

# Chapter 1

## Death to All Roses

“I’M DONE FOR.”

*Snip.*

“He’s sealed my fate—the wretch!”

*Snip. Snip.*

“No help for it now. I’m going to be an old maid, and that’s all there is to it.” She paused and stared at the murderous shears in her hand. “Eighteen—ha! I may as well be thirty-five. On the shelf forever.” Kate clipped off a dying rose and caught it in her handbasket. “An ape leader,” she said accusatorially to the shears.

The gardening shears had the good grace to remain mute.

“A spinster.” She grimaced at the word. This time a perfectly formed pink rose just beginning to open fell prey to her clippers. She’d come to the garden intending to remove the dead roses, but it seemed only fitting that the annoyingly perfect bud should be cut off before its prime. That’s what Greyson had done to her. Ruined her life. Cut her down before she had a chance to bloom.

*The cad.*

*Snip.* Another fresh bloom met its doom and fell into her basket.

Kate’s grip on the pruning shears tightened. Her teeth clamped together, and she went at it. Her blade lopped heads off roses with the fury of a soldier in battle. Along with the withered flowers that deserved removal, she beheaded ripe full blooms and newly opened blossoms—cut them all off.

Why should they have a chance to bloom? She didn’t.

Kate came to an unopened white bud and stopped. Something about the bright green orb with fresh white petals innocently peeking out of the seams reminded her of her younger sisters.

Her shoulders slumped, and the snippers drooped in her hand. She couldn’t bear the

thought of her sisters never having a chance at happiness. It was Greyson, the *high and mighty* Lord Colter, who ought to be cut off. How dare he renounce their engagement? And in public no less.

*The scoundrel.*

The blackguard jilted her. What's more, he had the unmitigated gall to call her a shrew. *A shrew!* The audacity.

And he did it in front of everyone—the *entire village*.

It would've been humiliating enough if he'd said it on the street. But did the black-hearted devil choose so private a place as a village street? Oh, no. Lord Colter was not nearly so considerate as that. He hurled his shaming diatribe at her squarely in the middle of the ballroom floor, in full view of everyone at the Clapsforth Assembly ball.

How could he? How could he stop dancing and read her a piece of his mind *during* a cotillion? The other dancers halted in their tracks. Musicians screeched to a halt.

*Everyone heard him.*

*Everyone.*

Not a soul in Clapsforth missed his scathing condemnation of her. Lord Colter roared, nay, he bellowed loud enough for folks in the next county to hear. And what did he say? *Oh my!* What fine saintly words they were. Kate shook the trimmers at the rose bush to emphasize the point.

*Fine, indeed.*

“Perfectly awful words.” Kate jabbed the blades at another hapless rose. Apparently, Lord Colter would rather rot in hell than suffer ten more minutes in her company. The tip of her shears trembled slightly. No one would want her now. Not after he'd exposed her character to half the world.

*Was she really that terrible?*

*Curse her tongue.* Why must she always say exactly what she was thinking? Papa had cautioned her a dozen times to mind her tongue, but he must shoulder at least part of the blame because Papa always laughed at her witticisms. *Laughed.* Great galloping belly-shakers. When he really ought to have scolded her.

*Snip.*

The decapitated blossom dared tumble off the edge of her basket and fall to the ground.

Imagining the ruddy thing was Greyson beneath her foot, Kate stomped on the fallen rose. *Hard.* So hard, that one of the thorns pierced her slipper. She hopped back from the assaulting flower, her chest heaving with indignation.

“Enough!” she shouted at the universe. Kate grabbed a handful of the wretched blooms in her basket and hurled them into the air. She wished they were spears, and that they would fly straight into Greyson’s cold rotten heart, piercing his, the way he’d pierced hers.

Except that wasn’t true.

Kate was made of sterner stuff than that. He hadn’t broken her heart. Not really. Oh, she’d liked him well enough. Of course, she did. Why else would she have agreed to marry him? They’d been friends since they were children, and although she loathed admitting it, looking at him always made her stupid heart beat just a wee bit faster. After all, he had a pleasant enough appearance, if one liked that revoltingly masculine type. His jaw was a trifle too imperious for her taste. And that overbearing Roman nose--why would anyone like a nose like that? Not to mention his height. How many times had she strained her neck to look up at him? And that says nothing about his incessantly mussed up hair.

She was immune to his charms.

Kate took a deep breath. All in all, her heart remained intact. That discovery surprised her. Rather than being broken, it seemed to pump stronger than ever. No, it was her reputation the villain had shattered.

And for what? Some trifle.

What had she said that set him off? Some perfectly innocent remark. She could scarcely remember what. She may have mentioned he looked as if he hadn’t shaved that morning. Oh, yes, that was it. And on the next turn of the dance, she asked if he didn’t think others might consider him careless of his appearance.

For that one small comment, which was a perfectly sound observation, he had scolded her roundly in front of the whole world. Accused her of merciless hen-pecking.

*Hen pecking.* Nonsense. She was merely concerned with his well-being. He had no call to turn on her like a great growling bear. Yet he did. And she’d jolly well like to rip out his gizzard.

Kate flung another handful of spears at her invisible foe. Wishing one of the stems would fly the short distance to his neighboring estate and poke him in the eye. Instead, one of the thorny stems stabbed her finger.

*Drat.*

She sucked the puncture and surveyed her handiwork. Petals and flowers lay strewn across the green lawn, like petals thrown for a bride.

*A bride.*

Petals would never be scattered for her.

*Not now.*

*Not ever.*

Her hands drooped to her sides. The basket slid from her arm. Kate's throat tightened, and she felt an utterly foreign sensation—an uncomfortable quickness of breath and a quivering in her chest. Water welled up in her eyes. Then it happened. Something that never happens. Something she forbade herself to do ever again. Not since her mother died had Kate given way to a single tear.

Not one single solitary drop. Not ever.

But now, unless she missed her guess, she was about to cry.

*Oh no.*

*She couldn't.*

*She mustn't.*

Nevertheless, water leaked from her eyes, stinging, blazing an acidic trail down her cheeks. Her nose was stuffing up, and . . . *sweet lambs of spring!*

There was more.

A keening noise burst from her throat, and she couldn't stop it. The more Kate tried to hold it in, the more fiercely it threatened to explode into an ear-shattering wail.

Battle lost—she dropped to her knees and let herself sob. Kate's shoulders shook in uncomfortable heaves.

She dropped to her knees, set the basket on the ground, and one by one, she gathered up all the poor spilled roses. Weeping tears over every murdered bloom, she carefully scooped up each fragile velvety petal and placed them in her basket.

Each one a tragedy.

Each one a lost hope.

When her tears finally subsided, Kate blotted her eyes on the corner of her apron. She fanned the air with her hand to cool her cheeks. She mustn't allow her sisters to see her like this. *Weak*. She was not weak. She couldn't afford to be weak.

In fact, her sisters would need to remain brave and stalwart themselves if they hoped to weather this public indignity. Her humiliation cast an ugly shadow on all of them.

There was no time to dwell on her lost future. Kate had to think of her sisters. She would need to demonstrate courage so that her sisters would be able to navigate the tricky waters ahead and secure suitable husbands for themselves. She set the garden tools by the back door, slipped off her pattens, and tread quietly through the kitchen,

heading for the parlor, considering the future of each of her younger siblings.

Dear sweet Nora was next to Kate in age, she would turn seventeen next quarter day. A pretty girl, but too quiet, always preoccupied, worrying about something or someone else, completely oblivious to the yearning looks she received from the young men in their village. Now that Kate's life was a hopelessly closed book, she would turn her attention to finding a suitable match for Nora.

Then there was Sadie.

Kate sighed. Sadie was fifteen-going on a tempestuous twenty-one and more trouble than a handful of kittens. Willful little minx, Sadie churned out mischief faster than fresh cream could be made into butter. Kate would have her hands full keeping Sadie in line.

And, of course, there was the youngest—Mama's surprise baby, Matilda. *Tilly*. Precocious little Tilly, only eleven, but cleverer than all of them put together. Kate had been there at her birth.

In those last dreadful moments, as blood poured from Mama's body and her skin turned whiter with each passing second, she had pressed the wee little bundle into Kate's arms. "Take care of her, my darling. I'm so sorry. So very sorry." Mama's eyes had flooded with grief. "Take care of your sisters. But through it all, my dear, you must remember . . . remember to . . ."

*To what?*

Kate would never know what else her mother had wanted to say. She had reached for Kate's cheek, but Mama's fingers had only fluttered briefly against her skin, like the faint brush of a falling leaf.

Her mother's passing left a hole in Kate's heart. A dark, frightening hole—if she were to admit it. Kate seldom risked even a glance in that direction. The hole grew into an ever-widening chasm that no one could fill—not her father, not Lord Colter, nor her sisters. It was a swirling sea of anger, and pain, and resentment, and a hundred other sins.

Kate shook her head at her errant thoughts.

*Mustn't dwell on all that.*

What right did Kate have to be angry? She had nothing to resent. Dying wasn't her mother's fault. It was a common enough thing to happen in childbirth. *There*—that was a blessing she ought to count. As an old maid, Kate would be spared the dangers of bearing children.

She dragged her fingers along the wall on her way to the parlor. Nearly to the door,

she slowed her steps, having heard her sisters talking conspiratorially.

“This won’t work.” Nora sounded upset. “He’s not going to eat it.”

“Did you put enough bacon grease on it?” Tilly plunked F sharp on the pianoforte.

*Bacon grease?*

Kate stopped just outside the door, trying to figure out what they were up to before entering.

Sadie answered Tilly’s odd question. “Of course, I did. I even stuck a piece of ham between the pages.”

“Well, it’s not working,” Tilly complained.

“I can see that,” Sadie snapped. “Ralphie, no! Don’t lick it. Take a bite.” The aged spaniel whined gloomily in response. “Come on, old boy,” she coaxed. “Eat it! There’s a good lad.”

Kate heard the familiar swish-swish of her sister’s slippers scuffing against the floorboards. Nora must be pacing, a nervous habit she’d acquired of late. “Maybe we should just hide it.”

“We can’t,” Sadie argued. “We need a plausible excuse for why Kate can’t read it.

Hearing her name, Kate leaned closer to the doorway. *What can they be doing?* If she barged in now and demanded to know what they were up to, she knew from experience the three of them would shut their lips up tighter than clams at high tide.

“I don’t think Ralphie likes paper.” Nora sounded distressed.

“Nonsense. He used to chew up our books, didn’t he?” Tilly was right, although how she could remember that many years back mystified Kate.

“That was when he was a puppy,” Nora argued. “It’s been years since he chewed up so much as a slipper.”

“Open wide, Ralphie.” Sadie stopped trying to sweet-talk their faithful spaniel and, despite the dog’s whimpers of resistance, took a firmer approach. “Do your duty. This is for Kate.”

The pianoforte bench scraped against the floorboards, and Tilly pattered over to the dog. “Maybe he objects to Aunt Honore’s scent. Cousin Fiona warned that our aunt is a rather unreliable lady, and I hear dogs are sensitive to such things.”

Nora sighed softly. “*Unscrupulous* might be a more apt description of our dear aunt’s character.”

*True*, Kate silently agreed. She’d read the society columns, and heard accounts from other cousins. Aunt Honore ran with an infamously rackets crowd. Cousin Fiona was too kind-hearted when it came to their aunt. Lady Alameda was notorious. Nevermind

that her friends were the crème de la crème of high society, wherever Aunt Honore went, a scandal was sure to follow.

“That is putting it mildly.” Sadie’s wry tone echoed down the hall. “The woman is mad as a hatter. Which is precisely why we can’t let Kate read this letter.”

*Letter?*

*A letter to me!* Kate had heard enough. Her sisters were trying to destroy something that belonged to her. She took a step, prepared to burst into the room, but stopped when Nora said, “I daresay, dear Papa might have meant well, but he should not have told his sister what happened to our Katie.”

Kate reeled back and pressed against the wall. He wouldn’t have, would he? Did he tell Aunt Honore about Greyson jilting her? No! Why would he spread the tale of her humiliation? *Oh, Papa! How could you?*

“Agreed. I don’t know what he was thinking to suggest Lady Alameda should take Kate to London. The very idea is unthinkable.” Sadie sounded ridiculously pious and grown-up, a perfect imitation of the gossipy matrons of Clapsforth.

Kate tapped her fingers against the wall. *Was it unthinkable?*

Her little sister continued pontificating. “Lady Alameda isn’t a fit guardian. Everyone knows that. Especially not with Kate in her present state of mind. You saw her in the garden. She’s lost control of her senses. And we all know the London season is full of pitfalls around every bend. Without proper guidance, our Katie is bound to make a mess of things inside of a week.”

*Proper guidance?*

*Ha!* Kate’s fist turned into mallets. What did Nora know about London? Nothing except what she read in the papers. London was . . .

*London!*

Far away from here.

Kate pushed away from the wall. She could escape Clapsforth. What did her sisters think they were doing meddling with her future? Kate spun into the room with all the fury of a typhoon.

Nora jumped back from the hearth, where she and Sadie had been kneeling beside Ralphie. She snatched her embroidery up from a chair and held it in front of herself as if that frail bit of cloth and needlework might protect her.

Sadie tugged the letter out of Ralphie’s mouth and hid it behind her skirts.

“There you are!” Tilly smiled as if she was genuinely happy to see Kate, then her eyes widened. “Uh-oh. You overheard us, didn’t you?”

*Out of the mouth of babes.*

Kate was too furious to answer. Instead, she thrust her hand out to Sadie in a wordless demand for her rightful property.

Sadie grimaced, but slowly acquiesced, handing over the crumpled parchment dripping with bacon fat and dog drool. She had the audacity to point at Tilly and say, “It was her idea.”

“True.” Tilly nodded unapologetically. “We had to do something.”

Kate managed to speak through gritted teeth. “Get. Me. A. Cloth.”

Sadie raced to the kitchen to retrieve a cleaning rag. Kate shook the tattered sodden letter at Nora. “*You should’ve known better.*”

Nora bowed her head, slid into the chair, and hunkered over her embroidery, stitching intently.

After Kate mopped Ralphie’s drool from the parchment, careful not to smear any more of the ink than what was already splotched and smeared. She smoothed out the tooth marks and deciphered what was left of her aunt’s mangled missive. Although barely legible, it appeared to be an answer to her prayers.

She glanced up at her sisters. “You didn’t read it all the way through, did you?”

“The first part was alarming enough.” Sadie sniffed and puckered her lips as she always did when justifying her rash behavior. “We thought it best to destroy it before—”

“Before you knew what the rest of it contained?” Kate shook her head. “It’s a lucky thing Ralphie didn’t eat it. Lady Alameda is due to arrive on the morrow.”

“What?” Nora swallowed. “She’s coming here?”

“Yes. So, we’d best prepare, don’t you think? Our aunt, a countess, plans to take luncheon with us and then remove with me to London for the season.”

*Away from this wretched village, and as far away from Lord Colter as possible. And, for once in my life, away from my responsibilities.*

“As you consider yourself so capable of providing guidance where it is needed. . .” Kate glanced pointedly at Nora. “In my absence, I shall leave the running of father’s household to you.”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“Oh, I think it is. I daresay, since you consider yourself more capable of navigating the hazardous waters of London than I am, you ought to be able to handle things here in quiet little Clapsforth.”

“I never said . . .” Nora’s mouth opened and shut with possible retorts, blinking helplessly as if she didn’t know which way to leap. “I didn’t mean . . .”

Sadie's lips remained buckled tight. She sat petting Ralphie while carefully contemplating the stones on the fireplace as if they hadn't been there since Queen Elizabeth's reign. *Scheming, no doubt.*

It was Tilly who finally found a clear-headed voice. "You can't leave us."

The child's brow crumpled, and, for a moment, Kate felt her escape narrowing down to a pinhole. But then Tilly lifted her chin to a shockingly stubborn angle. Her eyes fairly burned with willfulness, even her blonde hair seemed to glow. "I won't let you."

"Try and stop me." The words sprang from her mouth before she'd thought them through, but if it came to a war of wills with an eleven-year-old, Kate was determined to win.

## Chapter 2

### The Aunt Cometh

THE NEXT DAY, Kate worried her sisters might be right. Going to London with Aunt Honore could prove a disaster. The prudent thing would be to stay home. Realistically, though, would stumbling into a new catastrophe be any worse than her current situation here in Clapsforth?

*No.*

*Ergo, it is worth the risk.*

Now then, back to business. Kate tapped her cheek as she went over her plans for luncheon with Aunt Honore. She'd asked the cook to make partridges, a rare treat in their household. There would be a starter of *Soupe à la Flamand*. Not Kate's favorite, but creamed vegetable soup seemed more sophisticated than their usual fare of simple chicken and potato broth. Kate planned to serve lamb with curried peas and rice, alongside the roasted partridges. There would be fresh bread, of course, and wine. They would conclude the meal with a fine Stilton cheese and baked pears. It was extravagant for a midday meal at their house, but by Lady Alameda's standards, it would undoubtedly appear humble. Alice, their housemaid, would have to serve. There hadn't been time to hire a footman.

Kate untied her apron and smoothed out her day gown. Now, where had her sisters

gotten off to?

The scamps claimed they were taking a stroll to visit Mr. Treadwell, the village bookseller, and meekly promised to return in time to greet their aunt. Kate wasn't a fool. They were up to something.

*No matter.* The table looked beautiful, and Kate's trunks were packed and ready to load onto her aunt's coach. Whatever nonsense her sisters were plotting, she wasn't going to let it stop her from leaving. This opportunity was her only chance at being anything other than her father's spinster housekeeper. Speaking of father, it was time to extract him from his study.

Kate tiptoed in and cleared her throat. "I expect your sister to arrive at any moment, Papa."

He lifted one finger. "Yes, yes. I'll only be a moment longer." He sat at his desk, bent over the account books as always. In all likelihood, Sir Linnet was the most frugal squire in the whole of England. Kate respected his attention to detail. It served them well and kept his mind occupied. Although he accompanied his daughters whenever duty required, he didn't have much use for society and had never shown a desire to remarry.

At last, when he finally emerged from his study, he came and stood beside Kate. "Ah!" He clapped his hands together. "The table looks splendid. Your aunt will be impressed."

"Thank you, Papa. I hope it is fine enough for her." Kate doubted it. Aunt Honore was frightfully rich and accustomed to the luxuries of town. All of her life, Kate had heard tales of the excesses and wonders of London. She could scarcely wait to see the place for herself.

Papa put his arm around her shoulders. "Your Aunt Honore won't care so much about the finery. It's your company that will interest her. Mind you, not in the ways you might expect. When it comes to people, my sister is . . . um . . . how shall I put this? Something of an original in her preferences. Watch your step with her, child, and your, er, your tongue."

"I will, Papa."

He clasped Kate's shoulders tighter for a moment, let go, and immediately set to pacing exactly the way Nora does when she is distressed. "Oh, bother. Now that I consider the realities, I'm wondering if this is the right thing to do. I'd thought after the, uh . . . after *the incident*, I had thought you might be more comfortable in different surroundings." His thick gray eyebrows pinched together in worry.

She gave his sleeve an affectionate tug, straightening his cuff. "You were quite right,

Papa. I'm looking forward to a change of scenery. Visiting London is just the thing. I shall ask Aunt Honore to take me to Astley's and the opera. Perhaps she'll take me on a tour of London Tower." It relieved Kate to see his face relax.

He chuckled at her enthusiasm. "Doesn't seem much like you, Katherine, to play the tourist. But if it makes you happy, then all is well and good." He glanced out the window. "Ah. Here come your sisters dilly-dallying up the road. Unless I miss my guess, they're up to something."

"Agreed. The little minxes look far too cheerful." Kate crossed her arms like a general surveying the battlefield. "Don't let it worry you, though. I'm equal to whatever they've got tucked up their sleeves."

He chucked her under the chin as if she were twelve again. "That's my girl. Always with your chin up and your face to the wind."

The way he said it made Katherine feel as if she were braving a terrible storm or some deadly disease. Kate was merely facing the pitying looks of her neighbors, and the patently false commiserations from the other girls in the village. Not to mention, the prospect of her impending spinsterhood.

It could be worse.

*Much worse.*

She could be a destitute crippled orphan with a bad case of the plague. Oh, yes, things could always be worse. That was her new motto in life. Whatever happened from here on out, she would remember her troubles could be worse.

Sadie skipped past the dining room looking altogether too innocent, and Tilly followed her wearing a positively triumphant expression. Nora shuffled in last. "The table looks beautiful." She muttered in greeting but avoided eye contact.

Kate's arms remained crossed. She called after them. "Do hurry and change out of your street clothes. Aunt Honore will be here any minute."

An accurate prediction. Not five minutes later, a large black coach, pulled by a matched team of four, with the unmistakable De Alameda crest emblazoned on the side, clattered up the road to the house and stopped. The footman climbed down from his perch, lowered the coach steps, and opened the coach door. Kate watched from the window, holding her breath. Their notorious aunt stepped out, garbed entirely in funeral black as if a newly made widow. "I thought her husband died years ago?"

"He did," Papa answered, sounding as baffled as Kate.

"Did someone else in her family die recently?"

"Not to my knowledge." Papa rubbed the back of his neck. "But with my sister,

there's no accounting for her attire. All that black"—and there were yards and yards of it—"may mean someone dear to her died, or it might mean she's simply in a mournful mood." He swallowed hard. "As I said, watch your step."

He continued to mutter his reservations about sending Kate to stay with his impulsive sister even as he strode to the door to offer the lady a warm greeting. Arm in arm they came into the sitting room, and he did not stand on ceremony. He smiled broadly and gestured to his daughter. "This is my Kate."

Kate curtsied with as much dignity as she could muster, but upon rising her aunt embraced her as she would a beloved niece, rather than a girl she'd merely patted on the head on two other occasions. "My poor girl, *poor* dear," Aunt Honore gushed. "You must be beside yourself. What a terrible tragedy. My deepest condolences."

"For . . . ?" Surely, her aunt wasn't referring to the 'incident.' *Except she was.* The pity in her aunt's expression confirmed it.

"Oh, *that.*" Kate stepped back. "I assure you, Aunt. I am not indisposed in the least." She waved away the lady's sympathy as if it were an annoying gnat. "On the contrary, may I offer *you* my condolences? You are in deep mourning. Pray, who passed from this mortal coil?"

Lady Alameda huffed loudly. "Mortal coil, *shmortal* coil." She yanked off the black headpiece that held her mourning veil, and tossed it onto a chair. "I wore all this on your account." She wheeled on her brother. "You said she was distraught. Falling to pieces—those were your exact words."

*Falling to pieces?*

At that revelation, *two* indignant women glared at Sir Linnet.

He tugged at his collar. "I . . . well . . . I thought she seemed very angry—"

"Angry?" Aunt Honore's voice rose an octave. "Well, of course, she was angry! Why wouldn't she be? If he'd said those things to me, I'd have shot the blighter. Had I known *angry* was the sentiment of the day, I'd have worn a red dress. Anger calls for something with flair. Something spicy. Not these blasted widow's tweeds."

"Honore! I'll thank you not to curse in my house. There are tender ears about." He gestured to the other girls who were creeping down the stairs, no doubt curious as to the cause of all the shouting.

"I didn't curse."

"Blasted is a—"

"Phfft! I can see you're as stuffy as ever. Why is it that all my brothers turned out to be such prudes? Our father would roll over in his grave."

Papa groaned. “Our father was a tyrant. Not half as tolerant as you always insist. You only think so, because he doted on you. The rest of us—”

“Stop! I’ll not hear another word against him.” She glanced at the simple furnishings in the room. You’ve done tolerable well for yourself. Not bad for a third son. At least, I’m not bumping my head on the ceiling as I did at your nephew’s hovel. Jerome is a vicar, did you know?” Before Papa could answer, she rattled on. “And a perfectly bore. Never thought one of us could turn out so dull. Father would . . .” She pursed her lips at her brother. “Oh, never mind.” Her attention darted away from Sir Linnet and landed with a hard squint on Kate’s sisters. “Stop skulking on the stairs you three and come down here where you can be properly introduced.”

Nora, Sadie, and Tilly scurried obediently into the parlor and lined up for inspection like charges before a governess. Honore snapped at her brother. “Well, don’t stand there like a great lump. Introduce me.”

He exhaled loudly. “You’ve met them before. Last summer to be exact, at Valen’s wedding.”

“Ages ago. You can’t expect me to remember that far back. Who is this one?” She pinched Nora’s cheek. “A bit pale. You read too much, my dear.”

“This is Nora, and she’s not pale.” Papa put his arm around Nora’s shoulders.

“Nora?!” Lady Alameda completely ignored his scold. “Dear sweet Cavendish, did you name her after me? Oh, dearest brother, had I known—”

He rolled his eyes heavenward. “Nay Honore. The child’s proper name is Lenora.”

“*Lenora?*” Her nose scrunched up as if she smelled something foul. “What kind of name is that? And she’s still too pale.”

Before he could find the words to respond, she moved on to Sadie. Lady Alameda circled, looking down her nose at the girl, appraising her with all the tact of a horse trader. When she grasped Sadie’s chin, Kate half expected her to inspect the condition of her sister’s teeth. Instead, the lady stepped back and uttered satisfied grunt. “This one has promise. This is the one you ought to have named after me. Oh, yes. Look at the mischief in her eyes. Fire and spit. I like this one.” She let go of Sadie’s chin. “A pity about the red hair though. Perhaps we can do something about that.”

Sadie took exception to this criticism. “It’s not red, my lady. It’s auburn.”

Aunt Honore’s brows lifted skeptically. “Call it what you will, my girl. Red is *très gauche*. Out of step. It needs remedied.”

Tilly stepped forward in Sadie’s defense. “You cannot improve upon God’s handiwork.”

“Is that a dare?” Lady Alameda frowned at Kate’s youngest sister.

“No, my lady. It is merely a fact.” Stouthearted little Tilly stood her ground, despite Countess de Alameda’s imperious demeanor.

They stared at one another for a tense overlong minute. Papa cleared his throat and was just on the verge of intervening, when Lady Alameda spoke her mind. “You’re trouble, aren’t you?”

To which Tilly merely lifted one of her eyebrows.

“Humph. Of course, you are, but at least you’ve got backbone. I’ll give you that much. Whatever possessed you to speak out of turn? Haven’t you ever been told that children should be seldom seen and *never* heard? How old are you, anyway? All of ten years?”

That miffed Tilly. “Twelve!”

“Ha! Oh, well then. As ancient as that.” Aunt Honore grinned. “Cavendish, I take back what I said about the other girl. What’s her name? The redhead.”

“Sadie.” Tilly answered before her father could.

“Yes, Sadie. That fits.” She dismissed their middle sister with a flick of her wrist and bore all her attention on Tilly. “It’s not her who ought to be named after me. It’s you. You’re the one.”

Tilly, the little imp, curtsied properly enough to please a queen. “Matilda Honore Linnet, at your service, my lady.”

“Ah-ha. I was right. My namesake. Perfect.” Honore clapped her hands. “I shall mold you in my image.”

“You’ll do no such thing.” Her father groaned. The rest of them exchanged anxious glances. *Honore* was not Tilly’s middle name.

“Everyone calls me, Tilly.” She grinned several shades too innocently at Honore’s delight and her family’s consternation, and Kate began to wonder if she might have underestimated her youngest sister.

\* \* \*

The maid, Alice, broke through Kate’s stunned silence. She hesitated in the parlor doorway and in a shaky voice said to Kate, “Dinner is ready, Miss.”

Relieved to have a diversion from Tilly’s tomfoolery, Kate gestured toward the dining room, “Shall we?”

Papa offered his arm to Lady Alameda and led the countess in to the seat of honor at their humble table.

Throughout the meal, Kate felt as if the sword of Damocles hung above her head. She expected her sisters to spring their trap at any moment. Except they didn’t. They

remained on their best behavior. Their *very* best. No soup spilt. No peas flung across the table. All three girls ate with the dignity befitting a squire's table. They were perfect angels.

And the more perfectly they behaved, the more polite they were to their guest, the more convinced Kate became that they had something sinister planned. A live frog in the baked pears. Poison in Aunt Honore's wine. Maybe they planned to drug the coachmen. They were going to do something to foil Kate's trip to London. She knew it.

Instead, they politely asked Aunt Honore about London. What events did their aunt plan to attend? They begged her to tell them about the famous personages she knew. Had she supped at Carleton House with the Prince Regent? Oh, yes, of course, she had, and Honore was more than happy to regale them with stories of how the rich and famous spent their evenings. Some of her stories were less than suitable for their young ears. Her father kept clearing his throat and giving his sister pointed glares.

Kate paid little heed to her aunt's tales. She was on high alert for worse things than the shocking behavior of some members of the *Beau Monde*. She kept a watchful eye out for tacks hidden in the chicken curry, or glue on her aunt's spoon. She had to be ready for anything.

When everyone except Kate laughed at Honore's anecdote, her aunt turned to her with a vexed frown. "You're awfully quiet. Are you ill? Or are you always this subdued?" She said *subdued* as if it were contagious, like the pox.

Sadie laughed at that. "*Subdued*? Our Kate? You must not have heard about her dreadful temp—"

"Sadie!" Nora glared, and Sadie promptly clamped her lips shut.

Kate responded to her aunt's inquiry. "I'm sorry my lady. I am merely eager to be on our way to London. I've never been. Your descriptions are so vivid. I'm all agog."

"*Agog*, are you now? Hhmm." Honore tapped the side of her wine glass with her fingernail.

When the sword swinging above Kate's head finally did drop, it caught her entirely off guard. She noticed Tilly glancing out the dining room window and her eyes seemed to alight on something of interest. That should've served as a warning. Unfortunately, Kate's back was to the window, and it would've been rude to crane her neck around like a goose to see what her sister found so intriguing.

Thus, it wasn't until a knock sounded on their door that she felt the sword thump her rudely on the head. From the dining room she heard Alice open the door. "Afternoon, m'lord. I'm afraid the squire and all the young ladies is sitting down to eat."

A painfully familiar voice accosted her ears. “That’s all right. They’re expecting me.” “I’ll show myself in.” His boots clicked against the floorboards.

*Lord Colter.*

*Greyson!*

Kate drew in a sharp breath and grasped the edge of the table. The dreaded sword seemed to stab straight down through her stomach.

Alice dutifully trailed behind Greyson. “Shall I set another place then, m’lord?”

“No need.”

*No need, indeed.*

By then, Lord Colter was already in the dining room, all horrid six feet of him.

“Good afternoon, ladies. Sir Linnet.” He bowed graciously, and skimmed their faces until he landed on hers and grimaced. Kate couldn’t tell if it was a reaction to the horror that must surely be written on her own features, or if it was merely his discomfiture at seeing her again.

Her father scraped back his chair and stood. Surprise rendering him as speechless as Kate felt. Her throat tightened with unspoken words. Luckily, she still gripped her table knife and she considered letting it do all the talking for her.

Father was at a complete loss for words. “Uh . . . Lord Colter . . . we hadn’t expected to see you. That is to say—”

Kate found her tongue. “What in blazes are you doing here?”

Lord Colter glanced uncertainly at Sadie and Tilly before answering. Tilly countered with a triumphant grin. He straightened to his full overbearing height. “I came to apologize.”

*Apologize?*

*What?*

That stumped Kate. She hadn’t expected it from him. And, devil take his boyishly disarming curls, those ridiculously blue eyes, and sun-kissed cheeks—smooth shaven for once—it was too little, too late. “You ungentlemanly cad! A fat lot of good an apology will do now! Here. With only my family to hear it.”

“Katherine!” her father cautioned, but she wasn’t done.

“As far as the rest of the village is concerned, you’ve painted my character in the worst possible light. You tossed me onto the dung heap. You left me no future except that of an old maid. An old maid—consigned to leading apes into hell!”

Her chest heaved with indignation. Her skin blazed with heat. She knew she must be a bright shade of red, but oh, it felt good to hand him a piece of her mind. So good that

she let her tongue dance forward, doing one of those Spanish stomping dances. “If you were half a gentleman, you would take out a notice in the village newspaper. Although, now that I think on it, even that would be a useless gesture. It’s doubtful even an apology in print would repair to my good name. People might think I wrote it. No sir, I do not accept it. It’s too late. Your apology, such as it is, is of no use at all.”

His altogether too handsome face narrowed to a storm. “Of course not! Nothing I do is ever good enough for you, is it?” The heat in his words made her blood boil and the knife in her fist tremble. How dare he act as if he were the one wronged.

Oh but he did dare, and he said more, “I came here, on bended knee, to tell you I’m sorry. And what do you do? You scrape me up one side and down the other with that wicked tongue of yours.”

“Oh, you *naughty* young man.” Aunt Honore tittered. “I rather think you might enjoy a scraping of that sort.”

“Honore!” Papa frowned at his sister. “I warned you about tender ears.”

His scold only made things worse. Greyson’s cheeks flushed scarlet. “That’s not what I meant. I meant—”

“Everyone knows what you meant.” Kate relished his embarrassment, but would rather he didn’t repeat his thoughts about her character. “Even now, your opinion of me is quite clear. You would rather rot in hell than suffer ten more minutes in my company. That’s what you said at the ball, and obviously it is still your attitude.”

“Don’t throw my words back at me.”

She lifted the knife, not on purpose, merely because it was handy, and at least a little bit threatening. “I can think of other things I’d prefer to throw.”

He didn’t look scared at all. “Put down the knife, Kate. We both know you wouldn’t really use it on me.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?” She hefted it, testing the weight in her palm. He was right, of course, but she wanted him to worry just a smidge.

“Throw it.” This sage advice came from Aunt Honore. “Don’t let him talk to you like that. You’re no weakling. Throw it.”

Honore’s bloodthirsty taunts made Kate’s anger tuck back into the dark pit in her soul. Her aunt sounded like the Romans in the colosseum must’ve when they shouted for gladiators to kill their opponents.

Kate took a deep breath and calmly set the knife down. “Why are you here, my lord? Clearly, it is not to apologize. For that was the most pathetic apology I have ever witnessed.”

“Hardly an apology, at all.” Aunt Honore seemed annoyed that there would be no blood spilt. “And I never saw this *bended knee* he mentioned. Did you? Poorly done, young man. There was no heart in it.”

“He meant it!” Sadie blurted, and then drew back and meekly added, “I’m certain he did.”

Tilly sat forward, nodding. “He does. This was all his idea.”

Lord Colter glanced appreciatively at his supporters.

“His idea, *indeed*.” Kate leaned both hands on the table and glared past the boney partridge carcasses at all three of her sisters. “*They* put you up to this, didn’t they?”

Sadie and Tilly squirmed. Nora flushed and looked away.

Greyson’s features cooled, and he took a step in her direction, his hand out. “They merely came to me with their concerns, and I fully concur. You cannot go to London with Lady de Alameda. Her reputation proceeds her. Begging your pardon, my lady. I mean no offense.” He turned an earnest face to Aunt Honore, far more earnest than the half-baked apology he’d offered Kate.

Aunt Honore sniffed as if mildly wounded. “I’m surprised you even know who I am.”

“Everyone who’s *anyone* knows who you are, Lady Alameda.”

That seemed to gratify her somewhat.

“Lord Colter, at your service.” Greyson inclined his head, obviously remembering they’d not been formally introduced. But when he straightened, he resumed his lecture on propriety. “Surely, you realize, my lady, the circles you run in are not exactly suitable for an innocent such as Miss Linnet?”

“Are you saying the Prince Regent, ruler of our fair island and half the world, is not suitable company for my niece? I should think saying so borders on treason, young man.”

“I—no! That’s not what I meant.”

“I should hope not. It would be a pity to watch you hang, although on second thought—”

“Enough!” Kate stamped her slippered foot and crossed her arms. “I shall decide what circles are suitable for me, and who ought to hang for it.”

Lord *I-Know-Everything*-Colter turned back to her. “Oh, do be sensible, Katherine. What young lady decides such things for herself? This is London we are talking about, and you know nothing of that world.”

Aunt Honore guffawed at that. “And, of course, you are worldly-wise, being all of *what?* Twenty years of age.”

“I am *one* and twenty, my lady. Only three years away from my majority, and more importantly, I have been to London.”

“One and twenty, you say? So old. You’re practically in your dotage. Oh yes, I daresay, you must know *everything* there is to know about *the beau monde*.”

Greyson straightened and pushed up on his toes, as if adding an inch more to his six feet would make him wiser. “Mock me if you will. But I am sensible enough to know that Miss Linnet ought to stay here, in Clapsforth, where she can be kept safe.”

“*Safe*.” Lady Alameda chuckled to herself as if he’d said something mildly humorous. She turned to Kate. “I’ve always thought safety was over-rated. Is that what you want, my darling? To be *safe* and snug in this little village for the rest of your days?”

Kate’s lips parted as she hunted for the answer.

*What did she want?*

Safety wasn’t it, but neither did she want to endanger her future. Greyson stared at her, awaiting her response. Her sisters stared, too, and even her father. They were all leaving the decision to her.

It struck her then, with more force than the sword of Damocles, that she’d rarely had the freedom to choose anything in her life. In point of fact, she hadn’t actually chosen Lord Colter. He’d chosen her. She certainly hadn’t *chosen* to raise her younger sisters, or to keep house for her father. Apart from what dress she would put on in the morning, what had she ever chosen for herself?

Aunt Honore edged into her thoughts. “Surely, dearest, you’re not going to take counsel from this fellow? You do remember he is the same young man who publicly jilted you last Thursday.”

Aunt Honore may as well have catapulted a boulder at Kate. Her words hit the mark.

That horrid night flashed through her mind again. How numb she’d felt after his public castigation. She would never forget the way blood had seemed to drain from her head, leaving her faint, even as the fires of humiliation still scorched her chest. It had taken every ounce of her strength not to collapse under the realization that her life had just ended. Instead, she had turned, white-faced, and walked silently out of the assembly rooms, staring straight ahead into the blackness of the night and her future.

Kate dropped into her chair with a thud, only able to nod.

“None of that matters.” Greyson rushed to her side. “Be sensible, Kate. Think of your sisters. You can’t go haring off to London—”

*Her sisters.*

*Sensible Kate* had been watching over them for the last twelve years. She was tired of

thinking of her sisters. Tired of being sensible. “Why do you care? You broke our engagement and you said—”

“Words spoken in haste.” He pressed his lips together before continuing, but then he barged straight forward into the truth, as was his way. “Thing is, Kate, you were needling me at every turn. *Do this. Don’t do that. Go ask poor old Miss Agnes to dance. Must you drink so much ratafia? Stand up straighter. Don’t laugh so loudly.*” He stopped recounting his grievances and lowered his head for a moment. When he looked up again, melancholy darkened the blue of his eyes. “All that badgering is wearing.”

*True.* All of it was true.

He hadn’t said any of it accusatorially. He didn’t even sound angry. She was grateful for that. It could’ve been worse. He didn’t even mention the more disparaging things she’d said. After all, she had teased him about his dancing skills, and jested about the way his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as it squeezed over his too tight collar. And then the fatal remarks about his beard shadow.

Kate studied him for a moment. He still smelled faintly of his shaving soap, fresh and clean, and yet in places his beard hairs were already peeking through his cheeks and chin. She smiled at the way his hair fell in careless waves through no artifice on his part. She was jealous of his long eyelashes and the stark blue of his eyes, although she didn’t envy the permanent lump on his nose. She remembered the day he’d fallen out of a tree and broken it. He’d been no older than Tilly.

Greyson was a good friend, maybe one of her closest. Why then had she kept badgering him with petty grievances ever since they’d gotten engaged.

Then, it hit her squarely between the eyes . . .

“You’re right.” Kate bowed her head. “I *was* needling you. And for that I am truly sorry.” She also understood exactly why she’d been needling him. For the first time in what seemed like a hundred years, Kate had a moment of perfect clarity.

She knew exactly what she wanted.

*Freedom.*

Freedom to do *what*, she had no earthly idea, but she knew she’d never find it here in Clapsforth. She turned to her aunt. “If you are still willing to have me, I would very much like to come to London with you.”

“No!” Greyson stood. His words shot out with too much force. “No. You can’t go. I forbid it, Katherine.”

She smiled serenely at him. “I believe you’ll find, my lord, that I can. You surrendered the right to forbid me *anything* when you broke off our engagement.”

“I take it all back.” He dropped down on one knee. “Don’t go, Kate. Stay. Marry me!”

Kate liked him better in that moment than she had her entire life. In fact, she realized she might actually love him. Sadly, not enough. She gently cupped his cheek and shook her head. “I’m sorry. Now, if you will all excuse me, I must go and make certain my trunks are packed and ready.”

She stood and felt genuine sorrow when he dropped his head into his hands and sagged over his knee.

Aunt Honore smiled wickedly.

## Chapter 3

### The Trouble with Sisters

KATE ALMOST ESCAPED the dining room.

“Wait.” Nora’s voice stopped her. If it had been anyone else, she would have kept going. “Please, Kate. I would like to come with you.”

There was something painfully earnest in Nora’s plea. The girl so rarely asserted herself that it took Kate completely by surprise. The look on her sister’s face tore Kate’s resolve to shreds.

Nora was beautiful in a way that would’ve enthralled great painters. She had an otherworld quality that went far beyond angelic, and yet she was completely unaware of her beauty. On those rare occasions when Nora drew upon her transcendent appeal there was little anyone could deny her.

“Please?” she asked again, with a kindness that pierced Kate’s heart. Seeing she’d won Kate’s silent consent, Nora turned to Aunt Honore and gently redirected her request. “May I accompany my sister? I will happily sleep at the foot of her bed, and I promise not to be any trouble.”

Aunt Honore’s lips parted in astonishment. She stared at Nora as if she had never seen the girl before. She probably hadn’t, not really. Kate was a little surprised to see

that even the cynical countess was not immune to her sister's otherworldly allure.

"Dear heavens, I had no idea you were so . . ." Aunt Honore blinked and struggled to find words. "You *aren't* pale." She looked away and seemed to regain some of the customary hardness in her own features. "Very well. Yes, you may come."

Honore still seemed half mesmerized as she reached for her wine glass. "Although, I suspect you will be a *great deal* of trouble. Bound to leave a trail of broken hearts all across Mayfair." She tossed back a fortifying gulp of wine.

Sadie jumped to her feet. "Me, too! I want to come. I'll sleep on the floor, too."

"Good gracious, child. Don't be ridiculous. No one sleeps on the floor at my house, not even the scullery maid."

"Excellent!" Sadie grinned. "I shall be happy to sleep in a bed."

Aunt Honore sputtered. "Wait. What? That's not what I—"

"We should all go." Tilly stood and grabbed Sadie's hand. She dimpled up at Aunt Honore. "You wouldn't want to leave your namesake behind, would you?"

Honore's mouth fell open. "*All* of you?"

"Girls!" Papa smacked the table, rattling the silverware. "Stop begging favors of Lady Alameda. Anyone would think you were raised in Spitalfields." He glared at Sadie and Tilly. "What can you be thinking, behaving like this? Placing demands upon your aunt. Anyone can see she is not up to the task of watching over *all* of you. That would be asking far too much for a woman of her age—"

"A woman of my *what*?" Honore squawked, setting her glass down with a plunk.

"But Papa, I wasn't begging." Tilly stuck out her chin. "I was merely stating a fact." She edged closer to Sadie. "Wherever my sisters goeth, there shall I go also."

Honore looked aghast at her brother. "What is it with your youngest and her obsession with biblical edicts and annoying *facts*?" She whipped back to Tilly. "If you're going to be quoting scripture, my girl, you can no longer be my namesake."

Tilly primly tilted her head to her aunt. "I assure you, my lady, it wasn't scripture."

Not scripture, *exactly*, but close enough. Kate narrowed her gaze at her baby sister. The child's prevarications were beginning to stack up at an alarming rate.

Honore sniffed skeptically. "I distinctly heard you say the word 'goeth,' and that sounds awfully biblical to me."

"I was merely paraphrasing a young lady named Ruth."

"Oh, well, that's all right then." Lady Alameda forgave Tilly and turned her ire back on her Papa. "Listen here, brother dear, I am decades younger than you. *Centuries* younger! How dare you call me a woman of my age?"

At this juncture, Lord Colter helped himself to Kate's vacated chair. As he watched matters unfolding like a bad play, his countenance wavered between confusion and astonishment. He also helped himself to the remainder of Kate's wine, slugging it back like brandy, and promptly refilling the glass.

"You know perfectly well you are only five years my junior." Kate's father wearily corrected his sister. "And yes, I dared call you a woman of your age, because you *are* a woman of your age. What other age can you possibly be?"

"Any age I wish!"

"I see. You rule over *time*, now, do you?" He let out an exasperated huff. "Don't spout nonsense. Aside from that, you're missing the point, Honore. It would be too much for you to care for all four of my daughters. You couldn't possibly manage it."

"Why not?" she snapped. "*You* see to their care. And I'm not nearly as decrepit an old goat as *you* are." She pursed her lips indignantly.

Papa wasn't an old goat. That was unfair. Kate noticed Tilly about to dive in and defend their father. Luckily, Sadie noticed, too, and delivered a sharp nudge and quick shake of her head, warning Tilly not to interfere. Sadie must've realized that the more Papa fought to keep them from going, the more Aunt Honore insisted there was no reason they shouldn't. Once Tilly grasped Sadie's strategy, a slow half-smile curled impishly into her left cheek.

Kate sighed. They were right. Papa's well-meaning arguments were turning the tide as surely as the moon. She felt her tiny hope of freedom ebbing out to sea.

"For your information," Papa blustered. "I'm in fine fettle—hale and hearty." He all but beat against his chest to prove it. "Look at you, Honore. You're skin and bone. You stay out gaming and dancing your way across London until the cock crows. You drink too much, and haven't a care in the world. You're not used to tending to anyone's needs except your own. Unless I miss my guess your most bothersome task is visiting the dressmaker and standing still for a fitting."

Honore rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly. I don't stand around for fittings. They have my measurements on file."

"There! You see. You've made my point. It's no stroll in the park looking after four daughters. It requires self-sacrifice, fortitude, and watchfulness. You've no idea the burdens you would be taking on. There's endless squabbles and . . ."

Kate gaped at her father. Unaware he felt she and her sisters were such a heavy burden. How could it be, when she had been doing all in her power to help?

He continued to elaborate on what an onerous task it was to look after them, and

ended rather bluntly. “You can’t do it, Honore. You can’t! You’ve no experience, and you don’t have the strength of character the task requires.”

Her chin shot up exactly the way Tilly’s does when she’s in a stubborn mood. “You’re wrong, brother dear. I raised my stepson, Marcus. Not only that, I’ve had the care and keeping of *several* nieces.”

“Two.” He thrust out two fingers, but tucked his hand away when his sister swatted at it. “And those two girls were very well-behaved young ladies, not like this band of scamps.”

*Scamps?*

*Is that what he thinks of us?*

Aunt Honore waved his criticism away with a haughty sniff. “You’re forgetting I took Fiona under my wing. Members of the *Beau Monde* dubbed her Lady Fiasco. The gel caused a mishap at nearly every gathering she attended. If I can handle her—”

“*You didn’t*. That’s the rub. Everyone heard about what happened to the poor girl on your watch.”

“Oh pooh!” Lady Alameda sat back and crossed her arms. “It all landed sunny-side up in the end, didn’t it? She married well and has two brats of her own last I heard.”

“No thanks to you.”

Honore glared something fierce at Papa, and Kate wondered if any minute her aunt’s nostrils might start spewing steam. “You *impervious* old buzzard! You have no idea what I did, or didn’t do, for that girl.”

“You mean imperious, don’t you?” Tilly had been reading too much of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary.

“Same thing.” Aunt Honore snapped.

“Not really—” Tilly got a hard elbow to the ribs from Sadie.

Papa crossed his arms looking every bit as stubborn as his fire-breathing sister. “I won’t allow them to go.”

“You most certainly will! You wrote to me. *Remember?* Begging me to come to your aid. Here I am, rendering assistance.”

“I asked for your help with Kate. Only Kate. Not the whole passel of them.”

“*Passel*. Tch, tch.” She wagged her finger at him. “And you have the gall to scold me for my language. That’s not a very affectionate term, Cavendish. Mind your manners.”

“Passel means—”

Papa’s hand lifted to stop Tilly’s explanation. Then he dropped it to the table. The fight went out of him. “What’s the use? It’s not my intention to argue with you, Honore.

I'd lose anyway. It was always the way between us, wasn't it?"

She sniffed, and the barbs in her tone vanished. "Think of it like this, I shall be sparing you the cost of at least two London come-outs."

Kate watched her father sit back and calculate in his head the cost of taking his daughters to London for the season. Plus, it would be more than one season if any of them failed to secure husbands on the first go. The expenses for housing and gowns would be enormous, which went a long way to explaining why he'd invited Lady Alameda to help Kate in the first place. Since her engagement to Lord Colter had gone up in a blazing puff of smoke, Papa was trying to give her a way to find happiness.

Aunt Honore knew Papa better than Kate had guessed. Bringing up the expense of a London season was a brilliant ploy. His sister knew precisely where to stab the needle, and tie the knot in her argument. She tied the knot in her argument with a cutting snip. "Surely you don't expect all four of your daughters to marry backwater boys, like this one?" She gestured at Lord Colter.

Greyson raised his head from his third glass of wine. "I'll have you know I went to Eton and Cambridge. I am not a backwater boy."

"Phfft." She dismissed him with a wave of her jewel encrusted fingers, and turned to Kate's sisters. "Do you girls want to come with me to London, or not?"

Sadie and Tilly nodded like eager woodenheaded puppets. Nora edged closer to Kate, looking more and more uncertain about the way events were unfolding.

"Splendid." Honore clapped her hands together. "Go on then. Go pack your things." She shooed them away. "Quickly. I intend to leave in half an hour."

Sadie and Tilly tore out of the room. Nora trailed after them. Kate leaned against the doorframe. Well, that was that. She wouldn't be free after all. There could be no doubt as to who would actually be looking after her sisters, and it certainly wouldn't be her aunt. She emitted a low moan.

Papa shook his head and pressed his hands flat against the table. "No good can come of this, Honore. You're doing what you always do, behaving like a petulant child."

Honore rose and shook the crumbs out of her black silk skirts. "Thank you, Cavendish. You always know the exact right things to say."

"I don't see how you can manage this. You don't have a motherly bone in your body." He sounded genuinely worried.

"Perhaps not." She smiled unabashedly. "But you'll be pleased to hear I have several *aunt-ly* bones."

"*Aunt-ly*?" He sighed. "There's no such thing, and you know it. You'll be hauling the

girls back before the week is out.”

“We’ll see about that, shall we?” His sister kissed the top of his graying head.

“Do a favor for me, will you?” He caught her hand, and asked earnestly, “At least, bring them back alive.”

To that, she merely laughed, shook him loose, and strolled out of the room. “Now where did my coachmen and footmen wander off to? The kitchens, I suppose.”

Her father slumped in his chair. “This is a disaster.”

“You won’t get an argument from me.” Lord Colter pushed back from the table and strode to Katherine, pinning her in the doorway.

He stood too close.

So close, she could almost taste the wine on his breath. He towered over her staring down at her with the oddest expression. She wasn’t sure if he intended to shake her, or kiss her. *Or maybe both.* He leaned closer and she began to think he intended the latter. She hoped so. It would be exceedingly pleasant to kiss him farewell.

They’d kissed before. *Twice.* Once, on the occasion of their engagement. It had been quick and furtive. The first time, however, had been . . .

*Quite lovely.*

She’d been only fourteen. Greyson had returned home from school for the winter holidays. There’d been a glorious snowfall the Saturday after Boxing Day. Naturally, half the village gathered on the hill north of the river to do a bit of sliding. Kate took a bad tumble into the trees and Greyson came running to her rescue, laughing when he found her buried in the snow. He pulled her out, dug out her makeshift sled, and found her bonnet that had torn off in the crash.

It was when he stood brushing snow out of her hair and off her shoulders, that they’d realized they were all alone in the trees. His hands had slowed and drifted down her arms. She would never forget the eager way his mouth covered hers, almost as if he wanted to devour her. She often thought back on that day, wishing she’d known how to respond. Despite her inexperience, their first kiss had left her breathless and exhilarated. When he’d finally let go of her, they’d stared at one another in surprise. After that, she’d never looked at him the same way.

And now, as Greyson stared at her, drawing nearer and nearer, she softened her mouth, *hoping.* He clasped the sides of her face in his palms and she was sure he would kiss her.

Except he didn’t.

He stared at her mouth as if he was angry at her lips. Or was he hungry for them?

No, that was definitely anger. “This isn’t over, Kate.”

