibited a strength he found admirable.

“My mother died when I was just a child, my lord. My father remarried when I was twelve.”

“Did you dislike the woman your father married?”

“No, quite the opposite. The woman he married was kind and I believe she truly loved my father. And he loved her. Unfortunately, they were both killed in a carriage accident two years ago.”

“The Marquess of Willowbrook and your stepmother. You lost them both in the same accident. That must have been very difficult for you.”

He watched the subtle changes in her face as she fought to keep her composure. She was a grown woman, but it was clear the loss had taken its toll. And why wouldn't it? Willowbrook was one of the wealthiest men in Society. Everyone had heard of him. He was rumored to have the Midas touch. Every venture he undertook turned a handsome profit. Even the Queen asked his opinion when considering where to invest her money.

“Did you know my father?”

Jonah smiled. She didn't remember they'd had this conversation. But then, she had still been in quite a weakened state. He nodded his head. “I knew him, though not well. I only met him once or twice. My father was an acquaintance of his. They'd been in school together.”

“Oh,” she said on a sad sigh. “Then you probably know he was quite wealthy.”

“And deservedly so. He was a brilliant businessman.”

“When he died, he left his wealth to me in trust.”

“Yes, you've told me as much. And of course, that means money will never be an issue for you,” Jonah answered. He couldn't help but be a bit envious. Money had always been an issue for the Glassborough name, for as long as Jonah could remember.

“For me, the money father left me has always been a curse.”

Jonah couldn't hide his confusion.

“Forgive me, Lady Emma, but earlier you indicated your father had restricted the funds that could be drawn by your husband, should you marry. Surely that safeguard protects you from the curse of scurrilous suitors.”

The lady rose from her chair and walked to the window. “It did. Until Father died. My stepbrother Gerald has the authority now, and in his greedy haste to collect half my fortune he challenged the codicil, claiming he was obligated to draw adequate funds to see to my wellbeing. But,” she said with a

smug grin. “When I gain control I can turn off his spigot of free-flowing cash.”

She faced Jonah.

“Do you know how many suitors have courted me?” she asked, her face barely masking her anger. “More than I can count. Not because any of them ever loved me, mind you, but because they were desperate for the wealth I would inherit at twenty-one.”

She locked her hardened gaze with his. “If my father had known the true measure of his stepson he would have protected me. But Gerald is devious. Charming in a rather villainous way. So, until I am twenty-one, my stepbrother must give his permission for me to marry. And while he inherited quite a comfortable fortune from his mother, he has managed to fritter it away.” Her hands fluttered about, underscoring her frustration as she related her dilemma. “So now he wants what is mine and he has refused to grant permission for me to marry any man except one of his choosing. And the man he has chosen is... is vile beyond words.”

Lady Emma stopped to compose herself. “And why do you think he has chosen this particular person, pray tell?” She drilled Jonah with an intense glare, as if she were certain he could never guess the reason.

“It’s rather obvious, I should think. The suitor has agreed to share it with your stepbrother.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Yes! Exactly!” She began to pace. “For two years I’ve held out, but now that I’m within six months of taking full possession of my inheritance they’re getting desperate.”

Jonah drummed his fingers on the arms of his chair.

“Just who is this desperado?”

“My stepbrother’s choice is Viscount Charleton.”

Now it was Jonah’s turn to react with distaste. “Charleton!”

“It appears you know the man.” Lady Emma wilted into a chair, clearly exhausted from the telling of her dire straits. “In which case,” she continued, “you will understand my fear that it’s quite possible I would not survive the first year of marriage with him.”

She shook her head angrily. “None of his previous wives did.”

Chapter 4



Jonah stared at the fear on his houseguest's face. "How could your stepbrother agree to a marriage between you and Charleton? The man is widely known to have a violent temper."

She dropped her eyelids, gave a slightly tremulous sigh, then seemed to find her resolve.

"Half my inheritance was ample incentive. And I had proof that was their scheme! You see, I searched the house until I found the marriage contract Gerald and Lord Charleton drew up. When I turn twenty-one, my father's entire estate will come to me. But if Gerald can get me married to Charleton before then, control of the funds goes to Charleton. And Charleton is bound by the agreement to hand over half of it to Gerald."

"He'd sell you. Like a piece of chattel. That's monstrous." Jonah rubbed a hand across his forehead, realizing he'd entered into a similar bargain not so very long ago. Now he recoiled at the very thought of it. "I suppose it was an easy bargain to make, though. Even by gaining only half of your estate your stepbrother and Lord Charleton will both become very wealthy men."

"And I will live in fear for my life every day until Lord Charleton kills me."

The portent of her words sat heavily between them. Jonah leaned his elbows on his knees and took in a long breath.

"So you ran away."

"I had no choice."

"Where were you going?"

"To London. Then, to America."

"That is a wise decision."

Jonah watched Lady Emma as she reached out to the window ledge to steady herself. She swayed from one side to the other as if she had lost her

balance.

He rose, then took several steps toward her. "Come. Sit down."

But she resisted.

"You promised if I told you why I was fleeing from my home, you would tell me why you keep your rooms dark and why people think you are a monster."

"Perhaps another time."

"No, my lord. You gave me your word and I'm holding you to your promise."

Jonah took in a deep breath. "Very well." He leaned against the window frame and watched her reflection. He needed to see her reaction, but somehow couldn't look her in the eye.

"I will tell you what you want to know, but only after I've admitted that I am exactly like all the other men who have courted you. Except I must assure you that I am no longer interested in marriage. Not now. Nor ever. Please be assured, I have no designs on your wealth."

A frown creased her forehead. "You are independently wealthy?" she asked.

Jonah laughed. "Far from it."

"Then why aren't you interested in the money that would come with me if I marry?"

"Because the price it would cost me is far too high."

She hesitated. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You wouldn't know," Jonah continued, "but neither my father nor my elder brother were good stewards of what they inherited. I tried to rein in their spending, but nothing I said or did made them change their wastrel living. I finally gave up trying. When the war started, I joined Her Majesty's army."

"And came home with a scar on your face."

She said it in such a matter-of-fact tone, and yet one that was infused with notes of compassion, that he was momentarily startled. Her understanding loosed a cord deep within him that he only now realized had been strung as tightly as an archer's bow.

"Yes. It happened in the last battle of the war. A sabre wound."

Jonah found himself frozen in the moment as Lady Emma lifted her hand and pressed her fingers against the scar that ran down his cheek. Her touch was gentle yet clinical, probing as a physician might. He had never imagined

that any woman would be brave enough to touch his pitiful, puckered flesh. And yet she had. With mesmerizing tenderness.

He dropped his eyes and continued speaking when she lowered her hand. “My father and my brother both died while I was gone. I returned to no family and an insurmountable pile of debts that I have yet to repay.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“There’s no need to be sorry. My brother died the same way he lived. Reckless and in debt.” Jonah paused. “He’d been accused of cheating in a card game, and died in a duel.”

Jonah sensed her stiffen beside him. He knew he’d touched a raw nerve. He was admitting that his brother was exactly the kind of man she least wanted to know. *Bloody hell*, he was about to admit that he himself was no better.

“Two years ago, the Earl of Westshield offered me an enticing proposition. I had just returned from the war and was still recovering from my wounds. I hadn’t been out in public yet and very few of the townspeople even knew I was home.”

“What did Lord Westshield offer you?”

“He offered to pay all my debts if I would agree to marry his daughter.”

“*You* were the man Lady Constance was intended to marry?”

Lady Emma gave him an incredulous look.

“Yes. I was the man. Except dear Constance was not pleased with our betrothal.”

Lady Emma gave his arm a compassionate squeeze.

“The lady took one look at me and screamed in fright. Several times she refused to marry me but her father would not give in. When he demanded a final time that she had no choice but to marry me, she did exactly what you did. She ran away before spending even one night under my roof.”

“But that should have put an end to it, surely.”

“How many times I’ve wished it had. But her father found her at the inn in town and brought her back. After, of course, the lady had caused quite a scene. She’d informed everyone within shouting distance that I was a horribly disfigured monster and that I was mentally deranged from my time and experiences during the war.”

“Oh, my lord,” she said on a sigh. “How dreadful.”

“As you can imagine, the people of Glastonbury believed what the lady told them. They feared meeting me, or even having me approach them.”

“Is that why no one comes to call?”

“Do you blame them?”

She answered his question with a dismissing shrug.

“Was Lady Constance fleeing from here when she died in that carriage accident?” Lady Emma asked after a few moments.

“Carriage accident?”

“Outside London?”

“Ah,” Jonah said. “I always wondered what reason her parents gave for her death.”

“You mean, she didn’t—”

“No.” He could have left it there. He could have let her go on thinking that was the manner in which the distraught Lady Constance had died. But some force that now existed between himself and Lady Emma bade him to speak only the truth. And so he did.

“The lady took her own life.”

This was the first time he’d related to anyone what had happened that fateful week. The look of shock on Lady Emma’s face was evidence that much of Society had been spared the truth.

“Oh, my lord. I am so sorry. But not sorry that you escaped being married to such an unstable female.”

“Perhaps. But there’s also a certain amount of guilt that’s associated with what happened.”

“Please, my lord. The guilt is not yours to bear.”

“Perhaps not entirely, but in part.”

“Did Lord Westshield give you a reason why he was so desperate for his daughter to marry?”

Jonah shook his head. “I can only surmise.”

A look passed between them, and he saw that she recognized his conjecture that his bride-to-be had been with child.

“But I never asked. I didn’t care. I didn’t love her. All that mattered at the time was the amount of money I would get if I married her and how many improvements I could make to Glassborough Estate.”

Jonah felt again the anguish of that horrid time in his life and tried to forget it. The money he’d expected to receive had been so blasted important that it was all he could think about at the time. He had carelessly told himself that in time the female he was supposed to marry would become accustomed to his looks. That she’d find his grisly features less gruesome. He told himself that

once they were married, he'd do everything in his power to make sure she didn't regret marrying him.

But nothing worked out the way he'd planned. The lady had chosen death rather than life as mistress of his household. Her mother had found her daughter's lifeless body the morning of their wedding.

Jonah caught Lady Emma watching him, and she quickly turned toward the room.

"She did this." Lady Emma swept her hand to encompass the room.

Jonah had been on the verge of assuring Lady Emma that while he had once been the very type of man she sought to avoid, she need never concern herself with any advances from him to marry her in order to get the money that would be hers. He wanted to assure her that he'd learned a harsh lesson from the last female who had been forced to marry him—that even death was preferable to spending life with a deformed monster.

But he could not.

He'd destroyed a woman once over money. How could he know he wouldn't do it again?

And then there was the matter of his temper.

"No. She didn't do this."

He strode to the door and turned sharply just before he reached the hallway.

"I did."

Chapter 5



Emma slowly opened her eyes. Her afternoon in the morning room, with its soul-searching revelations by her host, had sapped her of energy. She wasn't sure how long she'd slept, but it must have been several hours. The sun was high in the sky, the same as it had been when she'd fallen asleep. From the way she felt, it may well have been an entire day.

She turned her head to watch Mrs. Jefferies enter the room after knocking softly at the door.

"Ah, you're awake," she said, then set the tray she carried on the bedside table.

Emma rubbed her eyes. "How long did I sleep?"

"A little more than a day, my lady. I haven't seen the master so worried ever. He checked on you more times than I could count."

"He did?"

"Yes," she said, then helped Emma to sit. She placed several pillows behind Emma's back, then handed her a cup of hot chocolate and a toast point laden with butter and jam.

"This is just what I needed," Emma said. "I can't remember when I ate last."

"That's what I thought," Mrs. Jefferies smiled. "His lordship wanted me to bring up a breakfast of eggs and bacon and ham and toast and sausage and pastries and kidneys and fried potatoes, but Cook told him you'd get sick if you ate that much after going without food for so long."

Emma smiled. "This is plenty." She finished her chocolate, then set down her cup and took a bite of toast.

"Thank you, Mrs. Jefferies. I appreciate everything you've done for me."

"You're most welcome, my lady. Just ring if you need anything else."

The housekeeper pointed to a bell sitting on the bedside table.

“Perhaps in an hour or so, you’ll help me dress so I can get out of bed.”

“I’m not sure the master will approve of you getting out of bed.”

“I won’t get stronger if I stay in bed another day.”

“We’ll see,” the housekeeper said, then left the room.

Emma knew she needed to begin moving about if she intended to get stronger. The same as she knew she needed to get stronger in order to be on her way. And she needed to be on her way before her stepbrother found her.

She had to be on the next ship sailing to America. She simply *had* to.

With great effort, Emma rose and dressed, then sat down in the chair beside the window. She had been forced to sit and rest several times while she dressed. It surprised her how exhausted she was. How weak she became from doing something so simple.

Emma sat in the cushioned chair and looked out the window.

The snow had stopped, but it was too deep to risk traveling. As if she were strong enough to travel, which she was not. Neither did she know how long it would be before she felt confident to travel on her own.

She was considering what lay ahead of her when a tentative knock sounded at the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened to reveal the Earl of Glassborough standing in her doorway. He was dressed formally, now, not covered in work debris as he had been the day before. But there was little evidence of the confidence he’d exhibited atop the scaffolding and through the early minutes of their conversation in the morning room.

“When Mrs. Jefferies told me you intended to get out of bed, I had a feeling that I’d find you up and dressed.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “And so you are.”

She smiled.

“Yes, my lord. A testament to your magnificent care.”

His lordship seemed startled by such praise, and covered his discomfort by stepping into the room to sit in a chair next to her, leaving the door fully ajar.

“May I?”

Her smile grew wider. “By all means.”

“I brought the book you were reading yesterday.”

Glassborough held out the small leather-bound volume of poetry and Emma took it. “That’s very kind of you, my lord.”

“Not at all.” He looked about. “Have you any coffee in that pot?”

“It’s chocolate, my lord. It should still be hot. Would you care for some?”

At his nod she rose and poured steaming cocoa into the second cup Mrs. Jefferies had placed on the tray.

“I must apologize for losing this lovely day to sleep,” she said as he accepted the cup. “I thought I was stronger than I am.”

“You were badly injured when that branch fell on you. You need time to heal.”

Emma’s heart beat faster. “But that’s just what I don’t have, Lord Glassborough. Time. By now, Gerald has returned to Willowbrook Hall and discovered that I’m missing. I’m sure he has begun his search for me.”

“You are safe as long as you stay hidden. I doubt your brother will even think to look for you here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because even if he inquires in the village, he will be told that everyone in his right mind avoids Glassborough Estate. The villagers believe that I am insane.”

Emma’s eyebrows shot upward. “That’s ridiculous.”

“You think so?”

“Of course I do. You’re as sane as I am.”

Lord Glassborough offered a crooked smile, then lifted his cup to salute her. “Thank you for the vote of confidence.”

Emma returned Jonah’s salute with a wink and a smile. She wasn’t just being kind. She meant it, and infused her words with the weight of a mother telling her quaking child not to fear the dark. *You’re as sane as I am.* She would say it as often as this good man needed to hear it.

A long moment later her host returned his cup to the tea tray and rose from his chair. He seemed deep in thought as he walked to the window where he braced his hands on either side of the window frame and looked outside.

Emma watched his shoulders stiffen as if the weight they carried was too heavy to bear. His fists tightened around the wooden window frame. Even though he pretended that what the villagers thought of him didn’t matter, she could see that it did.

“I want you to know, my lady, that you need never fear advances from me with regard to the money that will rightfully become yours on your birthday. If I learned anything from what happened before, it is to be content with what I have and not rely on an unwilling female to free me of my debts.”

“I have never considered you a threat, my lord.”

“I am glad to hear that, my lady. I refuse to involve another female in resolving my financial dilemma. In fact, that whole ordeal thoroughly soured me on the very idea of marriage. We are of like minds in that regard, madam.” He paused and ran a hand through his hair. “I cannot force another female to look at this face every morning when she wakes, or be forced to endure the looks of pity on the villagers’ faces because the poor woman I married is saddled with such a monstrous man.”

As she watched the tension in his face escalate, Emma was struck by Lord Glassborough’s earnestness.

“Surely you exaggerate, my Lord. Certainly you have nothing to fear in that regard.” She smiled. “You also have nothing to fear from *me*, my lord. I have made my intentions clear from the beginning. I am committed to making my way to America, and once there I intend to change my name and go someplace where Gerald will never find me.”

“Do you know where you will go?” Lord Glassborough asked as he turned fully toward her.

Emma shook her head. “I’m not sure yet. I tried to discover places where I can get lost in the crowds, but I didn’t have time to study too thoroughly. I couldn’t risk Gerald discovering what I was doing for fear he’d realize I was planning an escape.”

“What cities have you considered?”

“New York City, of course, the largest of American cities. It seems to offer the most opportunities for getting lost. Then, I’ve thought that Boston might do. Or Philadelphia. But I haven’t researched the last two choices to become familiar with either of them.” Emma lifted her gaze and looked at Lord Glassborough. “Have you been to America?”

He gave her a speculative look as he clasped his hands behind his back. “I have not. But I do believe you should avoid New York. Every immigrant passes through a place called Ellis Island. Surely all one had to do to discover you were in New York City would be to bribe the immigrant registrar or one of his minions. In fact,” he continued, “the names might actually be a simple matter of public record.”

“Really.” Emma slumped in her chair. This was awful. She had no idea it might be so easy to detect her presence halfway around the world. What was she thinking? She’d escape her stepbrother’s clutches here only to walk straight into his grasp in a strange and hostile country.

Slow panic began to trickle up from the pit of her stomach.

“I have an idea, though.” Lord Glassborough took two steps and resumed his seat.

She heard him speak, even while her mind was still in the throes of dealing with the bubble of hope his words had just burst.

“Emma?”

Slowly she realized that Lord Glassborough had reached for her, and before she could think to move, his large hand covered her own. It was warm, roughened by work, and comforting in the most intimate way.

She looked up.

“Emma,” he repeated.

“Yes?”

“Let me help you. I’ll obtain passage on a trading vessel, a ship belonging to a friend of mine, Captain Russell, who takes goods to Virginia. His wife often goes to sea with him. She can be your companion.”

“No, I couldn’t involve you. I—”

“But you must.” He moved to the edge of his chair and turned his earnest face toward her. “This way your name will never appear on any manifest. And Captain Russell will see you settled in Virginia. I promise you, he’s a man whose character is above reproach. I served with him in the war. He was my commanding officer.”

“I couldn’t possibly, I—”

As she began to object, her eyes searched his, and the sincerity she saw there silenced her. In the next instant Emma felt him raise her hand from her lap. Ever so gently he turned her hand palm upwards and with immense care gently uncurled her fingers that had been clenched into a fist. His finger traced the marks left by her fingernails.

“Let me do this for you.”

His voice was little more than a whisper, sending blissful waves of comfort traversing her veins, carrying this good man’s promise straight to her heart. He was kindness personified. What great good fortune had landed her in his care?

His eyes glimmered like melting gold, stealing any reservations she might have had. He was telling the truth. He would orchestrate her escape.

“Thank you, my lord,” she breathed. “I don’t know what to say.”

Her heart pounded in her throat, whether from the assistance he offered her, or his display of passion. Whatever the reason, she couldn’t help but be affected.

“Just say yes. It will be my pleasure to help you escape the destiny your stepbrother intends for you.”

Lord Glassborough rose to his feet, still holding her hand. “Now let’s adjourn to the library and search for any books that might describe life in America. I may even have a map of America’s eastern seaboard.”

Emma rose, somehow regretting that now she would have to drop his hand that had seemed so perfectly natural joined with her own.

“Do you know when your Captain Russell will be sailing next?”

He shook his head as he led the way through to the hall and down the stairs. “I’m not sure if he’s returned from his current voyage. If he has, I’ll make arrangements for you to sail on his next trip.”

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Glassborough led her across the foyer, then down the long hall and into the library.

“I think you’ll find books that contain the information you’re searching for on these shelves,” he said, pointing to the library’s west wall.

Emma forced herself to concentrate on his books and not on his hands that gestured so expressively between them.

“Please, sit down and I’ll hand you some books I think you’ll find most helpful.”

Emma took a seat in one of the oversized upholstered chairs and placed the books he extended to her in her lap. Before long, she had more books in front of her than she’d ever be able to peruse in one sitting.

“Now,” he said, walking away from her. “If you don’t mind, I need to return to my ledgers. Call for Mrs. Jefferies if you require anything at all.”

His departure seemed abrupt, but if he felt any of the electricity that was now charging through her own veins, Emma could scarcely blame him.

“Thank you, Lord Glassborough. You’ve been most helpful.”

“You are welcome,” he answered as he moved to the door. But when he reached it, he paused and half-turned toward her. He drew a breath, as if he were about to speak, then thought better of it. Instead, he gave her a small smile before stepping into the hall.

Emma watched him retreat. How comforted she felt, even with the riot of emotions that churned within her. The change in plans he had proposed gave her hope for the first time. She might actually be able to arrive safely in the New World.

Completely anonymously.

Chapter 6



Emma woke early the next morning. Refusing to spend another day resting in bed, she dressed, then went down for breakfast. She hoped that when she entered the breakfast room she would see Lord Glassborough and would have an opportunity to thank him for all he'd done for her. But he wasn't there. She asked after him, but was told he'd already eaten and left for the day.

When she finished eating, she went to the library to search for more books on America, then took the books to the morning room to read.

She was glad to find the draperies still open and the dust covers off the furnishings. The sun poured in through the windows and wrapped the room in sunny warmth. She had swiftly come to love this room. There wasn't a more beautiful room in Glassborough Manor.

Emma wouldn't have been surprised if Lord Glassborough had ordered the dust covers put back on the furniture to hide the shredded cushions, and the draperies drawn to keep the room in darkness. But instead, everything was perfectly in place. Where possible, the cushions had been turned upside down to hide the evidence of his temper, and to the unknowing eye, no one would ever imagine the master of Glassborough Manor had taken his anger out on the cushions in this room. The cushions would still need to be repaired, but that would come in due time. For now, the room seemed aglow with its reclaimed state.

It wasn't until mid-afternoon that Lord Glassborough returned to the morning room.

"Lady Emma," he said in greeting.

"Lord Glassborough. Have you finished with your ledgers?"

A smile lifted the corners of his mouth. That small movement transformed his features and caused a shifting in her breast. When he

smiled, he was an incredibly handsome man. His features softened and he seemed caring. Protective.

Emma studied her host's features. There was a confident set to his shoulders, and his profile was strong and bold. The rugged angle of his rigid jaw exuded power while his firm features indicated an air of command. One would think he possessed a calm confidence, yet the inky darkness of his eyes allowed Emma to see something he tried to hide. A hurt that haunted him day and night.

His deep, rich voice pulled Emma back from her musing, "The first thing I learned when I took over the estate..." he said as an answer to her comment, "...was that one is never finished with the ledgers."

He walked into the room and stopped at the sideboard where he lifted a crystal decanter and poured some liquor into a glass. "Would you care for anything? A glass of wine, perhaps?"

"Yes, that would be lovely."

He poured her a glass of deep red wine and handed it to her.

"Thank you."

He unbuttoned his coat and sat in a maroon velvet chair next to hers. He stretched his legs out in front of him and took a sip of his liquor. Emma was glad he felt able to relax when he was around her.

"You seem to be improving, my lady."

"I am. It won't be long and I'll be well enough to be on my way."

"I know you are anxious for that day, but I doubt you'll be well enough to travel for another week or two."

Emma took a sip of her wine, then smiled. "I thought you would be eager to see me go," she said.

"Quite the contrary, my lady. I've grown accustomed to having you here. And, I enjoy our conversations."

Emma lowered her eyes to the wine glass in her hands. "I'm glad to hear that, my lord. I so hoped I wasn't too much of an imposition."

"You aren't. And since you'll be here a while longer, why don't you call me Jonah. That is my given name."

"Jonah," she repeated. "The name fits you."

He smiled again.

"Then, please. Call me Emma. My given name is Emmaline, but my father always called me Emma."

He nodded, then took another swallow of the liquor in his glass.

“Emma, then.” He cleared his throat. “Would you care to take a walk in the garden? If you think you’re up to it.”

“By all means.”

“We won’t stay out long, just long enough to walk around the perimeter.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“I’ll ask Carter to get your wrap,” he said as he rose.

Nothing sounded more relaxing than taking a walk in the open air. It had been so long since she’d been out of doors, and the weather had turned so much nicer than it had been when she had her accident.

Spring was finally here after all, and some of the trees were starting to bud and the shrubbery was beginning to green. Even though dusk was approaching and she would not be able to see all the wonders of nature, she’d be able to imagine what the trees and flowers would look like in mid-summer.

Lord Glassborough returned with her wrap and helped settle it on her shoulders. Together, they walked out the paned double doors and across the terrace.

They descended the three steps to the garden, then walked down the path to their right.

“Once the trees leaf out and the flowers bloom, the east half of the garden is a masterpiece of vibrant colors that amaze the eyes. And the west?” With a small laugh Jonah swung his hand across the tilled soil of an untended group of plots. “Well, as you can see, it’s a dismal work in progress.” His self-conscious laugh held all the impatience she felt in him at having the project not yet completed.

“I can imagine what it will look like, though,” Emma said, taking in the scenery around her. “Do you have a hand in caring for the garden?”

“Yes. I’ve always enjoyed planting the seeds and watching them grow.”

“I admire you, Lord Glassborough.”

“Jonah,” he corrected.

“Jonah,” she said.

“Why do you admire me, my lady?”

“Emma,” she said with a laugh as she lifted her gaze to look at him.

He smiled, then looped her arm through his. “Why is it that you admire me, Emma?”

“Because not every man sees the beauty in nature. Because few men allow themselves to admire the beauty around them.”

“That is probably true, Emma, but...” He paused for several moments. “...I will never forget the first sight I saw when I stepped off the ship after the war. I can’t explain how I felt when I took my first step back on English soil. I wanted to weep. I had survived when so many others hadn’t.”

He took several more steps before he spoke again. “There was a young lass who met our ship. Her hands were full of flowers. She presented one to each of us. She handed me a yellow daisy. It was beginning to wilt and had several petals missing, but it was the most beautiful flower I’d ever seen. I can tell you with all honesty that it was the most precious gift I’d ever received.”

He stopped walking and stared into the distance as though he were reliving that day. His hand clenched as if he still held that flower.

“After spending two years in a country where there’d been nothing other than mud and blood and the cries and screams of the wounded and dying, that daisy was the most hopeful thing I’d seen in months. That is why,” he said looking around his garden, “much of my garden contains beds of daisies of every variety I can find.”

“A veritable garden of hope,” Emma sighed. “You know, old Henry VIII would have been thrilled to see your park filled with daisies.”

“Gads,” Jonah grinned down on her and winked. “He would probably have eaten them all!”

Emma looked at him quizzically. She’d recalled that the old king had a fondness for daisies, but was Jonah having her on?

“For stomach ache, you know. They’re medicinal.” He laughed. “Or at least Henry thought so.”

Emma lifted a hand to cover her sudden laughter. She reached the other hand out to swat his arm, and she took a step closer to improve her aim.

He stopped. Then turned her to face him.

Emma lifted her head and her gaze locked with his. There was something immensely compelling in the look he gave her. Something that told her that his emotions were battling with his sense of propriety. Then, his gaze lowered to her lips.

He was going to kiss her. Emma knew he was. He was silently waiting for her to refuse his advances, or give him her permission. Waiting for her indication that she didn’t object. Or that she did.

She should stop him. She only needed to turn her head and step away from him. But she didn’t. It was as if something inside her refused to let this moment pass without experiencing what his kisses would do to her.

Emma focused her gaze on his mouth. His lips were full and kissable. She ran her tongue over her lips, then skimmed her hands upward over his chest. She didn't stop until her fingers were nearly to his shoulders.

With their eyes locked and their lips parted, he brought his mouth down to gently cover hers.

There was nothing demanding in his kiss, only a tender entreaty that begged permission to continue.

Emma wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her mouth more firmly to his.

He answered her plea with another kiss.

The world spun in circles as the crystal moment lengthened. Their passion grew with unmistakable ardor before he wrapped his arms around her and held her closer still.

Emma heard a forlorn moan of distress. It was her own throaty affirmation of just how far his kisses had reached deep inside her breast to pull at her heart.

This shouldn't be happening. His kisses ought not to affect her like this. They weren't supposed to be so powerful that she would mourn the loss of them if he never kissed her again.

But they were.

In time, he broke off their kiss but didn't release her. Instead, he tucked her head beneath his chin and held her close. Emma was thankful. She wasn't sure her legs would support her if he released her, weak as they had become from his kisses.

"I should apologize, but saying I'm sorry would be a lie," he said without releasing her. "I'm not sorry. Not in the least."

"I'm glad you kissed me," Emma admitted. "Although, we must not give way to this...affection. You know that."

"I know," he said, then dropped his arms from around her. "I'll not forget what you said the other day."

"What was that?"

"You said that none of the men who courted you had loved you. What they loved was the money that would come with you. So I'll not forget that I am no different than any of those men. I need money as much as any of them did. Perhaps more. But I promised you then that I will not take advantage of you. I will not deceive you into thinking I love you just to gain your trust."

Emma heard disappointment in his voice, even as she felt it pinching her own heart. She turned to the side, hoping he wouldn't see the emotions with which she wrestled.

Jonah walked to the edge of the sidewalk and looked out over the garden. Instead of coming back to stand beside her, he walked a few steps down the path and stared out into the garden. "I think there could be something between us. I think that in time, we might come to care for each other. But neither of us can allow that to happen."

He paused for several moments. "I do not have a pound to my name, Emma, and if..." he paused. "...*if* something more developed between us, you would never know if I really cared for you, or if my words were lies like all the lies you heard before."

She knew he was right. She'd learned the lesson that she couldn't believe any suitor. And she'd learned it several times over.

"Thank you for understanding," she said quietly. "Now," she continued as she struggled to quiet her troubled heart, "I'm a little weary. I believe I shall retire."

"I'll see you in," he said.

Emma shook her head. "No need. I'll be fine by myself."

Emma turned away from him and walked back to the house. There was a very heavy weight inside her breast and a painful lump in her stomach, as if she'd just lost someone very special.

But she'd had no choice. She couldn't let any man in. At least not yet. Especially not someone who needed money as desperately as Lord Glassborough did.

Chapter 7



Every day seemed endless. Jonah knew that was because of the effort it took to avoid running into Emma. And yet...she consumed every second of his thoughts.

He couldn't stop thinking about her. About what she was doing. Whether or not she thought about him even once a day. Or more. But most of all, he wondered if she relived the kiss they'd shared. And if it tortured her as much as it did him.

After Constance had chosen death rather than spend her life as his wife, Jonah was certain he would never find a woman who could overlook the rumors that surrounded him. Or the scar that marred his face. Or the recluse he'd become. Or any of a hundred other things about him that made him someone no female would want as her husband. And yet the kiss he and Emma had shared amid the spring's budding garden told him something altogether different. The kiss they'd shared woke emotions he thought were long dead.

But she had chosen escape, and he would honor that.

Jonah rose from his desk and walked out the paned double doors that led to the terrace. He braced his hands on the balustrade and looked out onto the garden. The weather had changed since Emma had arrived. It was warmer now. The sun shone with regularity and the crocuses and daffodils were peeking through the soil. Leaves were turning the branches green and buds were popping open.

Jonah had always observed the awakening of the flowers and the blossoming of everything that had lain dormant throughout the winter merely as a botanical event. But since Emma had come into his life, he felt that every part of him was awakening. That something inside him had come to life.

He pounded his fist against the railing in frustration. Such feelings were futile. Nothing could come of the emotions that blossomed inside of him. No matter how much he might care for her, he had nothing to recommend himself to Emma. He had nothing to offer her. Nothing at all. Not even a decent roof over her head.

Jonah pushed himself away from the railing and walked from the terrace to follow one of the paths in the garden. He needed to think. He needed to plan. He needed to do what was best for Emma. And only one thing was best for her. That was for her to get as far away from England as possible and make a new life for herself in Virginia.

He'd only taken a few steps when he saw her. She was sitting on a wrought-iron bench with a book in her hands. Her eyes weren't focused on the words in the book, but staring into space as if she were deep in thought.

Jonah knew he should make his presence known, but he'd rather use the little time he had until she saw him to study her. He wanted to look at her features and put them to memory so that when she was no longer with him, he could still recall every detail of her. The rich color of her hair and the slight tilt of her nose. The magnificent blue of her eyes and the proud lift of her shoulders. But most of all, her inner strength and the determination to do what she knew she had to do. And do it alone. He'd never met anyone like her.

Jonah thought it was best to turn around and leave before she realized he was there. He turned, but only managed to take one step back toward the house before her voice stopped him.

"My lord?"

Jonah turned. "I'm sorry, Emma. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You didn't. I was just enjoying this perfect day. Please, join me."

Jonah made his way to the bench where she sat and took his place beside her. "It is quite beautiful, isn't it? The day, I mean."

She smiled and Jonah's heart flipped in his chest.

"Yes."

Jonah looked at the flowers just starting to bloom. "When I was young, I used to come here with my grandmother and she would sometimes read to me, or we would just talk. I thought she was the wisest woman in all the world."

"What did you talk about?"

"Everything. She would tell me about her mother and father and who they were. And she would tell me about my grandfather's family. She told me it was important to know where I came from."

“That is very important,” she said. “I wish my father would have told me about my grandparents. I would have liked to know who they were and how they lived.”

“Yes, I’m glad she told me about her parents. And my grandfather’s. If she hadn’t, I would have only known my father and brother, and they weren’t examples I could be proud of.”

She turned her head and stared at him.

“Does that surprise you?”

“Yes.”

“My grandfather was a very intelligent member of Society. He was well thought of, and an excellent businessman. He took the little his father gave him and invested it wisely. He worked hard and was a very wealthy man when he died.”

“What happened to his wealth?”

“It went to my father and my brother. My father was not blessed with a good sense of business and made one bad investment after another. My brother was a lazy wastrel. He enjoyed gambling and womanizing and spent far more money than he had.”

“How did your father die?”

“He drank himself to death.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and Jonah could tell from the sympathy in her voice that she truly meant it.

“They had both died by the time I came home from the war. Perhaps if I would have been here, things might have been different, but it’s too late to think of that now.”

“Yes,” she said. “You can’t live in the past, or carry guilt for the choices your father and brother made. You only have to answer for the choices you make in the here and now.” She gave him a piercing look. “As I am.”

Jonah shifted on the bench to face her. “Is there not someone else you care for? Someone else you would like to marry?”

Lady Emma drew back, giving him an odd, almost questioning look, as if she were considering his own marital worth. And then she sighed.

“No,” she answered as she rose from the bench and took two steps from him. “I have known I would not marry from the day Society discovered the amount of money my father had put in trust for when I marry. I remember that day vividly. Every man who had not so much as asked me to dance suddenly wanted to court me. There wasn’t an empty set on my dance card from the

moment rumors of my worth began to circulate. I felt like a prize horse at Tattersall's."

"I don't blame you," Jonah said, rising to his feet. "But speaking of horses, walk with me while we talk over a bit of business."

Emma lifted her gaze and took his arm. The corners of her mouth turned upward into a most appealing smile. To Jonah, her smile was her most enchanting feature. It might be winsome one moment, then pensive, inviting, or even intriguing the next. It could sit suspended upon her face while it lit her eyes, as if she were about to make a spontaneous comment. Or even a scandalous one. Her facial animations cast a prettiness over her features—a warm, smouldering welcome that invited closer study. The very effect of it tugged at his heart and refused to release it.

"Horses, you say?"

"Ahem. Yes. Your horse, in particular."

"My horse?"

"Yes. You won't be needing it, as I will be escorting you to London in the carriage. If you should require a mount, you're welcome to either of the two remaining in my stable." He cast his eyes away from her. He simply couldn't voice the real reason for wanting to sell her horse, so he fished about for a compelling reason. "But really, your stepbrother will have put out word that he's looking for a young woman on horseback, so you can't be seen out riding anyway. And I have a buyer if you give permission for me to pursue the sale."

The real reason for the sale stuck in his throat like a bit of bad fish. The funds from the sale of the horse would cover the cost of her passage on Captain Randall's ship. It was humiliating. He would give the world to gift her the price of her passage himself.

And if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

They walked in silence a few paces down the path until Lady Emma stopped and laid a hand on his arm.

"Jonah, your kindness and hospitality have overwhelmed me. My horse is yours to do with as you please." She gave his arm a gentle squeeze. "With my deepest thanks."

Jonah smiled at her warm appreciation. "I'll see to it the moment I return."

An expression of surprise crossed her face. "Return? Are you leaving?"

"Yes. I must go to London. I'll find out if Captain Russell has returned and when he will be sailing again. If I'm lucky," he said, nudging her shoulder with his own, "he won't be sailing again for months. Maybe years."

She looked up in time to catch his dramatic wink. “You’re flirting with trouble now, Lord Glassborough,” she said with a wink of her own. “I think I must leave before I completely wear out my welcome.”

Jonah stifled the words of denial that flew to his tongue and kept his answer light. “I imagine I can suffer through a few more days.”

Emma paused in the middle of the path and turned to face him. “You were serious when you offered to find me passage on your friend’s ship?”

“Of course I was. I completely understand why you’re anxious to leave,”

Emma lowered her gaze. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I have no money yet. I can’t pay you for my passage.”

Without realizing it, Lady Emma had opened the way for him to confess without shame. He could not have been more grateful.

“That’s not a problem. Your horse should cover the cost of it,” he answered.

“Of course! Oh, splendid! I can’t thank you enough, my lord.”

Letting her regain her self-esteem by providing for her own need was an unexpected reward. Jonah locked his gaze with hers. He battled the ache inside him when he thought of how lonely he’d be when she was gone. He’d never taken such pleasure in each day as he had since Emma had arrived. He didn’t want to think of how desolate he would be when she left.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked, looping her arm through his and making her way further down the path.

“Five days at the most, I would think. If Captain Russell is already in London and is preparing to set sail for his return trip to Virginia I’ll return immediately to get you.”

Jonah saw the excitement on Emma’s face and the ache inside him hurt worse.

“Should I go with you? Perhaps—”

“No, you need to stay out of sight. The last thing we want is for your stepbrother to see you.”

Jonah wasn’t sure if Emma agreed with him or not, but finally she nodded.

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

“First thing in the morning. If I make good time, I should reach London before nightfall.”

“Thank you,” she said. Tears swam in her eyes but she swiped them away before they spilled over her lashes.

Jonah brought her close and placed a brotherly kiss on her cheek. He wanted to kiss her mouth as he'd done once before but he knew that would be a tragic mistake. Kissing her once had been a huge error in judgement. Kissing her a second time would be fatal.

“I need to return to the house. I have papers to organize before I can leave.”

He gave her hand a warm pat and stepped away, letting the small pain of separation resume its place above his heart.

As he'd known it would.

Chapter 8



Jonah pushed Jupiter as hard as he dared. His trip to London had gone well. First, Lady Emmaline's horse had brought a very fair price, sold to a fellow in the next village. He'd promised to keep the horse out of sight in his barn for ten days.

Next, he found that Captain Russell had docked several weeks earlier and was preparing to set sail in a week's time. That would give Jonah six days to return to Glassborough and escort Emma to London. Thankfully, the captain's wife agreed to accompany her husband as a chaperone for Emma. It could not have worked out better.

Or worse.

Jonah wiped a hand over his face. He was so tired. He'd been up since dawn and had traveled all day to reach home. When his eyes closed and he swayed in the saddle for more times than he could count, he decided to stop at the *Pig and Ale Inn* to rest for a moment and drink a pint of ale in an effort to revive himself. He only had a few miles to go until he reached Glassborough, but as tired as he was, he wasn't sure he could make it.

When he arrived at the *Pig and Ale*, the yard was thankfully empty. He wasn't in the mood to put up with a crowd of rowdy workers and tenants who'd stopped by for a pint before they went home.

He dismounted and tied Jupiter to a post.

The second he stepped into the taproom, he felt an eerie tension. Ordinarily he found the patrons engaged in jovial conversation. But tonight's small crowd seemed ill at ease. Jonah turned his attention to the man at the end of the bar and guessed that he was the reason for their unease.

"Surely one of you has seen her. She'd hardly blend in with you lot," he said, slurring his words. "She's a lady."

Jonah took a chair at a table in the corner of the room, far enough from the man that he hoped he hadn't been noticed. Unfortunately, before the barmaid even came to see what Jonah wanted to drink, the man staggered over.

"Are you from around here?" he asked.

Jonah lifted his head enough to look at the man. "Who wants to know?"

"Baron Marquardt. The woman I'm looking for is my sister."

"And you lost her?"

Jonah's comment earned him snickers from the few men in the room as well as a malicious glare from Emma's drunken brother. Jonah could see why Emma feared her stepbrother. He seemed a black-hearted excuse for a human being.

The barmaid approached with the ale and Jonah lifted the mug to his lips and took a long swallow.

"So, have you seen her? She's not much to look at. Dark hair, well-dressed. Rides a chestnut mare."

Jonah finished his ale and lifted his mug to indicate he wanted another tankard.

"I'm just returning from London where I saw several women who match your sister's description. No doubt they felt it safe to walk the streets now that you've vacated the city."

"You're a bloody smug toff," Emma's stepbrother hissed as he rose and kicked his chair across the room.

Before he could step away from Jonah's table, Jonah slammed his hand down and clasped Marquardt's wrist in an iron grip. "I'd watch my temper if I were you, Marquardt. We don't take kindly to pompous jaybirds from London causing trouble where there's no need."

Jonah gave Marquardt's wrist a cruel twist, then released him. Emma's stepbrother staggered across the room and took his place at the end of the bar.

"Thanks, my lord," the bartender said, bringing Jonah another mug of ale. "That bloody bloke's been nothing but trouble since he came."

"How long has he been here?"

"Two, three days. Been looking for his sister who ran away from him. Not that I blame her. I'd run as far from that one as I could get."

Jonah cast a glance at Marquardt. He'd knocked over a stool at the bar and was stumbling up the stairs to his room. "Hopefully, you won't be bothered by him any longer tonight."

Jonah reached in his pocket and pulled out coins to pay for his last mug of ale.

“No,” the bartender said. “Last one’s on the house. You earned it.”

“Thank you,” Jonah said, then finished his ale. The sooner he left, the sooner he’d get home so he could protect Emma. The man who threatened her future was altogether too close for comfort. She was right. She needed to leave England as soon as possible.

Jonah mounted Jupiter and rode to Glassborough Manor. He handed his mount to Farley and strode to the house. When he reached the door, Carter was waiting for him.

“Has Lady Emma retired?” he asked as he entered the foyer. It was late, but not so late that he couldn’t stop to bid her good evening. He needed to tell her what he’d found out from Captain Russell, as well as that he’d met her stepbrother. He knew she would be pleased to know he’d arranged passage to America. Just as she’d be more anxious than ever to be gone from Glassborough Manor. Even though he wasn’t ready to see her go.

“Yes, my lord. The lady is in the library. She’s waited up every night since you left.”

Jonah couldn’t help but smile.

“Would you like me to have the servants make up a tray, my lord?”

“Yes, please, Carter. And some bread and cheese and meat. I didn’t stop to eat on my way home.”

“Right away, my lord.”

Carter turned away and Jonah turned toward the library. He couldn’t wait to see Emma. He couldn’t put into words how much he’d missed her. Now he looked forward to bringing that joyous smile to her face with his good news, even though it would crush him to do so.

He touched the inside pocket of his jacket and felt the books he’d purchased on his way out of London. He knew she would enjoy reading something more current than the books he had on his shelves.

Jonah walked down the hall and stopped before he entered the library. Emma wasn’t sitting in one of the chairs reading like he imagined she would be, but was standing by one of the cushioned wing chairs, facing the doorway.

“Greetings, my lord,” she said with a smile on her face. “I heard you enter. I can’t tell you how pleased I am to see you’ve returned safely.”

“Emma,” he said, taking long, eager strides to reach her. He leaned close to her and placed a kiss on each cheek.

“May I pour you a glass of brandy?”

“With haste,” he replied jovially, then sat on the sofa and stretched his legs out in front of him. He couldn’t believe how good it felt to be able to stretch out after riding all day.

Emma brought the glass of brandy and he took it from her hand.

“I was sure you’d arrive home tonight.”

“Were you?” he said with a smile, then took a swallow of the brandy. It was much more satisfying than the ale he’d had at the *Pig and Ale*. He took another sip.

“Yes I was. Did you have a successful trip?”

“If you’re asking if I saw Captain Russell, then yes. I had a very successful trip. Captain Russell has been in England for nearly a month and is preparing to set sail in about a week.”

“Oh, Jonah!”

There was the joyous smile, igniting dual flames within him and setting fire to his aching heart.

Emma breathed an audible sigh. “I can’t believe it. It won’t be long and I’ll be where Gerald can no longer touch me.”

“Yes. It won’t be long now.”

The expression on Emma’s face was puzzling. But Jonah didn’t have time to ask her what caused her confusion until the maids who had arrived with the tea service and tray left the room.

“You don’t seemed pleased for me,” Emma said.

“How can I be pleased when in less than a week you’ll be gone? I’ll miss you, Emma. Surely you know that.”

“Jonah, don’t.”

Perhaps the thought of Emma leaving caused such a maudlin emotion because he’d been on the road all day and was tired beyond belief. Perhaps the thought of Emma leaving was more real now that the plans were in motion and the date of her departure was not that far in the future. Perhaps the reason was that Jonah didn’t know how he would survive when she was gone.

“Never mind me, Emma. I’m just tired.”

Emma piled meat and cheese on a slice of bread for Jonah, then poured herself a cup of tea and sat back in her chair.

“Here,” he said, handing Emma the books he’d purchased by trading his watch fob to the bookseller. “I thought you might enjoy these.”

Emma took the books. "Oh, Jonah. Thank you. You're too kind! But I'm the one who should be gifting my host."

"Your presence has been gift enough," Jonah said, then tried to cover his forthright words by taking a bite of his sandwich.

"I met your stepbrother tonight," he said when he finished his food.

Emma dropped the book into her lap and her eyes darted upward. "What? Where?"

The fear in Emma's eyes was plain to see.

"At the *Pig and Ale*. I was falling asleep and stopped to rest for a few moments."

"The *Pig and Ale*? Is that near here? Did you speak to him?"

"About twelve miles. And yes. He was far into his cups and was asking anyone within hearing if they'd seen you."

Emma rose from her chair and paced the room. She clutched the books he'd given her so tightly to her breast that her knuckles had turned white.

"He's found me. He's found me! What did you tell him?"

"Nothing, Emma. Nothing. Besides, he was so drunk he no doubt won't even remember he saw me when he wakes in the morning."

"I have to leave."

"And we will. Day after tomorrow. Farley has found two men who will accompany us as guards."

"But if Gerald's here, I need to—"

"You need to stay where you are. The longer he stays around, the easier it will be for Farley to keep an eye on him."

Jonah could see Emma wasn't convinced, and he knew she needed reassurance. He rose and walked to the sideboard, poured her a glass of wine and handed it to her. "Here, drink this. It will calm your nerves."

"But you don't know what he's like," she said when she'd taken a swallow of the wine.

"Yes, I do. You forget. I met him. He's got the devil in him. I saw it in his eyes."

She looked at him with the most terrified expression and Jonah pulled her close and held her in his arms. "Don't worry, love. Nothing will happen to you. I'll keep you safe."

Jonah held her for as long as he dared, then led her to the sofa. "Finish your wine, then it's early to bed. You can start packing in the morning. We need to be on our way in less than thirty-six hours."

She took another sip of her wine and nodded as if she agreed with what he said. But the fear in her eyes told another story.

It would be the longest thirty-six hours of her life.

Chapter 9



Jonah slept far longer than he'd intended, but he'd been so tired when he went to bed the night before that he was thankful he woke up any time before noon. He dressed, then went to the breakfast room. He wasn't sure what he needed more, food to put in his stomach, several cups of coffee to help him wake, or the sight of a beautiful woman.

After he drank his second cup of coffee and cleaned his plate of all the food he'd put on it, he realized he'd needed all three. As he finished, he looked up when Carter entered the room. "Mr. Farley to see you, my lord."

A flash of warning surged through him. "What is it, Farley?"

"It's the bay mare, your lordship. She's gone. I think her ladyship took the horse and left."

Jonah bolted to his feet. "What? How?"

"I was in the back paddock cleaning the troughs. When I came back to the stable, the horse was gone. My son says she had him saddle the bay. I just had Mrs. Jefferies check on her ladyship and she came back down to tell me Lady Emma is gone. And her satchels, too."

"Damnation!" Jonah muttered under his breath. "Saddle my horse. I'll get my cloak. She shouldn't be on the roads alone."

"Yes, my lord."

Jonah ran to the house to get anything he might need, including a pistol, then raced to the stable to get his horse. At least he knew what direction she'd gone. She was no doubt headed toward London.

He raced Jupiter over the road, hoping he'd see a sign of her up ahead. Surely she didn't have that ample a lead over him. He prayed he could catch up with her soon.

Each pounding hoof beat drove home to Jonah what life was about to become once Emma left. There would no longer be a reason to make plans.

No longer a reason to work at retrieving his home's former glory. No longer a reason to smile.

Jonah pushed his mount. He could catch up with her and escort her on to London, but his solicitor was arriving that evening with the funds from selling his last bit of expendable property. It would allow him to give Emma enough to keep her comfortably in Virginia until she managed to get her own funds transferred.

He'd even arranged with his solicitor to handle that transfer for her, but she had to sign the documents first. And they were back at the manor on his desk.

He'd just have to force Emma to return with him. And when they reached Glassborough Manor, he'd lock her in her room until they were ready to leave for London.

Even as he formed the thought he dismissed it. He could never entrap her the way her brother wanted to. But he would distract her in every way possible. And if she still thought she might flee he'd take her to his bed.

Jonah urged his horse to travel faster. As tantalizing as the thought was, he knew it was a ploy he would never undertake. She was committed to her course, and he had promised to assist her in it. His own mounting need had no place in this unraveling plot. He may have behaved without honor in the past, but it would never happen again.

He pulled to a halt when he saw Emma sitting on the side of the road. The bay mare was grazing in the ditch.

Jonah dismounted and walked to where she sat. "Are you alright?" he asked when he reached her.

"Did you loosen this on purpose?"

She looked up as she tossed a horseshoe at his feet. Jonah bent to pick it up and saw the tears running down her cheeks. He turned the horseshoe over and over, at a loss for words in the face of her sadness.

"I shouldn't have left." A hiccup interrupted her words. "But I was so afraid. Twelve miles, Jonah! He's so close I can feel his breath on the back of my neck. I can't stand it. What will I do if Gerald finds me?"

"He won't find you, Emma. I'm here. I'll protect you."

"But he's so desperate there's no telling what he'll do."

"Trust me, Emma. I won't let anything happen to you. Now," he said holding out his hand to help her to her feet. "Let's go back to the manor. We'll stay with our plan to get you to London and onto the ship that will take you to America."

Emma took his hand and he tried to ignore the bolts of emotion that spiked through him.

Jonah brought her to her feet and she swayed enough that he gathered her to him to prevent her from falling. He held her for a few moments, then lowered his head. His gaze locked with hers, then lowered to her lips.

She was so beautiful. Her lips were made to be kissed and he couldn't stop himself.

He should release her. He should put her on his horse and take her back to Glassborough, but he couldn't. Not yet. He didn't have the courage. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to experience the emotional upheaval that had consumed him the last time he'd kissed her. He was desperate to relive the mind-numbing turmoil kissing her caused.

He lowered his head until his lips touched hers. The feel of her lips pressed to his was pure heaven. Never before had he experienced anything so stirring. Not since the last time he'd kissed her. Not since the last time his lips had touched hers.

Jonah knew he should end their kiss, but he couldn't. Any strength he might have had to control his emotions was gone. Especially when her hands slid up his coat and her arms wrapped around his neck.

Her fingers raked through his hair and pressed his head closer to take in more of his kisses.

Jonah deepened his kiss. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any woman in his life. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to take her as a man takes a woman he cherishes. Because he loved her. Loved her more than he thought it was possible to love anyone.

He was lost. He had to stop now or he wouldn't have the strength to keep from taking her right here.

Jonah lifted his mouth from hers and pressed her head to rest beneath his chin.

She couldn't catch her breath. It was as if her legs had lost the strength to support her troubled heart. Jonah wrapped his arms around her more securely.

"Are you alright?" he asked in a voice that sounded ragged and heavy.

She nodded her head.

"Oh, Emma. What power you have over me. Please, don't leave me."

"Don't, Jonah. Don't you understand? I don't have a choice."

"You do."

"No. I'm not safe here. I'll never be safe here."

Then, she turned away from him. And Jonah feared he'd lost her forever.

~■~

Emma descended the stairs for breakfast. Her nervous hands smoothed her skirts as she went down to meet with Jonah at his request. He was there, but from the looks of him he hadn't slept any better than she had. It had been late when the solicitor arrived to sort out the necessary papers for transferring her funds to a bank of her choosing when the time came. It took a good bit of creative legal language, but at last all three were satisfied that the transfer of her fortune would be done safely. And secretly.

Jonah rose and pulled out the chair to his right.

"Good morning, Emma. I trust you slept well." He handed her a plate which Emma filled with more food than she'd probably be able to eat.

Emma was surprised to find that no footman was present to wait on them and there was a cup of coffee in front of her place that Jonah had undoubtedly filled while she was at the sideboard.

Emma sat and began to eat, hoping her unexpected appetite might banish the gloom from Jonah's face. His features were set in a stern, determined expression—one that might intimidate her, but did not. Instead, it seemed to make him even more handsome. The scar down his cheek was as vivid as before, but she hardly noticed it any more. It was merely a part of him. The same as the color of his eyes and the waves of his thick dark hair were a part of him. His every feature was a unique part of him that she'd swiftly grown to love.

Emma concentrated on eating the food on her plate.

Jonah sat across the table from her while she ate, but didn't speak. It was as if he was intentionally waiting for her to finish before he broached the subject he knew she intended to discuss.

"You're a very patient man," she said when she laid down her fork.

"Does that surprise you?"

Emma shook her head. "No. It suits you."

He lifted his eyebrows in a querying expression.

"Are you finished?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then, please. Come with me."

Jonah helped her to her feet and escorted her from the breakfast room to his study. When there, he saw her to a cushioned chair before the fire. Emma welcomed the warmth.

“I’m guessing you have something to add to our plan.”

In response, Jonah went to his desk and opened the top drawer. He removed a folded piece of paper and handed it to her.

Emma slowly unfolded the heavy parchment and perused the writing.
“What is this?”

“It’s a marriage license.”

Emma’s heart slammed against her ribs. Surely he didn’t intend for them to marry. “I can see that, but whose?”

“Mine. It’s the license the vicar brought with him when he came to perform my marriage to Lady Constance.”

“Oh,” Emma said, unsettled by the notion of handling the unused document.

“That was, of course, before Constance refused to marry me. Once the vicar realized there might not be a wedding, he spent all of his time consoling the bride’s mother, as well as trying to prevent the bride’s father from killing his spoiled daughter.”

“Could the mother not speak sense to her daughter? Or her husband, for that matter?”

The smile that lifted the corners of Jonah’s lips contorted into a malicious grin.

“In truth, I think Lady Westshield fueled the torment. I wouldn’t doubt that it was she who planted the idea in her daughter’s head that I was to be feared.”

Emma shook her head. “That can’t have been the reason, Jonah. You are not a monster. Your quiet nature might have put her off at first, but that’s only normal when two people first meet.”

Jonah contemplated her for a long moment.

“What a forgiving and understanding woman you are, Lady Emmaline. You always look at things in the best light. How did your father raise a stepson so totally the opposite of you?”

“My father had very little to do with the rearing of Gerald. He was already grown and beyond influence when Father married Gerald’s mother. She was a weak person who spoiled her son unmercifully. The damage was already done long before Father could influence Gerald.”

Emma noted the marriage certificate’s empty signature lines. It would be such a simple ruse to sign the paper so Gerald would believe that she and Jonah were legally wed.

“There had to be another reason Lady Constance objected to the marriage.”

Jonah shifted in his chair, showing her just how uncomfortable he was with the memory of that dreadful time.

“In one of her rants, I overheard her tell her mother that she was in love with someone else. From what she said, I believe the man with whom she was in love was married. Her mother told her she was a fool if she believed that man would leave his wife and family for her, but of course Constance refused to believe her mother.”

“It’s obvious the girl was spoiled as badly as my stepbrother.”

“I think perhaps she was not spoiled as much as she was desperate,” Jonah said.

“What makes you say that?”

“I overheard her tell her mother that she was with child.”

There was little Emma could do to hide her shock.

She refolded the unsigned certificate from the foiled marriage. Why had someone not counseled the young woman? Why had someone not spoken in defense of the good man who had been willing under the most dire circumstances to give her legitimacy?

But apparently nobody had. And a misguided young woman had died.

Emma looked at the Earl of Glassborough with heightened compassion. How gravely it had changed him. How thoroughly it had cut him off from the community that could easily have been his salvation.

And how deeply it had touched her heart.

Chapter 10



Emma sat behind Jonah's desk and filled in the blank lines on the marriage license that would be their insurance against any claims on her estate. The small twinge of guilt that it was a sham license did not faze her in the least.

After she put in the bride's name and Jonah signed as her husband, Jonah's butler signed his name on the vicar's line. Cook signed as one of the witnesses and Farley signed his name as a second witness. The finished product looked real. It looked legitimate.

That thought shocked her to her very core. And not for the first time she wondered what it would be like to be married to Jonah. She wondered what it would be like for Glassborough to be her home. What it would be like if Jonah were her husband and he'd given her enough children to fill their home with joy and laughter. She wondered what it would be like if they shared a marriage bed.

"It almost feels as if we're really married," she said softly, not really intending for him to hear her.

"We can make that happen," he answered quietly.

"No, Jonah. We can't. I'm not safe until I am so far from Gerald that he can never find me. You don't know how his mind works. He's absolutely diabolical!"

"You could trust me to keep you safe."

"Or, Gerald could kill you and I would carry that burden of grief for the rest of my life."

Jonah turned his back on her and Emma realized the sooner they were separated, the sooner she could put this behind her. And the safer Jonah would be.

"I need to speak with Farley to make sure he understands our plans." Jonah walked to the door and left her.

Emma stared at his retreating back and knew she'd just lost a large part of her heart. She rose from behind Jonah's desk and sat in a chair before the fire. She pulled her legs up close to her breast and rested her chin on her knees. Tears she could no longer hold back streamed down her cheeks. She'd managed to get so little sleep the night before. The lonely hours had stretched endlessly forward as they crawled toward dawn.

She had spent nearly the entire night evaluating her feelings for Jonah. From the day she'd first realized that no man's word could be trusted, she'd lived with the knowledge that she would never give her heart away. But she'd done exactly that. Without even realizing what was happening, she'd given her heart to Jonah and it was too late to rescue it.

If only she hadn't let him kiss her. If only she hadn't experienced the passion he stirred within her. If only she hadn't placed her trust in his words. And his kisses.

She saw now that he may very well be the man who would shatter all her notions about men.

But as long as she remained single, she kept control of her wealth. And, as long as she controlled her wealth, she was guaranteed her independence. She would only lose her freedom if she gave her heart away.

Emma clutched her hand to her breast. She'd never hurt so much in her life. How could she have done exactly what she swore she would never do? How could she have opened her heart to a destitute man? A man who admittedly had tried once before to marry simply for want of a dowry? In truth, she had not seen such a weakness in him, but history could not be denied.

She felt deeply that his show of affection was genuine. But would it stand the test of time? Once he was on a sound financial footing, would he still feel that affection for her? She scarcely knew him. How could she possibly answer that question?

She couldn't have known it would hurt so much to give up Jonah. How was it that in just a few weeks' time she'd grown so close to Jonah that now a part of her trembled every time she thought of a future without him in it?

How had she fallen in love with him? How had she allowed him to take possession of her heart? She let the tears fall from her eyes. She hurt more than she could stand. Her only hope was that once she was away from Jonah she could start healing. Maybe in time she wouldn't hurt so much. Maybe in time her heart could begin the process of healing.

Emma rose from her chair and clamped her hands around her waist. The pain inside seemed to escalate. It could only mean that she loved him. She was coming to believe that she did, because life without him seemed a dismal prospect. Yet would her heart hurt any less if she trusted him with her love and he destroyed it? If he betrayed her love out of greed?

Emma left the room and went up to her bedroom. Tomorrow she would leave here and begin her new life. Tomorrow she could concentrate on mending her heart. There had to be a way to do that, and she was determined to find it.



Jonah sat before the fire in his study that night and watched the embers in the grate slowly die. He reached for the brandy decanter and refilled his glass, then slowly lifted the tumbler to his mouth. His intention was to drink until he couldn't remember the emotions that tortured him every time he thought of Emma and a life without her. But drinking wouldn't erase the love he felt for her. Nothing could help him forget how indelibly she'd imprinted herself onto his heart. And deep into his soul.

It seemed ages since he'd last kissed her, but the feel of her lips against his refused to go away. The after effects of their kiss still burned deep in his heart until he thought it had just been a moment ago that he'd held her in his arms. And no amount of liquor could ease the pain of knowing how much he would miss her long after she was gone.

Jonah took a long swallow of the brandy in his glass, then turned his focus to the soft footfalls beyond the door where he found Emma standing in the shadows.

"Go back to bed, Emma," he said, thinking he could stop her from entering. "It's not safe for you to be here. Not tonight."

"Gone a bit tiddly have you, my lord?"

Oh, how he loved her for endeavoring to make light of his inebriated circumstances.

"No," Jonah said on a laugh. "But not for lack of trying." He raised his glass to her and swallowed the last of his brandy.

As if she didn't fear his words even a little, she walked into the room. She stopped in front of the cabinet where Jonah kept several crystal decanters of liquor and poured a small amount of wine into a glass. When she had her wine

in hand she walked over to a second wing chair next to where he sat and joined him.

“Do you know if my stepbrother is still at the *Pig and Ale*?”

“Farley has a man watching who sent word that your stepbrother is still there. Evidently he’s conducting his searches in larger and larger circles, using the alehouse as his center.” Jonah shook his head sadly. “He’s caused a fight almost every night since he arrived and the owner and patrons of the inn are anxious to have him gone.”

“Why doesn’t he leave?” she cried in frustration. “He should know that even if he finds me, I’ll only run away again.”

“Money is a powerful motive, Emma. You above anyone know to what lengths a man will go to get your wealth. You know what lies a man will tell to make you believe he loves you.”

“Is that what you’ve done, Jonah? Lied with your kisses to gain my fortune?”

Her voice held a teasing, playful tone, but Jonah was halted by her words.

“Oh, Emma. How could I ever tell you anything but the truth? You’ve won my heart, it’s as simple as that. I could never betray you. And I’ll never let your brother harm you.”

When she didn’t reply, Jonah threw the remainder of his brandy to the back of his throat. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her. And never let her go. He wanted to hold her so she couldn’t leave him. But he’d promised himself that he wouldn’t beg her to stay. Not again.

He’d already told her everything he needed to say. He’d told her that he loved her, and promised that in every way she was safe from him. But it hadn’t been enough. She didn’t trust him enough to believe he would protect her. And now it was too late. She would leave in the morning and he’d never see her again.

“Are your satchels ready?”

“Yes.”

Jonah rose. He was afraid to look her in the eye, couldn’t bear to see her eagerness to take leave of him. But the sadness in her voice made him turn.

She rose and took a step toward him, her hand beginning to rise as if she intended to touch him. He couldn’t allow it. One touch and he would shatter completely.

“Good.” He turned away. “We’ll leave at first light. Now go to bed and get some rest.”

It was so quiet Jonah thought he simply hadn't heard her leave, but long before the twisting pain eased in his chest, he heard the rustle of her robe. She had left him for the last time.

~■~

"Do you have your boarding papers?"

They'd finally arrived in London. Soon, Emma would board the ship to America and this nightmare would be over.

"Yes."

He knew she did, but he needed something to say. Their silence was driving him mad. He and Emma had never had a problem finding things to say to each other, but suddenly neither of them had the ability to carry on a conversation.

"Wait in the carriage while I find the captain and someone to take your satchels."

"Thank you," she said and Jonah left Emma behind while he went to find Captain Russell.

You can survive this, he told himself for the hundredth time since they'd left Glassborough Estate yesterday morning. *You can survive losing her.*

Jonah found Captain Russell and his wife and made arrangements for a deck hand to carry Emma's satchels to her cabin. He gave his old commanding officer the small cache of money and elicited a promise that he wouldn't give it to Lady Emmaline until they were well out to sea. When he was assured that she would be well taken care of on the journey to America, he returned to the carriage.

"Your cabin is ready," he said as he helped her to the ground. "Captain Russell and his wife will take care of you. Go to either of them if you need anything."

Emma nodded, then reached for his hand.

"Jonah, I'll never forget what you've done for me." A tear rolled down her cheek.

"Emma—"

"Don't, Jonah. We've said everything we need to say."

Jonah swallowed hard, then looped her arm through his and walked her to the ship. Captain Russell and his wife came down the gangplank to meet them.

"If anything goes wrong, send word. I'll find a way to get you the help you need."

Lady Emma gave him a sweet smile tinged with sadness. Her lips trembled as she whispered her reply. "I know you would, dear Jonah. But I'll be fine. Truly I will. Now please don't wait here until I'm gone. You have business to attend to." She laid her hand on his arm, and when it lingered there a moment longer he covered her hand with his. Their eyes met and held, and Jonah felt the urgent need to beg her to stay.

But she saw it in his eyes and gave a slight shake of her head.

Jonah nodded. With killing regret he forced his hand to ease away from hers, yet she didn't move. As her eyes communicated one last farewell, she raised her hand and cradled his cheek. Her thumb stroked the long scar, sending a powerful message of love and acceptance that nearly took him to his knees.

Jonah swallowed hard, choking off the pleas that threatened to escape his lips.

And then her hand slipped away. She turned toward the ship. Toward freedom. And left him standing there with a heart drowning in its own tears.

Somehow Jonah managed to find his carriage through eyes clouded with loss. It wasn't too late yet. He could abandon everything he knew and go with her. He knew she'd let him, though she never would have asked. All he had to do was—

Jonah braced his hands on either side of the carriage door and waited the interminable minutes until he heard the scraping sound of the gangplank being pulled from the dock. Heard Captain Russell bellow the final orders to set sail. Heard the ship's warning bell ring for a final time. Then, heard the sounds of the sleek ship moving away from the dock. Small waves slapped against the wharf as the vessel was released from its moorings and the sounds quieted as the ship slid out into the channel.

Jonah stood as if he'd turned to marble, unable to move or feel. His fingers clenched the sides of the carriage so tightly he couldn't force them to release the wooden frame. If he didn't move, maybe he could pretend Emma wasn't really gone. Maybe he could pretend he could turn around and she'd be there. But, he knew that was impossible.

At last he forced his fingers to release the side of the carriage and moved to step inside. He had one foot on the step and one foot still on solid ground when a voice spoke to him.

"Excuse me, my lord. But I seem to have missed the ship on which I intended to sail."

Jonah turned and his gaze rested on the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen—a sight he thought had been lost to him forever.

“Emma?”

“Yes, Jonah,” she said, then took her first running step toward him.

Jonah met her with his arms open wide. He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her with the immense depth of passion that defied words. He kissed her once more, then deepened his kiss to emphasize how much he loved her.

“I couldn't leave you, Jonah,” she said when he lifted his mouth from hers. “I love you. My life wouldn't be worth living if you weren't a part of it. I would miss you too much.”

“Dear God, I didn't know how I'd live without you, Emma. Truly.”

He kissed her once more, then looked into her eyes. “You know that I will never betray you. I promise you will never regret marrying me.”

“I know I won't. Just as you will never regret marrying me. Even if I gave everything away and we had to live like two foolish paupers.”

“We'll be the happiest paupers ever,” Jonah whispered.

He kissed her once more, then she looked up at him and their gazes locked.

“Take me home, Jonah.”

Chapter 11



But he did not take her home.

Not immediately, at any rate.

Securing a special license to marry had been easier than either of them had anticipated, but it still took several days. In the intervening time before the marriage ceremony could take place, Emma had stayed with Mrs. Russell's housekeeper, and Jonah lodged in a rooming house across the street from Captain Russell's modest home. For five days the space between her door and his was the furthest they would allow themselves to be from one another. The world fell away, and nothing held their interest except the opportunity to know each other better. When at last they arrived back at Glassborough, they were truly husband and wife. The marriage license they had now was completely authentic.

The next few days were the happiest of Emma's life. Jonah had made her his wife in every sense of the word and for the first time ever she knew what it was to be truly loved. Her days were charmed and her nights were filled with wonder and amazement.

"Did you sleep well, my love?" Jonah asked when she entered the breakfast room the third morning after they were married.

Emma felt a blush rise in her cheeks. "Yes, very."

Jonah stood while she filled her plate, then helped her to a chair next to his. She'd put more food on her plate than she usually took, but she was starving. It wasn't until she looked at the food on Jonah's plate that she realized she had nothing compared to the mounds of eggs and bacon and ham and potatoes on his plate. She laughed aloud, loving the very sight of her husband eating his fill.

She and Jonah ate in companionable intimacy, sharing unspoken words with smoky glances. They had thoroughly discussed preparations for a small

reception they were to hold the next afternoon to celebrate the announcement of their marriage. All was in readiness. The few landowners and village dignitaries they had invited had replied positively. Now it seemed to Emma that all they had to do was get through today.

After Jonah's valet—who also served as footman—removed their breakfast plates and refilled their cups, the newly wed couple were alone in the room.

Emma watched with curiosity as Jonah's face clouded. When his hand began to fidget nervously with the table linen, she could no longer wait for him to speak.

"Is something wrong?" Emma asked, praying there was not.

Jonah cleared his throat. "Your stepbrother has found your horse."

Emma felt the blood rush in her veins, setting her heart throbbing and her head spinning.

"My horse! Dear Lord, I...I had thought it would have been safe to sell." She stood looking frantically for a way out of the trap Jonah had unwittingly set. It should have been safe, since she had expected at the time to be a thousand miles away before anyone discovered the horse.

"Didn't you tell them—"

"Yes, luv, I told the buyer not to take the horse out for two weeks, until after the previous owner had left the area. He seemed to understand my feeble story that it might upset you if you were out and about and saw someone else astride your favorite mare."

"Then why would he—"

Jonah rose to stop her pacing and caught her gently by the arm.

"He didn't, luv. But his young son didn't get the message. He hitched the horse to a cart to deliver eggs to his customers in town. And Marquardt saw them. You can hardly blame the man for recognizing such a grand animal."

Emma slowed her breathing, trying desperately to feel the calm that Jonah attempted to induce in her. His hands ran softly up her arms, leaving a trail of warm comfort that she wanted badly to absorb. But she could not.

"Jonah, what will we do if he finds out where I am?"

"He's already found out, luv. He—"

She stumbled out of his grasp. "How do you know that?"

Emma watched in horror as Jonah pulled a note from his waistcoat pocket.

"Because he wrote me saying he would be pleased to attend our Sunday reception."

"He what!"

Emma clung to her husband as he pulled her into his arms.
“He’s coming, luv. I’m so sorry. But he’s coming. Tomorrow.”

~■~

Emma dressed carefully for the Sunday reception. She had widened the pocket opening of her peach gown to accommodate the small handgun she intended to carry. But when she practiced drawing it out, the small pistol continually snagged on the fabric until she replaced the pocket lining with a soft leather insert. Now she could draw it smoothly ten times out of ten, though she hoped she wouldn’t need to draw it even once.

Jonah stepped into her dressing room, for a moment casting away Emma’s dread as she took in his handsome presence. Even in his pre-war fashion he cut a stunning figure. He came close to draw her to him, even as he dropped his head to touch his forehead to hers.

He spoke again the simple words that had calmed her each time she’d wakened in the night shivering.

“Remember that you’re my wife now. Nothing can harm you.”

She relaxed her hands and brought them up to cup his face.

“I’m your wife now. Nothing can harm me.”

She rose on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, but he stopped her and dropped his forehead to hers.

“All drama aside, are you happy?”

Emma smiled at the question and looked into Jonah’s eyes. There was no fear, no worry. She saw only a reflection of her own happiness.

Her answering smile widened his grin as she moved a finger to trace the rough planes of his face. She loved it when he smiled, and kissed him softly. “And there, sir, is the answer to your question.” She kissed him a second time, drawing her hand through his hair to press him closer. She wanted him to feel the full spirit of her reply.

“We have the upper hand, you know.”

“Hm?” Emma had been fully distracted by his kiss and failed to understand his statement.

“We’re in the right here, my love. And we’re on our own territory. In our own house. Gerald will be the one who is out of place. We’ll show him the license and he will not be able to deny its authenticity. He’ll leave in a huff and we will put it behind us and enjoy our guests. Right?”

“Mm. Yes. Right.”

With a sudden shift, Jonah sat on the bed and lifted her onto his lap. “Let’s tell Mrs. Jefferies we’ll take a light dinner in our room tonight, shall we?”

“You’re like a little boy who can’t wait to get out of his church clothes,” she chided.

He kissed her gently. “After this afternoon’s folderol I thought you might want me all to yourself.” He sneaked another kiss as she gaped at his risqué statement.

Emma leaned away. “*Folderol*? Celebrating our marriage is *folderol*?”

She swatted him playfully on the arm and pulled him with her into the hallway. “Then let the folderol begin!”

As they reached the bottom of the staircase Emma was about to capture Jonah for another kiss when Jonah stopped her.

Carter stood in the center of the foyer, clearly distraught. “My—um, my lord?” His voice sounded strangely different. As if it contained a warning.

Out of instinct, Emma took Jonah’s hand. They turned toward Carter, and Emma’s heart catapulted in her chest when she saw the man crowding past their agitated butler.

“Oh my, sister dear,” the man sneered. “You’ve been here all the time, have you? With that look of domestic tranquility you possess one might almost believe you *are* married.”

Gerald Marquardt stepped across the vestibule, treading on Jonah’s newly polished Italian slate with his muddy riding boots and bringing with him all the menace Emma had hoped to evade.

“But you see, I happen to know that no such marriage has been solemnized in the entire County of Essex in a fortnight.”

Jonah drew Emma close, then stepped in front of her to protect her.

“I’m sorry, my lord,” Carter said. “I told the gentleman you were entertaining privately, but he refused to leave.”

“That’s alright, Carter. We’ll see to our guest. But do let Fielding know that I wish him to join us.”

Emma felt a tremor of alarm. Fielding was the guard. Why had he allowed Gerald to come into the house unescorted?

If she hadn’t been looking his direction, Emma might have missed the signal Carter gave in return. Something had happened to Fielding. They were on their own.

Carter hung back, looking as if he hoped to be swallowed up by the very wall near which he hovered. It was just the three of them in the foyer now.

Emma stared at the man who had tormented her every day since her father had died. There was a wild look in his eyes as well as a gray paleness to his features. No doubt from too much drink and a lack of proper meals. If she had to find a word to describe how he looked, it would be *demented*.

“If you’ve come to see our marriage license, *brother*, we’ll be happy to produce it for you,” Emma said.

“Ha! Do you think I would simply take your word that you were married, *sister*? Do you think I would trust any flimsy document you tried to foist upon me to support your...your *fictitious* marriage?”

Emma bristled at his gleeful gloating.

“No. I had no delusions that you would be so trusting.”

Jonah placed his arm around her waist and led her toward his study.

“Please,” Jonah said as he beckoned to Gerald. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll get our marriage license.”

“So you insist upon carrying out this ridiculous charade, eh? Well then, by all means. Lead the way,” Gerald said with a sweeping bow.

When they entered Jonah’s study, Jonah led Emma to the chair behind his desk. But she couldn’t sit. She need to stand in case it proved necessary that she retrieve her pistol.

“You may have a seat if you’d like,” Jonah said, pointing to one of the wing chairs some distance from Jonah’s massive oak desk.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Lord Glassborough? Get me off guard, relaxed, at a disadvantage. So thank you but no. I prefer to stand.”

“As you wish.”

Jonah stepped around Emma and opened the right-hand desk drawer.

“Be careful,” her stepbrother said in warning. “Only remove a paper, Lord Glassborough. Nothing more.”

Emma turned toward her stepbrother and froze. He had quietly moved closer, and held a wickedly long knife-blade in his hand.

Jonah gingerly removed the formal-looking document from the top drawer and held it out to her stepbrother.

Emma enjoyed seeing the look of surprise on her stepbrother’s face when he viewed the marriage license with its official seal of London’s Registrar General. She took pleasure in knowing he never expected her to have married. And most of all, she took pleasure in seeing his reaction when he realized he’d never get so much as a shilling from her.

“I don’t believe this,” he muttered beneath his breath, then snatched the paper from Jonah’s hand and studied it. “You bitch!” he bellowed in a voice as hostile and vile as she’d ever heard from him. “You cunning bitch! You said you’d never marry! You swore it!”

Her stepbrother wadded the marriage license in his fist and threw it across the room. Then, before Jonah could react, Gerald lunged at Emma with a wild slash of the knife.

In a flash she understood his next move. If she were alive, marriage was the key to unlocking her wealth. But in the case of her premature death?

Emma darted backward just in time, even as Jonah leaped forward to protect her. The tip of the blade sliced through Jonah’s jacket and reached the flesh of his chest.

“Run, Emma!” Jonah yelled as he fell to his knees and clutched his hand to his chest. “Run,” he gasped.

Emma froze momentarily when she saw the look of shock and pain on Jonah’s face. It was the terror she heard in his voice that jolted her into action.

“Jonah!” she yelled. Deep red blood streamed through her husband’s fingers.

Fear grabbed hold of her and refused to release her. She wanted to run to Jonah, but knew it was useless to interfere. She was no match against Gerald.

Just when she thought that Gerald was satisfied with only wounding Jonah, he lifted his arm again to stab a final blow into Jonah’s chest.

“No, Gerald! No!”

Her cry stayed his arm for the moment she needed to draw the pistol from its leather pocket. Her trembling fingers grasped frantically at it, finally losing their hold and letting the weapon tumble to the floor. She stared in horror as the gun skittered across the rug, just out of her reach.

“You may have been married for a few days, woman, but you’ll be a widow the rest of your life.”

Emma saw the knife in Gerald’s hand begin its downward thrust and knew she had no time to consider what she had to do. She lunged forward, landing on her knees as she swept up the small handgun and fumbled it into both hands. Instead of weakening her position it seemed to give her an even more secure stance. Using both thumbs, she drew back the hammer and fired.

Her stepbrother’s eyes opened wide in disbelief as he lowered his gaze to the scarlet blossom on his waistcoat. “What have you done!” he whispered,

and clamped his hand over the wound. “What—” he muttered, then fell to the floor.

Emma trembled with shock as she saw the man who had tormented her so relentlessly suddenly collapse. The knife tumbled from his hand and lay harmlessly on the floor, no longer a threat to anyone.

The man who had wielded it a moment earlier was dead.

Emma rushed to Jonah and knelt beside him. “My love, are you alright?”

“Yes, Em. I’m fine.”

But Emma knew he wasn’t. She placed his head in her lap and brushed the hair from his forehead. “Go for a doctor!” she yelled when Carter tumbled into the room. “And find someone to carry his lordship to our chambers.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Emma clutched at Jonah and focused on his alarming loss of blood.

“Don’t worry so, Em. I’m fine. It’s only a flesh wound.”

“Don’t you dare leave me,” she ordered through the tears that filled her eyes.

“I have no intention of...leaving you. I just...found you.”

Emma leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. “I killed him,” she moaned.

“To save my life,” Jonah answered, which, when he put it in those terms, made her actions seem less horrific.

Emma gave him up reluctantly when Carter arrived with help to carry Jonah up the stairs. He helped her remove Jonah’s jacket and blood-stained shirt. A knot clenched in her stomach when she saw the wound. Jonah’s flesh was torn for several inches and would need to be stitched.

The doctor came shortly after, and when he finished sewing Jonah’s flesh and left, Emma was at last alone with her husband.

“Here,” she said, refilling Jonah’s glass and handing it to him. He drank most of the liquor, then closed his eyes.

“Are the authorities here?”

“No, my love.”

Jonah finished the liquor in his glass. “Then what’s all that noise?”

“Um,” Emma said, “the, um, guests. I’ll send them away, Jonah. You need to sleep.”

Half the countryside had responded to her invitation and were now assembled in the formal drawing room. On any other day she would have been thrilled with the success of their first reception. But not today.

As she watched her husband, she realized he could barely keep his eyes open. “Rest now, Jonah. I’ll go down to make sure our guests are greeted and sent on their way.”

Emma rose and walked to the door.

“Wait,” Jonah said as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. “I’ll need a clean shirt, waistcoat and jacket.”

“But you can’t—”

Jonah reached out and captured her hand. “I can. And I will.” He drew her to him. “What I will not do is wait one day longer to introduce the world to my beautiful wife. Now be a good girl and get my clothes.”

Chapter 12



The days following the reception were surreal. Emma made a point of asserting herself in the community, and in no time was receiving invitations to afternoon tea. When the first invitation for the two of them arrived, Emma knew it was the beginning of a new and wonderful life for her reclusive husband.

Jonah was slower to believe their welcome would last, but when the men at the *Pig and Ale* drank a round to him and his new bride, he began to allow himself a degree of hope.

Three weeks after the Sunday reception, Emma wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him good morning. “I received a letter from Mr. Jordan yesterday.”

“Mr. Jordan?”

“My father’s solicitor. He congratulated me on our marriage and informed me that according to my father’s will, I am now in possession of the money Father left me in trust.”

Jonah huffed in surprise.

“I didn’t think you would receive your dowry until you reached the age of twenty-one.”

“Twenty-one, or when I married. Whichever came first. Since I never intended to marry, I thought I would be forced to wait until my birthday finally arrived. But now we are set, aren’t we, my love?”

“The money is yours, Em. I’ve told you before, I don’t want it.”

“I know you don’t.” She kissed his cheek. “And I love you for that. But a certain portion of it is yours.”

“Emma, you know I can’t—”

She pressed two fingers against his lips to silence him.

“Until now that money has been a beacon for every rogue in the country to make my life a living hell. But now,” she felt her face soften and welcomed the peace that flooded her. “—now it has a chance to work for good. For you, for me, for us, for everyone who makes Glassborough their home. You *must* see that Jonah. You really must.”

She tightened her hold on him and he held her closer, pressing his silence between them.

“I’ve seen your plans, Jonah. You intend to fix the tenant homes on the estate and bring in even more tenants. You’ve figured out how to make Glassborough a profitable farm. You’re going to plant crops on any lands that will grow them, and place cattle and sheep on any pastures that won’t. You’re going to raise barley that you’ll sell to the brewery that makes such fine wine and ale, and see what would have to be done to increase the brewery’s supply so they can sell it all over England. Such goodness, Jonah. Such honorable plans. And I refuse to let you lock me out of it.”

“I won’t, luv, and I have it in hand. Really, I do.”

He seemed so earnest that Emma wondered if she had a right to assert herself into his plans. But it only took a moment’s reflection to know she was right.

“But yours is a ten-year plan. And much of it can’t be started for another three years until you’re on a better footing.”

She caressed his hand. “Jonah, think of the lives that can be changed if your plan starts now. The people whose lives depend on your success. The children who might have a chance at school instead of laboring in the fields with their families. Their lives could start getting better *today!*”

Jonah turned his face toward her and saw her eagerness. She had somehow righted all the things that had gone topsy-turvy in his world. Before she came into his home, he’d been a drowning man, flailing about for a way to save himself and his estate. And it was Emma who had thrown him a lifeline. Emma who had extended her hand to focus him on a future that had promise. Like a level-headed partner she was showing him a way forward that he could not hope to achieve on his own. But *with* her—

“Well, you’ve made a compelling argument, my dear. But it’s an awful lot to consider.” He sat up straight and pulled a studious look across his face. “Perhaps if I had a partner I might be able to manage all the work.”

He heard her gasp and couldn’t help the grin that seemed to spread wider across his face by the second.

“A partner,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he whispered back. “Know where I might find one?”

Now she was beaming as broadly as he was. “A partner! Yes! Oh, Jonah, we’ll be partners!” She grasped at his hand and stood up, dragging him with her.

A moment later she thrust out her hand.

“Let’s seal our partnership with a handshake,” she said. “Isn’t that how it’s done?”

Jonah just gave a slow shake of his head as he closed in to take her in his arms.

“Sorry, partner,” he whispered. “I prefer to seal it with a kiss.”

Epilogue



“Are you sure there will be room for so many?”

Jonah gazed around the ballroom that had never looked better thanks to his wife’s keen instinct. Glassborough Manor had not housed a ball in his adult lifetime. Now Emma couldn’t wait to banish that dubious record.

Emma laughed. “I will be terribly disappointed if it’s not the crush of the decade.”

“Surely some of them won’t come,” he argued.

“Won’t come? How could they not?” Emma gave him her most glorious smile. “They admire you, darling, whether you know it or not. Have you forgotten that in the past year, you’ve turned Glassborough into a thriving estate? Tripled our staff? That you’ve given jobs to many of the locals who desperately needed work, and that you purchase lumber and farming supplies from the local merchants, causing their profits to soar? That we purchase the food that goes on our table from the shops in the village? And,” Emma continued, “that you were very generous to the church when they asked for donations?”

“My partner is the one who was generous. I wasn’t even aware the reverend was taking collections for the orphanage.”

“You would have been had you listened closer when Reverend Smithey made announcements after Sunday service.”

“It’s difficult to listen when all the parishioners sitting around me are staring at my wife.”

“Nonsense.”

Jonah rolled his eyes then looked at Emma. She seemed a little pale tonight. “Feeling alright, Em?”

“Yes, I’m fine. It’s your babe that’s letting me know I’ve been on my feet a little longer than usual today.” She patted her stomach that had not yet begun

to show evidence of the coming joy.

“Then I will make sure you spend the entire evening seated.”

“You will *not*. You are going to dance with me at least a hundred times. I didn’t hire a London orchestra for the evening so I could sit on the side and listen. I’m going to dance like I haven’t had the opportunity in years.”

“Do you miss living in the City?”

“Heavens, no! I wouldn’t be anyplace but here. With you.”

“I love you, Em,” Jonah said.

Emma leaned on the tiptoes of her most comfortable dancing slippers and kissed him on the cheek. “You have to, sweetheart. You’re stuck with me whether you want me or not.”

Jonah returned Emma’s kiss and tried desperately not to leer. “Oh, I want you. Have no doubt of that, lassie.”

She gave him a playful swat of the glove she had still to put on. “What a cheeky thing to say to your business partner.”

He took her breath away when he pulled her suddenly into his arms. Jonah lowered his head until his lips brushed hers and her eyes fluttered closed.

“I want you a great deal. Wife.”



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About Laura Landon

Laura Landon enjoyed ten years as a high school teacher and nine years making sundaes and malts in her very own ice cream shop, but once she penned her first novel, she closed up shop to spend every free minute writing. Now she enjoys creating her very own heroes and heroines, and making sure they find their happily ever after.

A vital member of her rural community, Laura directed the town's Quasquicentennial, organized funding for an exercise center for the town, and serves on the hospital board.

Laura lives in the Midwest, surrounded by her family and friends. She has written thirty Victorian historical romances, all of which are selling worldwide in English, one in Japanese, and several in German. Two are Scottish historicals.

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