

Lucky in Love
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Lucky in Love

Chapter 1

July 17th 1814 Norfolk, England

The setting summer sun glinted off golden fields of harvested corn as the pure country air was polluted with tobacco smoke and masculine laughter. The small wooden hunting lodge, perched on the edge of a green rolling hill, looked down over a patchwork landscape like an oversized gothic scarecrow. The country folk leaving their fields rolled their eyes and sighed in irritation at the blight; as if they needed another reminder that all the land as far as the eye could see was owned by the Earl of Warenne. He was a decent landlord, but he was irritatingly thorough. When the young man decided to build a wall for one of his tenants, if he didn't show up to watch it being built he was sure to arrive later to count the number of stones or bricks to make sure the builder had used a good number. With stones the Earl preferred odd numbers and with bricks he preferred even. He wasn't a penny-pincher; he was thorough. It gave him supreme satisfaction to know that everything in his little Kingdom was exactly as it should be. If his mother had survived she'd have slapped him and told him to get drunk and leave the peasants to steal a few stones before they rioted, but she'd died before his twenty-first birthday. He was king of his proverbial castle and there was no one with any influence to interfere with his thoroughness or point out how irritating he could be. His friends called him Lucky. His enemies called him Pinhead. They all agreed the seventeenth Earl of Warenne lived a charmed existence. He'd inherited his fat mother's handsome features and his ugly father's straight brown hair and athletic build; life always worked out for Edmund de Warenne.

After a long day of shooting pheasants, Edmund was lying on the gentle slope of the hill surveying his kingdom through a cloud of sweet tobacco deaf to his friends' banter. It was the near perfect end to a near perfect day. The only thing missing was an adoring female to rub his sore feet and warm his bed after dark. His latest mistress had recently tired of his thorough love making and given him the boot. He wasn't upset; she'd saved him the expense of buying her a final token of his unwanted esteem, but it left him thinking it was time to find his countess. He was only twenty-six, but eleven of his known male de Warenne ancestors had died before the age of thirty. To die young would be disappointing, but to die without an heir would be the gravest negligence he could commit. He'd writhe in eternal torment if he couldn't complete his *raison d'être*. He had to have a legal heir before the age of thirty, but that meant he needed a wife. The thought didn't make him break into a cold sweat or shiver with loathing. Marriage was merely another item on life's list to cross off as satisfactorily completed. Those men who'd failed to acquire a pleasant companion had been careless. Choosing a cheerful bride would be as easy as buying a prize milch cow. By the end of the next season he'd be a married man. He'd send his London housekeeper a note to prepare his townhouse for the matrimonial hunt. He slotted the thought neatly into his mental 'Do tomorrow morning' drawer and tried to start a list of young ladies who might qualify. "Lucky!" He turned to smile at his two friends sitting at a small table holding three glasses and eight partially empty bottles of port. "Doodle has come up with the perfect wager. We need you to witness it."

"Phipps doesn't believe I'll find anyone to take the wager."

Edmund reluctantly stood up and stretched with a satisfied sigh that echoed down into the valley before elegantly flopping into the empty chair between his friends. "Well, what is this new perfect wager?"

"Doodle has a cousin, an old maid, who he says would marry anyone who asked her."

Edmund raised an eyebrow in contempt. “That’s what desperate old maids do; where’s the wager?”

“Doodle has wagered his lucky snuff box, the one he keeps up his sleeve even while making love, that no one could court this demigod of old maidenhood, offer his hand and survive a single man. I’ve wagered him my favourite horse he won’t find anyone stupid enough to take it, it’s too dangerous.”

Edmund’s decision to find a wife gave life to his curiosity, “How old is she?”

“Thirty-one, though the way she dresses she might as well be fifty.”

“What does she look like?”

“She’s an old maid Lucky; who cares what she looks like? She wears one of those ghastly caps and goes about mourning for some boring dead seaman. No one would be stupid enough to take this wager. It’s perfect.”

It never occurred to Edmund that his silly friend Doodle might have an ulterior motive for suggesting this new perfect wager. It was ungentlemanly to even think another gentleman would do such a thing. But if Edmund had asked a few thorough questions he might have suspected that Doodle had indeed made a deal with his uncle. In exchange for some much needed cash, Doodle had promised to produce a husband for the old maid in question whose air of doom had long afflicted her relatives. It was a trap, but Edmund enjoyed beating the odds. At worst he’d end up with an ugly, unpleasant old countess. At best he’d go down in history as having beaten a truly unbeatable wager. “I’ll wager you my snuff box, the one with the ill clad lady inside the lid you like so well. I wager you I can propose to this old maid cousin of yours in front of witnesses and be turned down flat. If I lose I marry an old maid and you’ll win my snuff box, but I don’t think I’ll lose.”

Doodle’s eyes lit up with hope of paying his tailor. “You’d gamble your freedom on being chained to an old maid you’ve never even seen?”

“You’ll be lost without your lucky snuff box in a few weeks Doodle.”

“Phipps is a witness; even you can’t be that lucky.”

Edmund felt a slight twinge of worry. “Is she ugly?”

“I don’t know; I avoid looking at her. I wouldn’t want her to mistake curiosity for interest and concoct some mad scheme to trap me after supper in a compromising position. I’d rather die...well I’ll umm...write to Uncle and tell him you’re coming to court the old thing. She’s an orphan; her parents died after eating wild mushrooms. She has a two thousand pound annuity that starts as soon as she weds, but Uncle hasn’t been able to tempt anyone to carry her off. She’s bad luck.”

“Prepare to lose your lucky snuff box Doodle.” Phipps scowled at both his friends having lost his own bet, as he faced handing over his favourite horse. Some people had all the luck.

Edmund smiled as he turned his attention back to the glorious view as dusk settled over his little kingdom. The wager had already been filed away into the, ‘Do tomorrow afternoon’ mental drawer. Life would continue as it always had. Whatever happened, it would turn out for the best because it always did. Deeply inhaling the relaxing scent of twilight, he wondered if he could persuade one of his maids to warm his bed. It was the sort of magical evening that

demanding female company. The wood pigeons seemed to agree as they cooed from the eaves of the hunting lodge as the first star twinkled above.

Looking up, Edmund smiled as he made a wish on the star to find the perfect wife. Never having been in love, he dismissed the emotion as unimportant. All he wanted was a cheerful woman who'd never tire of his company or his thorough love making. If he'd known he was wishing for love Edmund might have paused to consider what fate might require of him before granting such good fortune. Edmund continued to smile unaware that fate had set in motion enough ill-luck to crumble any man's kingdom.

Chapter 2

Sept 9th 1814

Suffocating warmth poured in through the orangery's large windows, steaming the solitary inhabitant tucked away behind a large fern in the corner. Miss Priscilla Stanley hated both excessive heat and oranges, but she was desperate to remain hidden from her family and their ghastly house guest, the Earl of Warrenne. She swore under her breath as her embroidery needle slipped in her wet fingers and plunged into the wrong part of the picture. Gingerly extracting the sliver of light, with pent up fury she stabbed the needle back into the correct place and squeaked in pain as her hand under the silk found the needle. The design sketched onto the white piece of silk held firmly in the standing frame shimmered as she bowed her head to hide her tears; no woman ever born had ever been so unlucky. She'd fallen in love at eighteen and at nineteen the man of her dreams had asked her to marry him. Two weeks before the wedding, her sweetheart had fallen overboard during a battle and drowned at sea. Three months later she'd gone to Bath chaperoned by her older sister to recover her spirits. Five days after arriving they'd received word that their parents and half their parent's servants had died after eating wild mushroom soup. Bath abandoned, Priscilla had gone to live with her sister and brother in law. All seemed well until her leering brother-in-law demanded she pay her room and board by allowing him certain intimacies in her bed after dark. After stabbing the man in the neck with her embroidery needle, Priscilla was blamed for inflaming the man's lust and sent packing by her sister to their Aunt and Uncle who'd never liked her. She'd inherited money from her parents, but it was all tied up in an annuity that wouldn't begin until she married. As the years passed her hope of finding love or a decent man to marry was similarly cursed with ill-luck. Her worst suitor turned out to be already married. One desperate man needed a wife, but didn't want any more children; he already had thirteen under fifteen. She refused to give up the right to have children so she could slave over some other woman's brats.

She found one promising suitor kissing the chamber maid; another she found kissing the footman. Her favourite suitor, Lord Llewellyn had given every appearance of being in love with her. After being pursued by so many men scraped off the bottom of the matrimonial barrel, Llewellyn's handsome cheerful person was difficult to resist. She'd accepted his proposal and allowed him several liberties before learning that he'd also asked her younger cousin Catherine to be his wife. He secretly protested to Priscilla that he was only marrying the plain young woman for her larger dowry as if that justified his actions. Priscilla could only be relieved she hadn't succumbed to the cad's husky pleadings to be allowed a premarital sample of her charms.

Five years later and still unmarried Priscilla was an unwanted emotional burden on her relatives. There'd been pressure on her cousin Donald to offer for her, but as the younger man couldn't bear to even look at her it was silly to think he'd offer for her. To clarify his feelings, her cousin Donald had sent along the awful Earl of Warrenne with his blessing as if Priscilla were some sort of unwanted gift to pass along to the next fool in need of her annuity. Her tears pooled, dropping onto her embroidery clearing her vision. Looking up, the sight of her Aunt Ursula eyeing her with contempt through the greenery sent a chill down her spine.

"Hiding in the orangery will not save you from wedding Lord Warrenne if he offers. You will go at once to the garden and if his Lordship is unable to find you I will personally ensure you regret it. You have been warned. Come do your duty and encourage that nice young man or else."

"But Aunt Ursula, he smells like a tomcat in heat and I don't think he's changed his smalls in weeks. If I see him pick nose and eat it one more time I'm going to be sick. Please don't make me..."

“You will marry him if he asks you or else.”

“I can’t marry him; I have a nose!”

“Then I suggest you put some of that embroidery floss to good use and shove it up your nostrils. If he asks, you will say yes. Your Uncle and I have had enough of your morbid moping for that dead sailor. We’ve had nothing but bad luck since you landed on our door step and I’ve had enough.”

“Jeremiah loved me and he was a Lieutenant in the Navy, not some pressed man.”

“Mr perfect Jeremiah...if I hear that sailor’s name one more time I’ll burn all your half finished embroidery cluttering up my house and send you back to your sister. His Lordship is waiting for you near the wishing well. He desires to walk with you in the garden. I don’t care if he hasn’t bathed in a year or picks his teeth after scratching his nether regions. You’re thirty-one not thirteen. This is an opportunity not to be missed. The de Warenne family have been interbred with the crown since William the conqueror. Leave your silly embroidery and go be pleasant to the man at once.” Priscilla gave her embroidery one final stab with her needle as she imagined it to be the heart of the rank gentleman waiting for her. With clenched teeth she stood up. “And take off that hideous old maid’s cap.” Priscilla clutched the lace edged flaps hanging down onto her high necked dress and blinked in horror. How could she hide her feelings without her ugly cap? “Men like seeing a woman’s hair. Remove it.”

Priscilla reluctantly took off the cap and dropped it on her embroidery. “I feel naked without it.”

“Not as naked as you’ll be in the man’s bed. Go be pleasant to the creature.” Priscilla made an obedient curtsy as she mentally cursed her Aunt to a hot place and then cursed the vile smelling man to the same place for making her life hell. Holding her head high she silently reminded herself that as a Stanley her family connections were no less impressive, not that blood meant anything in the end. Her Aunt Ursula’s threats would doubtless be followed through. Priscilla headed for the garden with hope that she’d arrive to find the awful smelling man had wandered off. If she was lucky for once she might not have to smell him until luncheon. The thought made her smile until she reached the black iron gate.

Looking through elegant loops of painted iron, the Earl of Warenne could be seen leaning over the wishing well looking into its depths. Priscilla shook herself as she was gripped by a murderous impulse; if she snuck up behind him she could push him in. She was losing her mind. Killing the man wouldn’t solve her problem; desperate fortune hunters would continue to appear on her Uncle’s doorstep. She gripped the iron curls and eyed the handsome figure in disgust. He’d be attractive if he bathed several times with a bar of soap, washed and combed his hair and changed into clean clothes. He appeared to own only two suits, one shirt and one pair of smalls. The thought of standing near the man threatened to bring up her breakfast. From a distance there wasn’t anything obviously wrong with him. If she’d been born without a nose he’d have been a pleasant congenial soul whose upbringing had somehow neglected manners of any kind. Pushing open the creaking gate, the Earl of Warenne’s eyes lit with pleasure as he turned his head towards her. Praying she was up wind, she slowly crossed towards the well.

“Good morning Miss Priscilla, I’m relieved to see you’re in perfect health. When they said they couldn’t find you in the house I had visions of wife hungry Vikings carrying you away.”

His obvious wink made her flush pink. “I was embroidering in the orangery.”

“The orangery? I didn’t think to look there...”

“I didn’t think anyone would.” The smiling man seemed oblivious to the implication that she hadn’t wanted him to find her.

“At least it occurred to me to look in the wishing well. I was relieved to see you hadn’t fallen in trying to wish for some other handsome man to drag you to the altar.” The Earl of Warenne’s eyebrows lifted simultaneously causing her cheeks to flush again with horror.

“I don’t do wishing wells.”

“What? You’ve never thrown a penny into a well and made a wish?”

“I don’t believe in wishes my Lord.”

“Really?” The man looked taken aback. “Why not?”

“Why should I? What is the point of throwing a penny into a well to ensure something good happens? It’s senseless; I might as well spit three times on a stone. Wishing is cruel and pointless.”

“You’ve been reading too many morose novels Miss Priscilla.”

“I don’t read novels my Lord. I read about real people whose miserable lives end in death.” The man pursed his lips as if suddenly concerned.

“It sounds like a few happy endings wouldn’t go amiss. Come over here; I want you to make a wish. I’ll give you a penny.”

“No thank you my Lord; that would be wasting your penny. You should save it and buy...” Half way to the well she slowed her steps, silently wishing the man would drop dead before she reached his side.

“What should I buy with my pennies Miss Priscilla; an engagement ring?” His eyebrows rose again as if to torment her with the prospect of marriage.

Reaching the well, Priscilla gagged as she was forced to breath in a lungful of air thoroughly polluted by several noxious odours. “Sometimes my Lord it’s most pleasing to spend one’s money on oneself. Why not save your pennies and buy a new suit of clothes?” The man smiled in amusement displaying unbrushed teeth which emitted another foul stench.

“I wouldn’t waste a penny on just anyone; I insist you make a wish.” Fingers with nails harbouring an unknown brown substance dug a penny out of his breeches pocket and slid it over the stones towards her. The brown eyes peering from under a greasy curtain of straight brown hair suddenly glinted with genuine concern. “Fate has a portion of happiness for everyone Miss Priscilla.”

“Not for me my Lord.”

“Nonsense. I think fate may have something special stuffed up its sleeve for you. I’ve often found that one man’s ill-luck is another man’s good fortune. You’ve remained unwed a few years longer than a lady would like, but last week’s misfortune may be next week’s good fortune. As a discerning Lord, I think you’d make a charming little wife.”

“My Lord, I’m...” She audibly breathed in through her mouth before continuing. “...aware of the honour you do me...” Priscilla looked down at the penny and drew another noisy breath.

“Are you developing a chest complaint? You aren’t tubercular?”

It was tempting to lie, but her Aunt Ursula would easily discount it. “No.”

“That’s a relief. Your breathing sounds strained.”

“The air is a bit unpleasant this morning.”

“I haven’t noticed anything irregular, but my lungs are like brick chimneys.” The dirty finger tapped the coin in front of her. “What will you wish for?” Priscilla momentarily forgot the man’s awful stench as she stared at the shiny copper penny. What would she wish for; his Lordship to disappear or for death to end her suffering? What sort of small happiness did she dare wish for? “You look sad Miss Priscilla. You’re supposed to wish for something happy.”

“It’ll never happen...” She gingerly moved the soiled penny with the tip of her fingernail towards the edge of the well. “...but I wish to belong somewhere.” The penny bounced off the opposite side of the well and then after a long silence plopped into the water at the bottom. “Are you satisfied?”

“You sound like a lost penny; that’s not a good wish. This is a good wish...” He took another penny from his trouser pocket. “...I wish Miss Priscilla found me irresistible.” He winked at her before shoving the penny over the edge into the abyss where it plopped into the black water below. “Here make another wish, I insist.”

Priscilla inhaled another noisy breath as the dirty fingernail left another shiny penny in front of her. “How is wishing to belong somewhere not a good wish? I’d be thrilled to have a home where I was wanted...it would be good enough for me.”

“It’s too dull. Wishes can’t be dull or they won’t come true.”

“Says who; the fairies in your garden?” Priscilla shivered as rank smelling fingers playfully tweaked her earlobe.

“Now you’re laughing at me Miss Priscilla. There’s no such thing as fairies. It’s my penny and I insist you make a happy wish. Never fear, I shan’t put any pressure on you to wish for my affections, though feel free to be so bold if you wish.” She knew he was winking even though her eyes swivelled upwards toward blue sky. Couldn’t God strike her with lightning just once? “What will you wish for?”

“If I must make a happy wish, I wish to be loved by a man I love.” The second penny followed the same trajectory as the first and fell into the water with a satisfying plop. “It’s rather cruel to wish for love since I’d only make him miserable. I’m the unluckiest woman ever born. He’ll probably meet me at the altar and be shot dead by a drunken vicar.”

“Well it was more cheerful than the first one...though you appear to have a morbid fear of losing your groom.”

“My first one died at sea, two weeks before the wedding.”

“Oh...terribly sorry, and the second?”

“The second will probably be some drunken cabinet maker who wishes to retire on my two thousand pounds annuity. Wishes don’t come true.”

“You are a lost penny.” The words were gentle as if he was genuinely concerned. “Well you’re in luck because I collect lost pennies and I’m not afraid of drunken vicars brandishing pistols either.”

“You can’t collect lost pennies; it’s an oxymoron.”

Her companion chuckled in amusement as he tweaked her ear again causing her to blush with illogical pleasure. “Whenever I find a penny I pick it up, wash it and then sort it into one of several giant glass jars that sit in my entrance hall, but I collect all kinds of coins. Have you ever seen a Roman coin?”

“No.”

“They’re tiny. It’s hard to believe they once had any value.”

“Why would anyone collect coins?”

“Haven’t you ever held an old coin in your hand and wondered who else might have handled it? What it might have bought over the years?”

“No.”

“I do, I often spend my evenings looking at them using one of my magnifying glasses just wondering what sort of stories they could tell. I admit my penny collecting is a little odd, but they do remind me not to lose my money every time I leave the house.

“My Lord, you really should take your pennies to your tailor and order a new suit.”

“I wouldn’t dare take a jar of pennies to the old codger; he’d boot me out the door. I always give him a bank note. That way I don’t have to count out the money. I’m a wealthy man Miss Priscilla. I don’t need your annuity, I need a pretty wife.”

“You? Wealthy?” Priscilla forgot to breathe through her mouth and choked on the stench of unwashed linen.

“You’re sure you’re not coming down with consumption?”

“I wish.”

“That’s a terrible thing to wish for; this cough is very disturbing. I think you should send for the doctor.”

“I’ll live...unfortunately.” She glanced at her companion who was eyeing her with concern and was struck by his natural grace. When he wasn’t picking his nose, belching, scratching his backside or lifting his leg to break wind he appeared to be a different man. Was he a vile smelling pig or a prince in disguise? It was a ridiculous thought. His brown eyes smiled at her open perusal of his person. As if to oblige her curiosity, he turned to face her and put a hand on his hip. Visually speaking, he was quite pleasing. There was nothing wrong that a hot soapy bath and dentifrice wouldn’t fix. Her eyes came to rest on his handsome features in time to see him finish inspecting her charms. The dreaded heat consumed her cheeks as he looked her in the eyes and then winked his approval of her person. Her heart shuddered with

insensible delight as she momentarily lost her sense of smell. An involuntary smile lit up her eyes as her companion mirrored her emotion.

Her hand resting on the edge of the well could feel dirty fingers approaching as if they possessed some strange electric charge. The masculine hand lightly hovered, testing for rejection, before relaxing its warmth over hers in a possessive caress. They stood smiling into each other's eyes until the sound of gunshot in the distance made Priscilla jump. Her heart continued pumping the pleasant new sensation through her body until she breathed in through her nose. Gagging, she backed away in search of fresh air. Concerned, the man eagerly followed with an outstretched hand. Had she lost her mind? Part of her was longing for that filthy hand to touch her, to feel his putrid kisses cooling her burning cheeks. As if hearing her thoughts the man stepped closer, but the unbearable stench made her retch. Priscilla's heart threatened to fall out of her chest onto the remains of her breakfast decorating her suitor's shoes. Bursting into tears, she ran blindly towards the house. He'd never want to touch her again. She wasn't sure if that made her less or more unhappy. Locking herself in her room she waited for word that her latest suitor had packed his bags and fled.

Chapter 3

Looking down at his ruined shoes, Edmund caught a whiff of the stench emanating from his body and heaved in disgust. His thorough preparations had been a little too thorough for his own good. It was elementary that a strict absence of soap and water would help ensure he won his wager, but Edmund really didn't want to marry some old maid sight unseen. As further preparation he'd forced himself to wear the same garments day and night for two weeks and before leaving for his visit had one of his gardeners rub an unhappy tomcat up and down his suit. He knew the affect he'd have on the old maid before he even set off in his carriage. If his own servants couldn't stand within five feet of his person without gagging, it was unlikely even the most desperate old maid would say yes to a marriage proposal. If the stench didn't put her off, his determination to break every etiquette rule ever invented probably would. Either way his thoroughness was getting up his own nose. He had to finish the wager quickly; the gnawing anxiety caused by his filthiness was almost unbearable. The thought of pulling on clean underclothes made his eyes water with longing. As soon as he won his wager he'd bathe, put on a clean suit of clothes and depart.

At least if he lost the wager there was no fear of being saddled with an ugly wife. Miss Priscilla Stanley was a pretty woman with alabaster skin, seductive curves and brown silky hair worn plaited into a crown that left her divinely shaped ears exposed. Every time he looked at her or thought about her he felt a luxurious throbbing that reinforced a mad desire to pull her into his arms and kiss away the sadness in her eyes. Finding Miss Priscilla Stanley in his bed every morning would be no hardship, but that wasn't a good enough reason to marry a woman. It certainly wouldn't guarantee a happy home. He needed to have a thorough inspection of London's beauties before giving in to any throbbing madness. He had to choose carefully; once he made his choice he'd be stuck like a pig on a roast. A man couldn't change his wife like a dirty shirt.

Having finished cleaning his shoes on the grass around the wishing well, Edmund stared at the old stone ledge where he'd touched her hand. He hadn't meant his flirtatious courting to become physical. Words were empty twaddle without physical proof of sentiment. He didn't want to trifle with the woman's feelings. He was here to be rejected not to inspire hope. The impulse to caress her hand was clearly linked to the luxurious throbbing that was trying to persuade him to be a fool. He tried to push the touch from his thoughts, but walking through the garden the electric memory of soft clean skin allowing his caresses shimmered in and out of his conscious like a flickering ray of sunlight through thick grey clouds. If he remained in the woman's company there was no telling what madness might occur. It was clear he'd have to speed up his departure. The prospect of donning clean clothes was reason enough to bring his courtship to an end at the earliest opportunity.

Chapter 4

The long rectangular dining table sat centred in a cavernous rectangular room with sombre greyish-green walls. A dozen dyspeptic ancestors sneered down at the four diners as if to emphasise that entertaining was duty not a pleasure. Her Aunt and Uncle sat either end of the table like sentry ensuring Priscilla remained seated in the center across from Lord Warenne. With only four feet between her smelly suitor Priscilla hunched over her plate and tried to breathe through her mouth and chew at the same time. Clutching her knife and fork she glanced at the noxious man seated opposite; the Earl of Warenne was clearly mad. His greasy brown fringe flapped his forehead like a tinker's leather apron as he looked up to give her a wink. He was completely insane. She glanced down the table to her right; Aunt Ursula appeared absorbed in her food, but Priscilla knew she was listening to Warenne's every word. The man had somehow mastered the art of eating and talking simultaneously. The sight of masticated food yet to be swallowed was threatening to bring up her luncheon. Marriage to the man would certainly be uncomfortable for his wife's stomach. The poor woman would probably starve to death if she shared his table every meal.

Priscilla tried to keep her eyes on her plate, but every few minutes they'd wilfully slide across the oak table and up at the handsome face with warm brown eyes. She stifled a groan as she averted her gaze in disgust. The man was picking his teeth with a dirty fingernail. The next time she glanced up he was rubbing his nose on his filthy sleeve. It was only a matter of time before he lifted half his rump off the chair and loudly gassed the room with another ration of ill smelling wind. She'd paralysed his attempts to draw her into a conversation with silence, but Priscilla's hope of escaping a public grilling was crushed by Aunt Ursula's distant authoritarian curiosity. "Lord Warenne..." The man's fringe flapped as he turned his head towards the older woman sitting a safe ten chairs away. "...how did you find the garden this morning?"

The man appeared to pause as if the question required deep thought. "I found it quite pleasing Madam. Your lovely niece and I had a most enchanting conversation by the wishing well that left me...well, wishing for more." Priscilla's impulsive look of disgust was rewarded with a wink as her nemesis shovelled another spoonful of Macaroni into his mouth. "I was telling Miss Priscilla about my coin collection. I have a particular fondness for lost pennies, but as she rightly pointed out one can't be lost and found at the same time. I think your niece is a remarkable woman." Priscilla blushed in horror as the conversation drifted into dangerous waters. Lord Warenne merely smiled and enthusiastically pointed at her with his empty spoon. "What man of sense could see this pretty penny and not pick her up and take her home?" Lord Warenne nodded as he used his spoon to point at himself. "This collector knows a rare valuable coin when he sees one. May I have your permission to pick her up and put her in my pocket?"

"I don't think she'll fit in your pocket my Lord, but if you can squeeze her into your carriage do take her away." Priscilla's mouth fell open as her tongue went limp.

Lord Warenne, oblivious to her horror, appeared pleased with her Aunt's blessing as he refocused his warm brown eyes on Priscilla. "Well Penny? Will you let me pick you up and take you home? You needn't fear I'd put you in a glass jar..." Priscilla fought off a mad impulse to crawl across the table and claw out the man's left eye; anything to put an end to his winking. "...my house has an empty suite of rooms that connect to mine through a secret door. My mother preferred an old fashioned peach and cream, but you could refresh them however you please. I'll even order you a new mattress; I refuse to make love to my wife in my mother's bed. You'll have to share mine for a few weeks, but I promise I won't complain." The man winked again as if to emphasise the zealous gleam in his eyes. "I'll happily buy you whatever you need to make my house feel like a home. Even my last mistress would tell you I'm a very generous man. Her only complaint was that I was too

thorough. I won't be able to explain what she meant by that 'till our honeymoon." Priscilla could only gurgle in horror as her cheeks threatened to burst into flames. "Some people are impossible to please, but to tell you the truth I was glad she gave me the boot. It forced me to re-examine my priorities. Why pay to visit a pretty wench once a week when one can crawl into bed every night with a pretty wife? Besides, a wife can fill one's nursery with screaming brats and it's high time I had some brats. I'd like an heir by the time I'm thirty, but with luck we'll have an heir and a spare."

Priscilla's felt her eyes nearly pop out of her head, "I thought you were thirty."

"Heavens no, I'm twenty-six, but I take my responsibilities very seriously. I'll take good care of my dependants. Well?" He licked his lips and took a deep breath before asking in a soft hopeful tone, "Will you marry me and be my lucky penny?"

Priscilla could feel her Aunt and Uncle staring at her, silently willing her to accept the boorish man's proposal so they could be free of her. She was desperate to be free of them as well, but marriage to the man opposite was impossible. "No." The tight little word barely travelled beyond her plate.

The man had an odd anxious look as if he was suddenly afraid of rejection. "Penny, I want to marry you and make your wishes come true. We can leave today for London for a special license or drive to Scotland and be married over an anvil. They say it's romantic, if a bit noisy."

"My Lord..." Priscilla cursed her ill-luck as she suddenly felt sorry for the man. If he always smelled this awful, he'd probably received a long list of refusals. Another rejection would understandably hurt him. "I'm..." He leaned towards her as if enthralled by expectation. "... I'm sorry my Lord, but I can't marry you."

"Penny..." Priscilla jumped as the man's knife and spoon crashed onto his china plate. His quivering lips looked rouged against pallid flesh. "...are you rejecting my offer of marriage?"

"I'm terribly sorry my Lord." He looked as if she was refusing to help rescue him from certain death. Priscilla could hear her dragon Aunt Ursula sucking in her breath for a fiery tirade.

"Priscilla Stanley."

"Penny...if there's anything I could do to make myself more agreeable...I didn't think I repulsed you."

Priscilla looked the man in the eyes and briefly wondered if he could be taught some manners. He was a little old to be changing his ways, but those brown eyes had an intensity that made her question herself. The thought of being naked with the warm brown eyes and electric hands made her heart race and her stomach heave. The man was attractive, but not for a lady with a nose. "You're a good man my Lord. I'm sure you'll make some poor...I mean some woman feel lucky. I'm sorry it can't be me." Her words seemed to shroud the man in unhappiness. "Don't be upset my Lord; you're five years younger than me. You're bound to find a prettier debutante who'll give you a dozen infants. I don't think I could make you happy; I'm sorry." The man's knife and fork chinked loudly in the silent room as he politely set them down on his plate together and stood up removing the napkin tucked into his waistcoat. Dropping it on the table next to his plate, he silently made her a regal bow. Swivelling on his heel he left the room. The tapping of his leather soles brought to mind an exotic lonely bird, calling for its mate. Priscilla shivered with fear as she heard her Aunt Ursula stand up.

“If you’re unable to persuade Lord Warenne to forgive your inexcusable stupidity, you’ll be packing your bags. My daughter, Catherine, is in need of a new companion. The last silly chit she hired proved as shameless as the rest. Lady Catherine is tired of training up another servant only to learn five months later the slut has got with child by some wretched admirer. We expect better behaviour from our own flesh and blood.” It was Priscilla’s turn to feel the blood drain from her face. She knew the admirer responsible was Catherine’s husband whose roving lust was excused because of his title. A Viscount, the impoverished Lord Llewellyn had raised Catherine from being a Miss Stanley to being a Lady; a fact Catherine enjoyed reminding Priscilla at every opportunity. It was almost tempting to accept Lord Warenne’s proposal just to be a countess and outrank her pompous cousin, but the fear of being ravished was more pressing.

“You know I can’t live with Catherine; Lord Llewellyn was my suitor. I thought he was going to marry me. I can’t live in the man’s house.”

“Then I suggest you persuade Lord Warenne you’ve had a change of heart. Those are your options.”

“Why can’t I go live with Cousin Georgina? She always needs help in her nursery.”

“Georgina thinks you’re unlucky. She doesn’t want you cursing her precious offspring with your gloomy shadow of doom.”

“Doesn’t Cousin Donald need a housekeeper? He never looks at me and it could hardly be...”

“I certainly wouldn’t inflict my favourite nephew with his worst nightmare. Now go snare Lord Warenne or suffer the consequences.”

Chapter 5

Edmund walked from the dining room mentally sneering congratulations at himself. He'd won the perfect wager; Doodle would lose his lucky snuff box. The thought left Edmund unmoved. The luxurious throbbing that occurred every time he looked at or thought about Miss Priscilla Stanley had suddenly become a painful ache as if her refusal had somehow unsettled the flow of his blood. Everything was unfolding just as he'd planned so why did he feel like a tree struck in half by lightning, his heart exposed to the elements? There was no logical reason why he should feel upset or dejected. He didn't want to marry Miss Stanley, but somehow at the same time he did. Edmund wasn't used to simultaneously processing opposite emotions. He felt like someone had taken two files out of his mental chest of drawers and dumped them on the floor of his soul. He'd asked a woman to marry him and she'd turned him down. That should have produced a feeling of completion, but instead he felt undone.

On the way to his room he ordered his carriage and as many cans of hot or cold water the kitchen could immediately send to his room. He had to bathe before he went mad and killed himself to escape his stench. As soon as his chamber door was closed behind him he tore off his clothes and threw the rank bundle wrapped around his shoes out the nearest window with relish. The arrival of water and towels momentarily distracted Edmund from his inner turmoil. He didn't care if the single bar of soap wasn't his usual regimented two inches thick or that the two towels had been dumped on the table next to his bath at odd angles with the edges of the table.

Once he was scrubbed red from head to toe his cleanliness was an uncomfortable reminder of the scene by the wishing well. If he'd been clean she might have said yes. He rolled his eyes at his body's euphoric response to the thought. He was a grown man not a green boy. He'd been firmly rejected; he was leaving. It's what she expected. It was what he wanted; at least it was what half of him wanted.

Twenty minutes later he was pulling on his hat as he stepped out into the sunshine. The gravel crunched under his boots as he approached his carriage. There was no sign of the uncouth gentleman who'd arrived a week earlier. His footman opened his carriage door an exact one hundred and thirty-five degree angle and stood at attention as Edmund stared glumly into his empty carriage. He sternly reminded himself that he had no intention of carrying away a bride, but part of him was desperate to drive away with his new found penny. He put a foot on the first step, but was halted by luxurious throbbing caused by thoughts of pushing Miss Priscilla into his carriage. "I forgot something. I'll be right back." His two footmen looked at each other in disbelief as Edmund took his boot off the step and hurried back towards the house. Their fastidious employer had never been known to forget anything.

Like a man intent on walking the plank into shark infested waters Edmund followed a maid to Priscilla's chamber door and then waited until the servant was out of sight before knocking three times. It was complete madness. He barely knew the woman. She was five years older. She thought him a stinking mannerless bore, but it didn't matter. He wanted her. She made him laugh. She made him feel... His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of feet approaching the other side of the closed door.

"Yes?"

"Miss Penny...it's me, Lord Warrenne." The other side of the door was silent. "I've had a bath. I need to speak with you in private. Are you crying? Miss Penny..." He tried the door handle, but it was locked. "Why are you crying?"

"Go away."

“I can’t leave my lucky penny...”

“You don’t want me, I’m cursed. They call me Cilla, the seal of doom.”

“Don’t you mean Cilla the silly penny? There’s no such thing as curses. Luck is more often a matter of choice than fate. Open the door; I can’t bear to hear you crying.”

“Go away, before I ruin your life.”

“There’s something I need to tell you and it’s not something I can say through a keyhole. I’ve had a thorough scrub and I’m wearing clean clothes...”

“Then I’m definitely not opening the door.”

“Penny please...” Edmund rested his forehead on the door. “...I don’t want to leave without you. Do you expect me to leave without seeing you? Won’t you let me kiss you goodbye...on the hand?” After an eternal five minutes of silence Edmund felt his heart knocking on his ribs demanding satisfaction. “Miss Penny my carriage is waiting; come away with me. We can reach London by this evening...”

“Don’t tempt me; just go.”

He could hear footsteps retreat from the door and then silence. What if he never saw her again? He groaned in disgust at his feelings of horror. Had he lost his mind? Did it matter? He knocked five times on the door with Lordly determination, but he hammered his knuckles in vain. There was no answer from the other side. He stood caressing the door handle trying to pretend it was still warm from Priscilla’s touch until two maids walked past giggling in-between whispers. Feeling stupid Edmund straightened and knocked one more time. “I’m leaving!”

“Good. You’ll escape the curse.”

“Miss Penny, I...” Another servant slowly wandered past eyeing him with curiosity.

“Do you mind? I’m having a private conversation.” The servant raised an eyebrow, snorted in contempt and disappeared around a corner. “Miss Penny...won’t you open the door?”

“Never.”

“Then I guess this is goodbye...goodbye Miss Penny...” Denied a reply, Edmund caressed the door handle one more time before walking away feeling incomplete and yet relieved that he was miraculously still a free man. Climbing into his carriage he strangled an insane desire to kidnap the old maid and forced himself to mentally organise his immediate future. After returning home and packing his trunks, he’d spend the rest of the year in Bath. He’d ensure he was introduced to all the marriageable young beauties and with luck he’d soon forget the luscious Miss Penny. With his plans formulated he relaxed into the jostling rhythm of the carriage as melancholy settled over him like a dusty ancient cloak infested with bedbugs.

Chapter 6

November 19th 1814, Bath

The bookshop's green door opened and closed every few minutes as wealthy patrons bored with drinking sulphurous mineral water and gossiping at Bath's Assembly Rooms came in search of entertainment. Waiting in line to purchase an unspecified romance novel for her cousin Catherine, Priscilla clenched her teeth in irritation as several young men rudely cut in front of her. Her cousin would blame her for dithering. The thought of enduring another of her cousin's condescending sermons before lunch filled her with loathing. Action was required. She opened her large reticule and took out the unfinished piece of embroidery stabbed through with her largest needle and pretended to start to take a stitch as she stabbed the young man in front of her. A satisfying yelp was swiftly followed by a glare. "What the devil are you doing needlework in a bookshop for? Are you mad?"

"If people will cut in front of me I might as well get some work done."

"Ouch!"

"I'm terribly sorry, did I jab you again?"

"Harpy!" The young man looked at his friend as if to say, 'the lady's mad' as they stepped out of line leaving Priscilla her proper place. Her embroidery disappeared back into her reticule as she approached the counter and requested the latest romance novel. Having no idea which books her cousin had read, she purchased the suggested book and fought her way back towards the door. Through the shop's bowed window she could see her cousin talking to a fashionable man gracefully leaning on a walking stick, his back to the window. By the coquettish expression on her cousin's face the man was handsome and good ton. Stepping out into the cold north-easterly wind Priscilla shivered and dodged several oblivious shoppers to reach her cousin. Knowing her cousin wouldn't want to be interrupted she stopped behind the man to wait for him to walk on. Her heart started pounding as the fashionable man's voice penetrated her thick wool pelisse and made her shiver with delight. Entranced, she inched closer until her nose detected understated cologne that melled perfectly with a faint trace of shaving soap and the pungent aroma of a smoke filled coffee house. Her heart settled into an up-tempo rhythm as her eyes slid up the masculine back to the pristine white cravat hiding his neck and the trimmed brown hair combed carefully into place. Deaf to the conversation she inched around until she could see his profile.

Entranced by his transformation and the pleasure of seeing him in the flesh, Priscilla forgot her cousin until the woman screeched, "Priscilla Stanley, you're an embarrassment! If you're going to act like a dying haddock every time you see a handsome man I'll leave you in the carriage."

The elegant man started, his cheeks suddenly rouged as he swivelled to return Priscilla's stare. "Miss Penny..." He politely lifted his hat as his face lit up with delight. "...I didn't know you were in Bath. Tell me you're staying the winter?" The question had an intensity that made Priscilla shiver with hope. Would he ask her to marry him again? Staring into smiling eyes her heart ached with pleasure as that strange electric magnetism told her he'd extended his glove. Her cold hand flew to the offered perch like an obedient dove returning home. "My lucky Penny, you enchant me..." Priscilla forgot to breathe as he leaned over and kissed the back of her white glove with just the right amount of adoration and respect one would expect from a keen suitor. He was still holding her hand as her cousin disturbed the magic moment.

"You're acquainted with my unlucky cousin my Lord?"

Lord Warrenne didn't take his eyes off Penny's face. "Last month; I stayed at your parent's home for a week."

Catherine's eyes lit up with cruel amusement, "You're the man Priscilla refused? I didn't recognise you in my mother's description. I thought she misspelled the name..." The woman's face contorted with jealousy as she eyed her unpaid companion with spite. "...I heard you won a wager to get an old maid to turn you down, I had no idea it was our Priscilla. You had a lucky escape my Lord; my cousin is the unluckiest woman ever born. Doom follows her like night follows day. The only reason I told Mother I'd take her is that I need a companion who'll stay out of the footman's bed. Mother was terribly upset at failing again to get rid of her. Priscilla, stop staring at his Lordship and give me my book." Her head spinning as if she'd been slapped, Priscilla pulled her hand free from Lord Warrenne's possession and after a scathing look of scorn at the grimacing man she turned away and thrust the book at her cousin. "What is this? I told you I wanted the latest romance not one I read six months ago. Take it back and get me one I haven't read."

"But I don't know what you haven't read."

"Don't be impertinent or I'll send you to your sister. You'd be lucky if she let you sleep with her pigs." With tears in her eyes Priscilla spun on her heel and rushed back into the shop with the book, relieved to have an excuse to run away. The man was a cruel thoughtless cad. His dramatic pleadings at her chamber door had been nothing, but a cruel finale; something to brag about to his snotty friends. She wished she'd given in to the temptation to accept him. He wouldn't have been laughing with his friends with an old wife in tow. The heartless cad obviously didn't care if he broke an old maid's heart, but at least her inner organs were safe. The sensation of a sharp blade turning in her chest mocked the thought as warm tears slid down her cold cheeks. Wiping her face she reached the counter and asked the shopkeeper if she could exchange the book because her Mistress had already read it. The man refused saying he ran a bookshop not a lending library. Her cousin would blame her and it was all Lord Warrenne's fault; the horrid swine was probably laughing at her.

She was about to turn around when the hairs on the back of her neck crackled with a familiar electric charge. Her heart was pounding before she smelled him at her shoulder. "The latest romance for Miss Stanley; one she could not have possibly read before this week." The Lordly demand was obeyed without question. Her eyes swivelled to watch as one pristine buff glove was removed revealing impeccable fingernails that reached into his pocket. If she hadn't seen the man picking his nose at table, she'd never have believed the majestic fingers capable of such rudeness. "Keep the change."

Penny forced herself to be polite as he handed her the book. "Thank you my Lord..." The naked majestic fingers ignored the dry ingratitude and gently took hold of her upper arm. Curious shoppers paused to watch the wife shopping Lord possessively lead a pretty woman wearing an old maid's cap under her bonnet towards the door.

Priscilla blushed as whispers erupted behind her as they passed. The door closed behind them and she hissed at the man beside her, "Remove your hand Sir." The hand remained on her arm and steered her in the opposite direction of her cousin. "Is there something you wished to say; an apology perhaps for being a heartless swine?" Her cousin Catherine was glaring at her; Priscilla could already hear the lecture on knowing her place.

"Penny, I tried to tell you before I left, but you wouldn't open the door..."

"That's a convenient excuse my Lord. What did you win; a penny?"

“I won Doodle’s lucky snuff box; it was his wager. I merely accepted...”

“That must make it acceptable to the inmates of Bedlam. It obviously didn’t occur to you, my Lord, that your theatric proposal might injure your victim. It’s bad enough I’ve been banished as Catherine’s free drudge; what if I’d fallen in love with you, you heartless cad?”

“Penny please...” The man actually sounded wounded by her words. He was clearly born for the stage. “I admit my first proposal was to win the wager, but the second was for me. I tried to convince you to come away with me remember?”

“Ah yes, the keyhole proposal; I’ll wager you a penny Cousin Donald wept with laughter on hearing you’d risked the noose twice and survived a free man.”

“I haven’t told anyone about the second proposal...”

“How prudent; your future wife will never know you momentarily lost your mind and nearly wed a doomed old maid.”

“I understand you’re upset with me...”

“Upset? Because of your stupid wager I’m my cousin’s slave and if I manage to escape her household without being ravished by her husband I’ll be luckier than her previous companions.”

“I’m sorry...it was rather thoughtless, but you should have married me. I’ve tried to forget you, but I keep dreaming that I’ve kidnapped you and carried you off to Gretna Green. When I wake up and find it isn’t true I feel miserable. Marry me. Be my lucky Penny.”

The man might smell pleasant, but he was still insane. “You’ve proposed over a dinner table, through a door and now on the street. What next; through a window? Or will the young lady you actually wish to wed get a private tête a tête without an audience?”

“Penny, I’ve thought about you every day...”

“Touching; you must have a conscience.”

“I can’t get you out of my mind...”

“It must be torture.”

“Penny I want to marry you.”

“What?”

“I want to marry you. Today...if you’re amenable?”

“You’re insane, but you do scrub up rather nicely.”

“Do I?” The man’s eyes lit up with hope as his fingers boldly caressed her arm. “I long to be your Lord. The thought of kissing you makes me feel...happy.”

“If that’s true, then you’ll use your theatrical talents to persuade me that marriage to a lunatic would be better than marrying a desperate fortune hunter.”

“You won’t marry me tomorrow morning?” The man was such a good actor he even sounded disappointed.

“No. You may call on me and persuade me of your sincerity over time like any other normal suitor, if there is such a thing.”

“May I see you without that hideous old maid’s cap?”

“You’ll be lucky.”

“I am Lucky...that’s what my friends call me. How much time do I have to persuade you to be my Lady?” His wink seemed to punctuate the fact he was going to have his way by hook or crook.

“You have until I decide to marry someone else. Are you going to return me to my vile cousin or kidnap me from the High Street?” The man sighed as if it was a difficult choice and reluctantly removed his hand and followed her back to the glaring Catherine.

Lady Catherine’s lips twisted with wrath, “I hope you enjoyed your public tête à tête while I froze to death waiting for you. Did you find me a book to read?”

Priscilla handed over the wrapped book. “The shopkeeper wouldn’t give an exchange. Lord Warrenne paid for it.”

“That was very kind of you my Lord.” Unwrapping the paper she tutted in disappointment that she couldn’t send Priscilla back into the shop, “It’ll do. Perhaps you’ll allow me to thank you by inviting you to dinner this evening Lord Warrenne?”

“It would be a pleasure my Lady.” He bowed over Catherine’s hand and then lifted his hat to Priscilla. “Miss Penny.” Pulling his glove back on he walked away with a jaunty spring in his step.

Lady Catherine eyed her cousin with envy. “Why does he call you Penny?”

“I suspect he doesn’t like the name Priscilla.”

“I’ve heard he collects pennies. The man’s an eccentric; they say he always chews his food twenty times before swallowing. I’ve also heard his last mistress gave him the boot and you’d never guess why.”

“Because he was too amorously thorough.”

“Who told you that?”

“Lord Warrenne, at the dinner table in front of your parents barely two minutes before he asked me to marry him.”

“No?” Catherine’s eyes gleamed with horrified delight. “What else did he say?”

Priscilla had no desire to give her cousin any extra gossip that might wound her unwanted suitor. She ignored the illogic of her kindness. If she wanted to hurt the man she’d scratch out his eyes. It would be kinder than feeding the gossip mill. “I can’t remember; it was all rather horrific.”

Catherine's scowl outlined her displeasure. "Humph...still, you were a fool to refuse him. I'd have married him by special license even if he did stink. I understand he's exceedingly generous to his dependents even if he does hate wasting money; you could have been a wealthy countess." The thought appeared to make her grimace with horror. "Well perhaps it's for the best you refused Lord Warenne. Being a Lady requires an ability to discriminate between how one addresses a Duchess whose Lord descends from a King's bastard or a Duchess whose Duke, like Marlborough, merely won royal approval and treat them accordingly. The art of social interaction is complex and requires a finesse you'd never understand."

"I suppose not, but then I'm unlikely to need it."

"No. Why would any man want you? You're past your prime. Lord Warenne needs an eighteen year old debutante who can breed a large brood." Catherine nodded as if agreeing with herself. "Whoever he marries will suffer endless confinements. I've heard he's keen to produce half a dozen before he turns thirty. I should introduce him to several young things I met recently. They won't notice his eccentricities until they're chained to his bed. It's best not to know anything about one's husband. I certainly didn't know anything and look how happy I am. And to think he almost married you. My Lord Llewellyn is heartily relieved he married me and says so every morning. My husband didn't need to marry beauty; he values me for my finer qualities." Priscilla glanced at her cousin and buried her hands farther into her muff. If her cousin was happy wallowing in self-delusion there was no point trying to burst the fantasy. "I think I'll invite several young ladies to dinner this evening. Wouldn't it be diverting if I married off Lord Warenne to some wide eyed innocent before Christmas?"

"Very."

"Where's the footman? I'm not carrying this stupid book all the way home."

"He's right behind us."

"Here you carry it. You don't need to protect your hands from the cold. No one cares what you look like." Priscilla took the book as she imagined her cousin's reaction on finding Priscilla had run away to marry the eccentric Lord Warenne."

"What are you smiling about?"

"I was just remembering something Lord Warenne said. The man's insane."

"What did he say?"

"He said his friend's call him Lucky."

"How does that make him insane?"

"He doesn't seem very lucky to me."

Catherine tutted in contempt, "The man escaped being tied to you. I'd say that makes him lucky."

"True, I wouldn't want to be tied to me."

"Don't talk to me. I need to choose the guest list and decide what to serve each course. If I could persuade the Duke of Strathmore to attend my dinner it would be the talk of the town." Priscilla had an awful feeling her cousin was going to ensure Priscilla's ill-luck became

Bath's latest on-dit, but it didn't seem to matter. The horizon suddenly glimmered with hope that Providence was about to deliver some happiness.

Chapter 7

Edmund winced in irritation as a burst of laughter combined with the soft chink of silverware on ceramic plates momentarily deafened him to the conversation opposite. Instead of enjoying dinner with his lucky Penny he was sat between two pretty girls who appeared to have only one brain between them. They cheerfully accepted his mumbled noises as conversation as he strained to hear the beautiful widowed Duke of Strathmore practice his legendary charm on Priscilla. Edmund sneered as the Duke glanced at him with a faint smile. Strathmore looked like a terrier who'd found a rat for his evening's entertainment; a terrier who'd be curling up in front of the fire with a full stomach.

Edmund had unwittingly made an enemy of the Duke by winning the man's carriage in a game of cards. Ever since that ill-fated game the Duke of Strathmore had inexplicably gone out of his way to make Edmund's life hell. As fate would have it, sometimes good luck was really bad luck wearing a tawdry wig and a thick layer of face paint. Edmund knew that faint smile meant the older man was about to give Edmund a verbal kicking. The temptation to throw his plate at the Duke's head was overcome; he'd be damned by the ton as an intolerable bore and Strathmore would win.

There was nothing to do but ride out the storm and hope Penny wouldn't despise him at the end of it. She'd only glanced eleven times in his direction. The number was all wrong. It needed to be an even number. He willed her to look at him and end the excruciating anxiety. If she looked at him one more time he could swallow without choking, but Strathmore's hypnotic voice appeared to hold her spellbound. She looked like she'd jump off a bridge if the Duke asked her to. Edmund was relieved when several noisy guests were abruptly silenced by the act of stuffing their faces allowing him to hear Priscilla ask, "...why do you call him Pinhead?" Edmund's face burst into flames as he mentally cursed Strathmore to eternal unrest for poisoning Penny's mind with the hated label.

The whole table could now clearly hear the Duke say, "A few years ago Lord Mulgrave, on a dare, gave Lord Warrenne a handful of pins and offered him ten thousand pounds to throw the pins into the street uncounted. Warrenne couldn't drop them. He pinned them onto his coat sleeve in groups of three at one-fourth of an inch apart and found to his dismay that the end number wasn't pleasing. He went straight to the nearest dressmaker and bought a single pin like a drunk desperately licking the dregs of the bottle. He probably took them home and arranged them in one of his drawers. I understand he has walls of drawers constructed for his counted collections. He's exceedingly thorough. He's a pinhead."

The dim beauty sitting on Edmund's left tilted her ear towards Strathmore. "I don't think Lord Warrenne looks anything like a pin. I think he's quite handsome."

Strathmore's eyes lit up with amusement, "My dear child, I commend you for attempting to swell his head. As his hatter knows, it's greatly in need of swelling."

Edmund glared at Strathmore as the older man raised his eyebrows silently daring his prey to defend himself. Having won a twelfth glance from his lucky Penny, Edmund could finally swallow in relief. "You're so amusing Your Grace. It's a pity we can't somehow make an audible record of it for posterity, but perhaps your wit might lose something in translation. They might assume you were merely cruel and therefore a bore." Edmund flushed with pleasure as Penny's eyes lit up with approval. He felt like he'd slayed a dragon.

The Duke appeared unmoved. "It's true; wit lives and dies in its own day, but that's such a boring topic of conversation. I'd much rather hear how you, a handsome wealthy bore I mean Lord, persuaded this pretty woman to reject your hand in marriage. You must have unfathomed depths."

Edmund felt twelve pairs of eyes pin him to his seat. One day he'd just throw his plate at the man's head. "It's true I accepted a wager to court and be rejected by Miss Stanley..."

A female voice down the table gasped, "How rude! The poor woman must have been mortified."

Edmund scowled down the table. "...and I'm heartily glad I accepted the wager as I wouldn't otherwise have met Miss Penny and that would have been extremely unlucky."

Strathmore raised a single eyebrow, "Is it true you proposed at the dining table? Perhaps you'd care to re-enact the scene; I for one would be vastly amused."

"I'm sure you would, but spare a thought for the lady sitting next to you who will now be viewed like a shrunken head in a curiosity shop for rejecting me."

The dim beauty at Edmund's right elbow tilted her head in confusion. "How do you get Penny from Priscilla? I'd call her Prissy or Cilla or Pussy..."

Strathmore turned in his chair to face Priscilla, "I apologise if my curiosity has caused you discomfort Miss Stanley. Not many women would have turned down an opportunity to be a Countess; you must be eminently sensible. I myself have decided its time to find a wife. I fear having only one son creates a need to inflict childbed on another female. I've been looking to find a sensible woman who could compliment my insensibilities. Why don't you marry me?" Edmund gasped in horror along with the rest of the table. The luxurious throbbing was instantly transformed into a painful throbbing that threatened to explode his heart. He was about to throw his plate at Strathmore's head when he noticed that Penny was looking at the Duke as if the man had asked to her take off her clothes and dance naked on the table.

"I'm afraid I don't find that amusing Your Grace."

"There was no amusement intended Madam. Marry me; be my Duchess."

Edmund heaved a sigh of relief as Penny's face contorted into disbelief. "Why would you want to marry me? I'm a complete stranger."

"Why not? You're pleasing on the eyes and obviously sensible. My parents met at the altar; at least I get to choose my bride."

"I'm honoured by your offer Your Grace, but I can't marry you."

"Why not?" It was a nonchalant question.

"Because it wouldn't be sensible. One can't meet a man at dinner, marry him the next day and expect life to unfold any happiness."

"My dear, life has so little happiness that it's barely worth unfolding. Marry me and all your earthly cares will be null and void. I've been told I'm not intolerable to live with though most of my houses are so large that you could conceivably avoid me from sun up to sun down. As for those briefly shared moments of the day, I have very pretty manners and I'm obviously not unpleasant to look at; I'd wager you'd be content."

"I'm honoured by your offer, but I can't marry you."

Edmund gnashed his teeth in mute horror as Strathmore reached out and touched Penny's face. "Eminently sensible my dear; I wouldn't marry me either." The older man half swivelled facing Edmund as if nothing outlandish had occurred. "I wonder if proposing á la table will become the next silly craze. I can't say I was the first, but perhaps it's best to leave such honours to a pinhead..." Edmund wasn't listening. He was watching Penny's eyes flutter around her plate as if unable to settle. His lungs filled with air as she looked up at him. He had the distinct impression she was smiling even though there was no obvious upward turn to her lips. His wink caused her cheeks to surge with a glorious colour that made him feel like dancing. Penny had just turned down one of the most eligible bachelors in the Kingdom; the luxurious throbbing pulsed victoriously through his veins. Was he imagining it, or did Penny prefer a nose picking Earl over an impeccable Duke? Since walking away from her chamber door he'd spent a lot of time imaging things. Every other day he'd fluctuate between wanting to kidnapping Penny and checking himself into Bedlam; his two halves refused to compromise, threatening his once pleasant life with the agony of eternal seesaw. His feelings made no sense, but his lucky encounter with her horrid cousin had resolved the issue. Turning to find Penny staring up at him with kissable lips parted in amazement, the seesaw had landed with a bump on the side that demanded he marry her immediately.

Edmund stood up with the other men and managed to get another wink as he caught his Penny's eye before she left for the Drawing room with the other ladies. The luxurious throbbing demanded he follow, but his host, Lord Llewellyn, beckoned. "Lucky. Come have a drink and tell me more about this wager. What ever did you do to dissuade old Prissy from dragging you to the altar?"

"I made myself thoroughly disgusting. I could barely stand myself."

Strathmore gave the man sitting in the chair next to Edmund a look and the man fled. The Duke sat down and offered his glass for filling. "So tell us Pinhead, what exactly did you do to frighten off that pretty penniless bird desperate for a perch?"

Edmund turned to find Strathmore's sneer three inches away. "She's obviously not desperate enough to perch on you." Snickers of laughter were silenced by a look from the Duke. "She's not penniless either; she has a two thousand pound annuity that begins the day she weds. She'd probably have married years ago, but she has this silly notion that she's bad luck. It's rubbish of course. Luck is all about perspective."

Strathmore raised a single eyebrow. "You're quite a sage Pinhead. Have you any other advice for us regular headed mortals?"

"Keep addressing me as Pinhead and I may pin you to the floor." The other men in the room watched wide eyed as Strathmore smiled as if amused.

"You must be what, twenty-two? No wonder Miss Stanley turned you down boy. No woman wants to wipe her babe's bottom and then turn to wipe her husband's nose."

"You know I'm twenty-six."

"Do I?"

"How old were you when you married Strathmore; twenty? Did your wife ever wipe your nose?" Even Lord Llewellyn blanched as Edmund mentioned the unmentionable subject. Strathmore's wife had died in childbed less than a year after their marriage. It was rumoured he'd killed several men for slighting her memory. It was known he'd pummelled half a dozen for the same offence.

“You are a pinhead.” The words were almost a sigh of exasperation.

“Your opinion means nothing to me Sir. Now if you’ll excuse me I wish to join the ladies...”

“I’m sure Llewellyn could find you a dress...”

Edmund curled his lip in disdain as he unconsciously cracked his knuckles. “You wear it Strathmore. With your willowy figure you’ll look just like one of your sisters, but you might want to shave first or that black shadow will give you away.”

Strathmore raised a weary eyebrow. “I hope you’re writing these down Pinhead. It won’t be long before you’ve squeezed the last witty retort from your tiny brain. Whatever will you do? Personally, I recommend you buy a monkey to sit on your shoulder and throw peanuts at me. Now that would be entertaining. Over time it might become your friend and if you’re really lucky it might even marry you.”

“Strathmore, you amaze me...I find this conversation even more ennui than our last one. Perhaps we could avoid speaking unless you plan to kill me with boredom. Be so good as to wait until I too have a son. It would only be faire. Gentlemen.” Bowing politely Edmund escaped into the drawing room, but Lady Catherine had sent her companion up to bed. Aching with anxiety at being unable to speak with Penny and accomplish the reason for his attendance, Edmund found himself turning endless pages of music for a dim beauty asked to play the pianoforte. Luckily he wasn’t expected to talk. His body was trapped, but his mind was free to return to his favourite subject. Was Penny sleeping? Was she thinking of him? Would she think his need to count things made him unsuitable husband material? The thought caused a crippling wave of anxiety. The wave passed in time to turn the page. Edmund couldn’t understand why other people didn’t need to count things or arrange objects in precise geometry, it was completely normal to him. Why would he throw a handful of pins in the street for ten thousand pounds? He didn’t need ten thousand pounds, besides Mulgrave was kept on a short financial leash by his mother. He wouldn’t have been able to pay the money anyway and that would have been a waste of pins. Besides, knowing how many pins he had ensured he’d be able to use them more efficiently; counting things was perfectly sensible. The fact Strathmore and his ilk couldn’t understand it proved them insensible.

Edmund hoped it wouldn’t take long to persuade Penny to become his Countess. The luxurious throbbing was maddening; if he didn’t hold her in his arms soon he would end up in Bedlam. His third proposal might have been rejected, but he had high hopes for his fourth. He’d ensure it was private and convincing. His wandering thoughts momentarily returned to the present. Looking around he found Strathmore staring at him with a look of hatred that made Edmund wish he had a loaded pistol in his pocket. Rebuked for not turning the page in time, Edmund was luckily given an excuse to turn his back on the Duke as he imagined the man marrying a monkey. The dim beauty singing as she played the piano thought Edmund’s smile was for her. She filled her lungs and stretched her skills to sing her best in hopes of attaching his affections. Edmund used the pleasant interlude to formulate his plans for winning his wager. Fed, watered, and inspired; Edmund couldn’t wait to go to bed so he could get up in the morning and pay a call on the woman upstairs. After weeks of grim grey monotony, life was once again painted in a vivid rainbow of colour. Everything was going to work out; it always did.

Chapter 8

Hunched over her thread and needle, Priscilla was carefully stitching a bright green ribbon to the crown of a yellow straw bonnet when her heart shuddered in delight. Lifting her head she quickly translated the cheerful noise in the next room into Lord Warrene greeting her cousin. Distracted from her needle, she stabbed her finger. Blinking back tears of irritation, she sucked her bleeding finger as she eyed three stacks of hatboxes and two baskets of ribbons. It was going to take her hours to complete her assigned task and until she finished she was banished from the drawing room. She glared at the connecting door left ajar by her cousin and wondered if Lord Warrene really intended to repeat his offer. If the man was going to bathe and change his smalls every other day, being Warrene's wife would be immeasurably more pleasant than being her cousin's skivvy. She shivered as she remembered the man's electric fingers. Another painful jab of her needle brought her painfully back to her senses in time to hear Lord Warrene politely ask after her. Biting her wounded finger, Priscilla froze as she strained to hear the conversation. "...is she poorly?"

"The ingrate is sewing in the next room."

"What? Through there?"

"Yes, I fear Strathmore's whimsical offer has swollen her head. She must learn her proper place."

"Strathmore has that affect on women; he probably did it for a wager."

"Why else would the Duke of Strathmore offer for Priscilla? Why would any man offer for her? The creature is hardly the sort you'd want to chain to your table let alone your bed. She was unaccountably rude to Lord Llewellyn at breakfast this morning. He politely asked her to sit next to him and do you know what she did?"

"No. What?"

"She ignored his repeated request and pointedly sat at the other end of the table. She does not appreciate how lucky she is that we've taken her in. She'll do as she's told or she won't be sitting at my table again."

"That was rather rude, but perhaps she had a reason."

"I think she's sulking. I think she's still in love with Llewellyn. She's jealous he didn't ask her to marry him. She thinks I stole her suitor as if a man would marry Priscilla when he could have me. She'll learn to be polite to my husband. No one else in the family wanted to be saddled with her bad luck. My Lord Llewellyn says superstitions are silly. He kindly insisted she come stay with us. Who else would have been so thoughtful? She's a silly old cow who needs to realise that Lords don't marry so far beneath them as Priscilla."

"She could have married me..."

"You had a lucky escape my Lord."

"I think it had more to do with the fact I smelled like something you pay the night soil collector to cart away...she might be able to hear that I've come to call. It would be rude of me not to present myself. If you'll excuse me a moment..."

Priscilla quickly straightened her white cap and smoothed her apron over her skirts. As she concentrated on making a stitch the door swung inwards pulling her heart towards the

handsome man with smiling brown eyes. On reaching her side he silently pointed his thumb in the direction of the door and made a face as he put two fingers either side of his forehead indicating that Lady Catherine had horns. Priscilla bit her lip to keep from laughing out loud and felt her eyes fill with tears. He was good and kind; she should have accepted his third offer. The sight of her tears appeared to discompose him. He whipped out a handkerchief as he droned in a loud monotonous tone, "Good Morning Miss Penny..." He gently wiped her eyes and whispered fervently, "I missed you last night after dinner. I think your horrid cousin is trying to keep us apart. She forced me to turn music for one of the dim beauties who sat next to me at table." And then back in the booming bored tone, "You slept well?" He kissed the corner of the handkerchief holding her tears and carefully tucked it into his waistcoat near his heart.

"Yes thank you; and yourself?"

In the booming bored drawl Edmunds replied, "Yes...like a Lord in the House of Lords..." His voice dropped back to the fervent whisper. "I woke up with indigestion after an eternal nightmare that you'd married Strathmore. If you knew how much I missed you this morning..." His voice returned to the booming bored tone, "Fine day for sewing what? Those clouds look rather unsettled. I'd wager my hat it'll rain sometime today." And in a whisper, "You don't regret refusing Strathmore, do you?"

She shook her head no, "That's what rain clouds do my Lord; rain."

Warrenne's smile widened. "Well that's a relief. Imagine the shock if rain clouds spat out pennies. I don't think I'd want to have pennies dashing at me from the skies..." He gave a wink before whispering, "Fall into my arms and I'll happily make you the crowning penny of my collection." He pulled a small paper wrapped object from his coat pocket and thrust it at her. "You're not very talkative this morning Miss Penny...I suppose you'll open up later when you're all alone?" He ogled the packet and winked again.

"Why would I open up when I'm alone?" She slid the packet deep into her inner pocket. "Your mind sounds full of cobwebs my Lord. A long walk in the bracing wind might do you good."

"It'll certainly benefit my hatter. Do you know what I fancy doing?"

"No my Lord. What do you fancy?"

"I think I fancy some shopping..." His voice dropped to a whisper, "...and tasting your lips. May I kiss you? I don't smell...I don't think..."

"I didn't think men enjoyed shopping."

"It depends on the shopping Miss Penny; there's a shop that sells magnifying glasses that I used to enjoy patronising."

"Do you have many magnifying glasses my Lord?"

"I have ninety; I tried to stop at seventy-seven, but every time I opened the drawer to use one that number, seventy-seven, would irritate me. It's not a satisfying number when associated with magnifying glasses; though to be honest I've never liked that number. Ninety is the right number. I'm quite pleased with my collection. They all fit exactly into three drawers."

Priscilla raised an eyebrow, "Do you often find certain numbers unsatisfying?"

“Yes. Even before I knew my numbers if things didn’t look right I found it very upsetting. When I was three I woke up one morning to find one my toy soldiers had disappeared from the window ledge. I was exceedingly upset; who could possibly find eleven toy soldiers satisfying? It jars the soul. The first time I had breakfast with my parents and my three older sisters, I was six. Our Uncle was visiting so there were seven occupied chairs at the table. I couldn’t eat until Mother had one of the maids sit down to make eight. Once I learned my numbers I understood that some numbers are simply unsatisfying.”

“What will you do if your wife has a dissatisfying number of children?”

“I’ll adopt, after endeavouring to give her a satisfying number of babes.”

His slow wink made her heart shudder with pleasure. It was time to change the subject before her face caught fire. “I’ve never owned a magnifying glass.”

“Really? I’ll buy you one...no I’ll buy you three. Everyone should have at least one magnifying glass; they open up the world. It gives me great pleasure to view things closely.” He put his hands on the arm of her wingback chair and leaned towards her. Priscilla glanced at the door and back into the brown eyes. “Have you ever looked at a human eye through a magnifying glass? It’s utterly fascinating...” His eyes were so close she could see golden yellow rings around his pupils. They looked like chocolate pudding drizzled with custard. She licked her lips as he held her gaze. The hairs on her neck stood up as electric fingers approached. Flinching in shock at the charged caress, the fingers froze as chocolate eyes searched her face for permission to take further liberties. Relaxing, she allowed her throat to be lightly caressed. Tipping back her head, the fingers found more skin to explore. The straw hat rolled off her lap onto the floor as electric lips thoroughly claimed ownership of her senses. The hungry kiss was reluctantly paused, her lower lip held captive. The light tension warned her ears to hear what he’d heard. Another visitor was being announced. Her unspoken wish for another kiss was granted leaving her breathless. Electric fingers caressed her throat one last time before they withdrew. It was several long seconds before she realised the loud thumping was her heart and the rhythmic glint in the corner of her eye were the silver pins holding up her apron front as her lungs begged for air. “You’ve dropped your hat Miss Penny. Am I boring you?”

She bent over and reclaimed her sewing, holding the hat to her chest as if it could protect her from temptation. “No my Lord...” His face lit up with a triumphant smile as he put a hand on his hip.

“Well I must say it’s always a pleasure to see you Miss Penny, but today has been a particular pleasure...perhaps I may be allowed to repeat it in the not too distant future?”

“That would be most agreeable...” Blushing, she glanced up from under her lashes. “...my Lord.” Her earlobe was tweaked and her cheek lightly caressed before his hands were banished behind his back.

“I feel like the luckiest man in the world Miss Penny. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Life keeps offering up the most exquisite reasons to go on living...” His voice dropped back to a whisper as his brown eyes warmed with enthusiasm. “That was the most delicious kiss. I want to kidnap you today, but I fear those blasted bonnets will keep you from getting any air. I’ll have to wait ‘till tomorrow.”

“I’m glad life is kind to you my Lord.”

“Life wants to be kind to you too Miss Penny. Happiness often comes when you least expect it.”

“Not everyone is so lucky.”

“Rubbish. No one has doom printed on their forehead at birth; you’ve allowed yourself to believe that you’re doomed. You’ll never be happy if you don’t stop telling yourself you’ll never be happy. Tragedy is one side of a coin Miss Penny.”

“Yes, I believe the other side is suitably labelled Comedy.”

“No Silly, the other side of the coin is Happiness. The coin is in your hand Miss Penny; turn it over. The coin is always in your hand.” His impassioned declaration dragged her eyes up towards his face. He looked upset; as if he took her inability to believe fate could grant her happiness as a personal affront. He dropped his voice to a whisper, “I don’t understand why you can only see tragedy. What do you see when you look in the mirror?”

“An old maid...a servant...the unluckiest woman ever born.” Her tears were captured by the cherished handkerchief and returned to his waistcoat.

“When I look at you Penny, I see a woman who has been saved from countless vile unions for me. I see a woman who is...delectable. Your ears were created to ensnare me. You’re divine; I could kiss you forever. I see fate having picked you up and dropped you in Bath at my feet. This past month I couldn’t make up mind whether to kidnap you or check myself into Bedlam...”

“That’s flattering...”

“Penny, I was desperate to see you or hear word of you and when I saw your cousin I knew I had to talk with her; and then to turn and find you standing there. Seeing you was bliss like the most perfect number; I wanted to carry you away and marry you immediately. You are the luckiest penny fate has ever dropped at my feet. Can’t you see it? Don’t you feel even a little pleased to have met me? Aren’t you glad our paths have crossed again in dreary Bath? Am I just another scrubbed up suitor or might I make you feel happy to know that a stupid thoughtless wager has brought me into your life? And if you feel happy knowing I’ve come into your life, doesn’t that make you feel a little lucky?”

“I never thought of it that way...”

“You cherish tragedy, but what feels like a crown of thorns is really a diamond studded crown worn upside down. You’re a very lucky woman and I should know.”

The hat in Priscilla’s lap blurred as her eyes filled with tears. She bravely looked up and allowed herself to imagine the adoring look in the brown eyes was real. “How do I turn the coin over?” The handkerchief was again pulled out and put to use.

“Easy. You start seeing the happiness; you notice the positive aspects of whatever life throws your way. There’s always a positive and a negative. How you choose to view life largely determines your luck. If you focus on the positive you’re lucky. If all you see is the negative then you’re unlucky. Simple. Evens and odds; the dice are as loaded in favour of happiness as tragedy, but only if you notice.”

“I fear we may be playing with two different sets of dice, but I’m glad you accepted Doodle’s stupid wager. I do feel lucky to have met you, you’re good and kind.”

The man flushed with pleasure and whispered, "I feel like dancing you to the moon. I don't want to leave you, but I should return to Lady Llewellyn or she might not let me see you tomorrow." He dropped his voice again. "I'm going to buy you a magnifying glass. It'll be an excuse to see you and if I'm lucky I'll get to kiss you." His smile faded as he glanced towards the door. "Oh no...Strathmore the plaguey pox; I hope the next time he sails to France he falls overboard in a thick fog...did I say something wrong Miss Penny? You look upset."

"Jeremiah, my fiancé, died at sea..."

"Curse my tongue; I'm terribly sorry...no that's a lie. Don't hate me Penny, but if you'd married him I wouldn't have tasted the sweetest lips ever created." Priscilla was working up the nerve to tell him she'd equally enjoyed his kisses when the drawing room door swung inwards and the beautiful Duke of Strathmore stepped into view followed by a sour faced Catherine who was clearly displeased that her eminent guests preferred the company of her old maid cousin. Priscilla obediently bent over her hat and tried to keep her eyes on the ribbon, but they kept bouncing upwards to make sure warm brown eyes were still smiling at her. Could the man fill her life with happiness? His adoring wink made her blush as she bit back a smile. There was something in the way he looked at her that made her want to jump into his arms and press her excited heart into his green striped waistcoat. She meekly ignored the desire and braced herself for her cousin's wrath.

Chapter 9

Edmund turned to see Strathmore and Lady Catherine join them and managed a polite expression. Strathmore was a human pox, but his entrance was lucky because it brought a few more minutes with the woman glancing up at him every five seconds. His eyes gravitated back to Penny's pretty features relaxed with happiness. Seeing her lips still flushed from his kisses made him smile. Every time she glanced up at him he felt a dose of bliss heighten the luxurious throbbing as if pleasure had multiple layers he'd never explored. If he was lucky she'd be his by the end of the week. The first thing he'd do was throw her hideous cap in the fire so he could see her beautiful ears. He'd take her in his arms and press his aching chest against soft heaving silk. He could feel his body playing a symphony in C minor. He was going to marry her and thoroughly make love to her, but he'd have to wait. The length of waiting was almost irrelevant as long as he didn't have to wait seventy-seven or seven days; he wanted to pick her up and carry her away immediately. Would she let him? She might. The thought caused another wave of bliss. She thought him good and kind. She'd returned his kisses. His toes curled in his boots as he struggled to moderate his physical desire. His chest felt swollen with happiness as he caught another shy glance that made him feel like the luckiest man ever born.

The Duke stopped beside him and looked Edmund up and down with an amused smile before turning to greet the seated woman. "Good morning Miss Priscilla...I see my early morning call has been given a boring prologue. Pinhead...you're looking rather..." The Duke pursed his lips in amusement as he glanced at Edmund's skin tight trousers. "...sharp this morning. Be careful around Miss Priscilla; she's not a pin-cushion. We wouldn't want you to accidentally poke her...she might bleed." Edmund felt the blood drain from his face in embarrassment and then flush red with anger. Edmund glanced at the seated woman relieved to see she was completely unaware of the Duke's double-entendre. The impulse to put his fist in the man's face was resisted by the thought of having to explain to Penny why he'd hit the man. His hands stayed firmly behind his back. "You're not as sharp as I thought Pinhead. A sharp man knows what he wants and obtains it. Hesitation has cost many a field marshal his life. Nelson is a hero because he disobeyed orders and sailed into battle. History snubs men who hesitate; Miss Priscilla...would you do me the honour of accompanying me for ride in my new carriage?" Edmund felt the words like a knee in the groin. He instinctively knew that Lady Catherine would never have allowed Penny out for a ride with him. Of course the Duke would be granted the privilege; Strathmore had a mesmerising affect on the female sex. He'd have to watch his Penny being tucked into Strathmore's carriage and there was no telling what the man would do. The thought twisted Edmund's stomach in a knot. His inner organ converting blood into bliss had been cauterised leaving the lonely sensation of acute anxiety. His only relief was the look on Penny's face. She looked like the Duke had asked her to sew herself a death shroud.

"It's very kind of you my Lord, but I'm afraid I can't go out today. I have work..."

Lady Catherine grabbed the yellow bonnet out of Penny's hand. "Don't be stupid. His Grace's offer is an honour not to be snubbed. Go change out of that black rag into something with colour and leave off that hideous old maid's cap. We don't want people to think His Grace is escorting his housekeeper on a ride about town."

"I hardly think I'd be taken for his housekeeper..."

"Shut up and go change. Your rudeness sickens me."

"But it looks like rain...it might thunder...perhaps another day Your Grace."

Lady Catherine's eyes widened in horror; to impede Strathmore was to earn his wrath. That would lead to a painful social death as surely as the sun would rise in the morning. "Priscilla Stanley...go change or I'll be changing my companion."

"Yes my Lady." Priscilla rose from her chair and curtsied in the direction of the two men before glancing into Edmund's eyes. "Thank you for thinking of me Lord Warrenne; it was a pleasure to see you today." Her silent plea for help caused brief elation. She trusted him and he couldn't think of any way to rescue her. He felt like he'd stumbled upon a dragon about to eat his Penny and he'd left his sword at home. Her took her offered hand and reverently kissed it. Had he imagined her returning his light squeeze? His eyes followed her exit, his whole body swivelled to watch her disappear taking all colour from the room. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Strathmore lean towards him.

"Poor Pinhead; it must hurt to see your beloved Penny go dress for me. Ah love, the emotion that produces ecstasy and agony in equal measure." Edmund felt stunned as the word love reverberated in his heart like a true clear note. "What's the matter Pinhead? You look perturbed. Does it hurt to imagine what might happen to your Penny in my new carriage?"

Edmund's impotence to protect his Penny boiled out of his mouth. "Touch her with any part of your poxy person and you'll regret it."

The Duke merely raised a single contemptuous eyebrow. "You forgot to thrust out your chest when making the challenge Boy. Didn't your father live long enough to teach you how to act a man?"

"I'm man enough to pummel you."

"Unlike you, Pinhead, I am a gentleman. I'd never injure a lady's finer sensibilities by courting her stinking of unchanged linen or picking my nose and eating the crust. Your silly Doodle was quite forthcoming with the details of your adventure. I wonder when you fell in love...before or after she refused you?"

"You're a vulgar miscreant."

"I'd rather be a vulgar miscreant than a fastidious pinhead."

"Why are you doing this? She's not even your type."

"How do you know my type Boy? A pretty sensible brunette is just what I need. She may even live past the first two children."

"She isn't going to marry you."

"Perhaps not...we'll have to wait and see how fate flips the coin."

"Penny is going to marry me."

"Oh? How many times has she turned you down? Is it an unsatisfying number? Perhaps you need to experience rejection a few more times. Your blushing cheeks betray you Pinhead. Who do you think a sensible woman would choose; a wealthy beautiful Duke or a fool who picks his nose and forgets to change his smalls? It's not a difficult choice. I win."

Edmund blinked back unmanly tears as his fists tightened. "You're only chasing her because I want her. This is all because I won your stupid carriage, isn't it?"

“Let’s just say...it would have been more fortuitous for you to have lost that game of cards or to have accepted my offer of payment in gold. Your eccentric habit of refusing to wager money no doubt makes your life easier Pinhead. We all know you’d have to count every coin you won. Heaven knows it would have taken you so long to count two thousand guineas that you wouldn’t have had time to bed your mistress before she died of the pox. That would have been sad; you might have forgotten what it felt like to count your thrusts. I suspect you’ll be wishing you’d chosen to count a pile of gold when you read in a magazine that your Penny has married me.”

Edmund felt the words like a blow to his chest. “You’d ruin my life because of stupid carriage?”

“No Pinhead, you ruined your life by insisting I offer collateral instead of money. That carriage was...particularly comfortable.”

“You can have the blasted carriage; I don’t need it or want it.”

Strathmore rolled his eyes and heaved a heavy sigh of irritation. “I don’t want it now that you’ve touched it. Your thorough presence on my seats has ruined it. Sell it for scrap for all I care.”

“You’d marry a woman you didn’t want just to make me suffer because I won your stupid carriage? Are you mad?”

“Who said I didn’t want her? Society women are so predictable. They hear my name and throw themselves at me in worshipful oblation like lambs to the slaughter; it’s such a bore. Miss Priscilla, however, will make a pleasantly unpredictable companion. The crowning pleasure of course will be making love to her at nine every morning. You’ll look at the clock and know that I’m counting my thrusts and my pleasure will cause you to writhe in agony.” The Duke’s smile didn’t reach his eyes as he looked his stunned victim up and down with satisfaction. “If I have my way, you’ll never pin yourself to her bed sheets. Ah Miss Priscilla...I’ve never known a woman to change so quickly with such stunning results. You look utterly fetching in pink and that bonnet...a delightful frame for such a pretty face. Excuse us Warenne; I have an enjoyable hour planned for Miss Priscilla...”

Edmund was deaf to his persecutor. Wrenched around at the command of his heart, he stared with an equal measure of pleasure and pain at the pretty woman in pink. Seeing Strathmore step towards Penny, Edmund rushed forward shoving his rival out of the way. Grabbing her hand he reverently kissed it and held it to his chest. “Penny, come away with me right now. If you don’t want to buy a license we can ride to Gretna Green...I don’t care...marry me.”

His Penny’s cheeks flushed bright red as she glanced between the two men. “Lord Warenne; I’m honoured, but...”

Strathmore shook his head. “I’d forbear that offer if I were you Miss Priscilla. Lord Warenne was just telling me he wants to marry my cousin Guinevere. He raptured over her impressive dowry as well as her black silky hair and willowy frame; at least that’s what he said. I fear he’s one of those men who doesn’t know what he wants.”

“Strathmore is a cursed liar. I’d never marry his bluestocking cousin. The last time I danced with her she asked me if I knew any pirates and looked disappointed when I didn’t. When I reluctantly called on her the next day as a dutiful gentleman she practically chained me to her pianoforte and had me singing pirate songs till I was sea sick; I’d rather marry a pirate than his cursed cousin.”

“Guinevere would make you a perfect wife Warrene. She’s beautiful, wealthy, intelligent and desperate; the last adjective having the most in common with your good self.”

“I don’t want your poxy cousin; I want Penny.”

Strathmore’s left eyebrow arched accentuating the dangerous gleam of hatred in his brown eyes. “Miss Priscilla will have plenty of time to make up her mind whether to throw her life away on a pinhead or accept a better offer.”

“Don’t go with him Penny; come with me.”

None of them noticed Lady Catherine until she took hold of Penny’s arm and firmly led her towards the door. “Priscilla is going to have a carriage ride with His Grace. Your errant knight theatrics Lord Warrene are unhelpful and embarrassing. Take my advice; that silly face would never convince a woman you love anything other than drama.”

Edmund followed the trio out to the carriage. It all seemed to happen in slow motion. Penny was helped into the carriage by the evil Duke where she stared out the window like a lost soul on her way to Hell. The Duke sat down beside her and leaned over her shoulder to smile at Edmund. Seeing the Duke pick up the end of one of the bonnet’s ribbons and visibly kiss it caused an eruption of rage in Edmund’s heart. The woman he loved was being carted off into unknown dangers. Shaking in fury he watched as the footman closed the door and the horses were whipped into motion.

“My horse!”

Lady Catherine looked at Edmund with pursed lips. “If you’re going to order me about in that tyrannical tone I suggest you take yourself off to the mews and saddle your nag yourself. Good Day my Lord.” Edmund didn’t bother to retrieve his hat and gloves. He had to make sure nothing happened to Penny.

Chapter 10

Priscilla ignored the noise of the carriage wheels clunking over cobblestones and turned to look at her unwanted suitor. The beautiful man looked pleased with himself as he folded his arms and propped his feet on the opposite bench. His sneering smile gave the impression he was savouring a private amusement. Catching her gaze his lips relaxed into a more genuine gesture, but his eyes remained cold and unmoved. She felt like a ladybug about to be cocooned in a spider's web saved to be eaten at a later date. She clutched her large reticule and wondered if it might be prudent to take out her embroidery.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes Your Grace."

"Good. Your comfort is important to me." The man's eyes appraised her with obvious pleasure and then smiled as if she amused him. She could believe Lord Warrenne wanted to marry her because he enjoyed her company. The man seated next to her made her feel like a horse up for sale. The only pleasant aspect of her ride with the Duke was that she had Lord Warrenne's gift to look forward to at the end of it. She'd left it wrapped up and hidden under a loose floorboard.

"Where are we going?"

"For a ride; there's nothing to fear Miss Priscilla. I'm not going to hurt you." Priscilla silently disagreed as she opened her reticule and took out the eternally unfinished embroidery stuck through with her largest needle and started making tiny slow stitches swaying as the carriage turned a sharp corner. "Do you always work embroidery when a man tries to court you?"

"Are you courting me? I remember rejecting your offer my Lord."

"I remember some silly protest over our lack of intimacy, but once you get to know me you'll find I'm excellent husband material. Half the women in London would poison their husbands to sit where you're sitting."

"You don't strike me as a man who'd take a snake to his bosom."

His smile was almost genuine. "What do I strike you as Madam?"

Priscilla's hand holding the needle paused. She turned her head and took in the curious amused expression. "You strike me as a spider Your Grace. I suspect you enjoy spinning webs and catching people."

His features crumpled into boyish laughter momentarily erasing years from his face. "We shall get along famously."

"Why?"

"You won't bore me."

"How do you know?"

"No one's made me laugh like that in almost seventeen years."

"You can't know many amusing people."

“That’s a truth. Society’s boring sycophants can’t kiss my...hands fervently enough. Few people speak anything, but cant these days.”

“Why don’t you like Lord Warenne?”

The smile twisted into a sneer. “The man’s a pinhead.”

“Why must you call him that? How would you feel if he addressed you as Pinhead?”

“He’d regret it.”

“That’s hypocritical!”

The boyish laughter erupted again. “Madam, life has a pecking order and I’m at the top. I outrank him. I call him whatever I please.”

“You can’t have many friends if you treat people like chickens.”

“I don’t need many friends.”

“Do you devour everyone that stumbles into your web?”

The man’s eyes looked like frozen mud as his voice cracked like a warming icicle. “Madam; I do not find that amusing.”

Priscilla shivered with cold relief. All she had to do was keep insulting the man and she’d be free of his unwanted attentions. “I don’t find it amusing when you call Lord Warenne a pinhead.”

The beautiful man’s lips turned up as he snorted in amusement. “Lord Warenne...” The Duke sneered his rival’s name with contempt. “...would be enraptured to hear it.”

“Why?”

The beautiful man turned to gaze at her with amusement. “Because the fool’s in love with you.”

Priscilla flinched in shock. “He told you he loved me?” Her embroidery lay forgotten in her lap as she relived chocolate adoring eyes, electric fingers caressing her throat and his divine kisses. Even her beloved Jeremiah had never made her feel so... She struggled to find an appropriate word to describe her complicated feelings.

The Duke heartlessly interrupted her pleasant memories. “You can always tell when a man’s in love. He stares at his heart’s desire with an expression that would be mistaken for indigestion if his eyes weren’t so focused upon one woman. Wherever she goes, his eyes follow with longing. He’s a slave to the ache in his chest demanding he make her his own. It’s sickening. I urge any admirable man to avoid it like the plague.”

“Don’t you think that’s rather cruel? What if the next day he was to meet a woman who’d win his heart? Your unhelpful advice might ruin his life.”

“Life is cruel; then we die.”

Priscilla eyed the beautiful man with distaste as she realised if she didn't start seeing life's happy side of the coin she'd end up bitter and twisted too. "Has your life been so unlucky that you can't see a single good thing?"

"There are a few momentary pleasures." His eyes raked her with a gleam that threatened future intimacies. The thought made her want to burst into tears.

"Life is cruel in-between pleasures then you die? I think even Lord Warrenne would say I'm a ray of optimism next to your fated doom. Don't you see any good in anything? Aren't you glad you're alive?"

"No. Why would I be glad I'm alive?"

"Don't you feel glad you have two eyes when you see a rainbow? Haven't you ever heard a piece of music so beautiful it made you cry? When you step out of a carriage after a long ride; aren't you glad you have two legs that work?"

"The day I rejoice in a sore backside my coachman will be dropping me off at Bedlam. Nothing good lasts more than a flicker. Wretchedness is merely made more acute by having sampled a minute portion of happiness, believe me."

Priscilla shook her head as if to break free from mental chains of doom. "Tragedy is only one side of the coin my Lord. We can find happiness if we turn the coin over and look for the good."

The Duke's rudely snorted. "It sounds like Pinhead has been mesmerising you with tales of blue skies."

"What if he has? Is it so bad to see the good? Is it so impossible to be happy?"

"There is no such thing as happiness."

"I pity the woman you marry. Her life will be utterly miserable without even a hint of peace or happiness in her home. Even if she loves you, you won't let her love you. The poor wretch will cry herself to sleep praying one day your icy heart will thaw, but it won't. And then one day your heart will stop and they'll put you in the freezing crypt where you'll be miserable forever."

"I don't want anything to do with love. That's why you'll make an acceptable companion. I'll never fall in love with you and you'll never love me. You'll do your duty without encumbering my bed with emotional hysterics. I loathe emotional hysterics."

"You certainly weren't born a romantic."

"Romance is nothing more than cruel theatrics put on by one's inner organs."

The angry vehemence of his words made Priscilla's eyes fill with compassionate tears as she suddenly saw a younger man made an early widower. "You loved your wife didn't you? She died and broke your heart." The Duke silently turned away and stared intently out the window at his side as if she hadn't addressed him. "That must have been awful, but didn't she give you a son? Surely having a part of her is better than nothing?" His only response was to tighten his arms across his chest. "I may wear the crown of doom, but I don't revel in it. I want to be happy. I want to marry someone who makes me smile when he steps into view. I don't want to marry a miserable wretch. I'm afraid you'll have to continue searching for a more suitable miserable Duchess."

“You’re eminently suitable.” The words crackled like a half frozen mud puddle.

“Why?”

The Duke’s head turned towards her enough so his cold brown eyes could look her up and down. “When you die in childbed I can bury you without any sense of loss. It’s the sensible option. You need a husband. I need legitimate heirs. We marry. Problems solved.”

“Luckily I have another option. Lord Warenne has asked me to marry him and I’ve a mind to accept.”

“You’ll come to admire my finer qualities. My last mistress hated me for years, but she still begged me not to leave her.”

“She’s was probably afraid of starving...why did you leave her?”

“She fell in love with me. Every time we met she’d water my chest with a warm shower of tears as she pled for some sign of affection. I wasn’t paying her for affection. It’s hard to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh with a woman who thinks that if she water’s one with enough tears love will somehow erupt like a fungus on one’s chest.” Priscilla felt sorry for the unknown woman as the Duke snorted in derision.

“Why didn’t you marry her?”

The frozen mud puddles turned to look at her with irritation. “Don’t you listen? I told you I don’t want anything to do with love. I have no desire to wake up every morning and face a woman who longs for something I’ll never give her. How boring. I want pleasure and simplicity; nothing more.”

“Well if that’s all you want there are plenty of ladies who’ll oblige you, but I’m not one of them.”

The cold brown eyes were again amused. “That’s why you’re going to marry me.”

“I’m going to marry you because I don’t want to marry you? Have you been drinking?”

The beautiful man appeared not to have heard her. “Why does Lord Pinhead call you Penny?”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“I suspect he wishes to collect you and put you in a jar. I wonder if he’d take you out every evening to play with you or if he’d leave you out for hourly inspection. I’ll choose the latter.”

Priscilla clutched her embroidery for courage. “I’m glad Lord Warenne was the first to visit me this morning. I was feeling so wretched I might have accepted even your offer, but not after his Lordship’s visit.” She shook her head. “I couldn’t bear to marry you; the thought repulses me. Take me home!”

The man at her side unfolded his arms and slid closer until he whispered in her ear, “Did Lord Pinhead make love to you this morning? I see by your sudden feverish cheeks that he did. Did he kiss you? Did he tell you a story about how he aches for you? I assure you Madam there’s little difference between what he feels for you and what I want from you except I’m not suffering from acute indigestion.” Priscilla bent over her embroidery and prayed he’d

disappear as the man's lips hovered near her cheek. "You stink of eau d'amour. Never mind, it'll fade into something more palatable after a few years as my wife."

Priscilla flinched as he caressed her cheek with his nose. "Don't touch me."

"Am I not allowed the same liberties as my boyish rival?" Priscilla shivered in fear as cool lips skimmed the corner of her mouth. "How can I convince you of my superior worth if you don't allow me an opportunity to demonstrate?"

"Don't..." Long slender fingers encircled her waist. Please...don't..." She cringed away from lips caressing the corner of her mouth. "...stop...I'm warning you...stop." Amused laughter warmed her cheeks belittling her protest. Clutching her needle she jabbed hard into the back of his hand.

"Ouch!" The hands momentarily withdrew before grabbing for her weapon. She wounded his grasping fingers and then stabbed his leg for good measure. "Hellion!" The beautiful man slid back to his own corner rubbing his thigh. "What did you do that for? I was only kissing you."

"I warned you."

"You didn't say anything about stabbing me. I'll have to clear my house of all sharp objects. It's a good thing I like eating soup."

"I'm not going to marry you. Take me home or else."

The man eyed her embroidery through narrow slits. "We haven't finished our ride." He casually let down his window and returned his attention to Priscilla.

"It was finished before it started. I don't like you. I think you're a boring hateful wretch and I'd rather die than be your Duchess."

"Playing hard to get?" The man lounging in the corner suddenly lunged for her embroidery. Grabbing the fabric he pulled it from her slippery fingers and tossed it out the window with a triumphant smile. "Now we can safely finish discussing our impending nuptials. Your dramatic resistance is noted, but I'm afraid I've made up my mind and as anyone will tell you..."

Priscilla's eyes filled with tears as she stared horrified past the man's moving lips and out his window as the lashing rain. They'd left Bath and were heading north east through the countryside. "Where are we going?"

"Scotland. Relax Hellion; I'm not going to ravish you. As my wife you'll receive the utmost courtesy."

"Since when has kidnapping become a courtesy?" Lord Warrenne would think she'd willingly absconded to become a Duchess. Tears gushed from her eyes. He'd hate her. He'd never kiss her again.

"There's no need to cry Hellion. You're perfectly safe." She cried louder as the beautiful man reluctantly slid back to her side and scowled at her tears. "You look awful when you cry." She sobbed harder as she imagined what Lord Warrenne would do if he found her crying. He'd take her in his electric arms and whisper sweet happy words in her ear. "Come Madam; being a Duchess is no mean thing." She flinched as a masculine hand came to rest on her thigh. "Truly, it won't be as bad as you think. I've never hurt a woman; I'd hardly start with my wife. You'll have every luxury..."

“Everything, but kindness or love.”

The man rolled his eyes as he sighed loudly in irritation. “Love and kindness are highly overrated. A comfortable bed, a full belly, a purse of gold and the occasional pleasure are adequate believe me.”

“I want to marry Lord Warenne.”

The Duke sneered, “Well you’re not going to marry Lord Pinhead. You’re going to marry me; you suit my needs. Besides, our union will make Lord Pinhead pin himself into a shroud. I can see him now as he gets the news...he’ll pale as his heart’s blood drains away to the sensation of acute drumming agony...”

Priscilla turned to stare in horror. “That’s why you want to marry me; to injure Lord Warenne? Are you mad? What has he done to deserve a broken heart?”

“Madam if I didn’t want you I wouldn’t marry you. The fact Lord Pinhead will be crushed by our union is merely a bonus.”

“No. You want to marry me because Lord Warenne is in love with me. I’ve never met anyone so...evil.”

“You clearly haven’t met my cousin Lyndhurst.”

“Take me back to Bath.”

“Madam; fighting your fate will do nothing, but irritate me. If you think to scratch out my eyes I warn you, you’ll be wearing that dress until you come to your senses.”

“Take me back. Now!”

The Duke’s lips curled up in amusement. “Protesting against your fate is unproductive. I suggest you quietly accept your future happy state and cease your senseless...” The Duke grimaced in agony as Priscilla plunged her eight inch hat pin deep into his leg before pulling it out and stabbing at his arm. “Kill me and they’ll hang you...” The words were hissed between clenched teeth.

“I don’t imagine there’s much difference between hanging and suffocating as your unloved bride...Your Grace.”

“Hellion! Give me that hatpin...Ouch! Blast it...that hurt.” He rubbed his leg as he blinked away unmanly tears. “Fine, I’ll take you back, but you will marry me.”

“Not unless you want to suffer.”

“You’ll willingly accept my proposal; I always get what I want.”

“You must want to suffer, because that’s what you’ll get. Turn this coach around before I do something insensible.”

The Duke leaned out of the open window into the rain and shouted, “Take us back to Bath. Miss Stanley wishes to return home.” Ignoring her, he rested an elbow on the open window with his face turned into the rain and rubbed his leg. Priscilla clutched the hat pin like a dagger until the outskirts of Bath appeared on the horizon. She reluctantly tucked it back into

the crown of her hat and through her hair and wondered what Lord Warrenne would say when she told him she'd marry him without delay.

Chapter 11

Edmund returned home chilled to the bone, his clothes soaking wet. The agony of his failure to find the Duke's carriage was compounded by a throbbing headache and violent shivers. Gulping down a hot drink he crawled into bed intent on getting up and returning to Lady Catherine's drawing room as soon as he was warm.

A bright cheerful morning sun woke him from unpleasant slumbers of being roasted in hell by the Duke of Strathmore to find he was burning up with fever. He could die. The horrifying thought made him groan. He might never kiss his Penny again or tell her that he loved her. His heart might be silenced before it could deliver its treasure. Fat tears quickly dried on his burning cheeks. There was no telling what Strathmore might do. Edmund knew he couldn't waste time. He tried crawling out of bed, but quickly crawled back into it. Being carried into his beloved's presence on a stretcher would not give the right impression. He'd send a love letter. Women liked that sort of thing and she'd have a souvenir if he died. Half delirious, he sat up in bed hunched over his travelling desk and scribbled his heart onto a sheet of paper and then sent for his footman. "This must be delivered directly into Miss Priscilla Stanley's hands." The servant took the letter and returned half an hour later. "How did she receive it? Did she say anything? Did she look pleased?"

"I'm sorry my Lord, the man at the door said I was to hand the letter to him which was contrary to your orders...so I brought it back."

Edmund felt his eyes well up with tears as he moaned in physical and mental anguish. "I want it in her hands within the hour...whatever it takes."

"My Lord; perhaps I might inspire Lady Catherine's servant's charitable interests with money? How badly do you want me to accomplish the task?"

"Money? Yes...take the purse...on my dressing table...tell her I wish I could deliver it in person."

"As you wish my Lord." The manservant tucked the heavy purse into his pocket and quietly closed the door behind him. Sniffing back his tears Edmund relaxed and fell back to sleep for another few hours of being roasted on a spit turned by a horned Strathmore. He woke in a dark room, the curtains drawn against the night. Thirsty, he reached over and rang his bell. The maid stepped into the room looking half asleep.

"You rang me Lord?"

"I'm parched..." He gulped down the offered liquid and then sighed with relief. "My letter... did John succeed?"

"Succeed in what me Lord?"

"I sent him to deliver a letter to my Penny."

"Did ye? That's odd. He packed his bags and left without notice this morning. Said he couldn't abide...well, you're lucky to be rid of him me Lord. He was no good as a footman always lounging around picking his teeth. I tell ye I never did like him."

"My letter?"

"There was nothing in his room, but the bed linen and a used chamber pot."

“Send for Doodle.”

“Doodle me Lord?”

“Mr Donald Stanley...send for him and hand me my writing case. I need to write another letter...”

“It’s three in the morning me Lord; he’s likely drunk. We’ll send for him first thing gone ten.” She refreshed the wet rag on his forehead in the bowl at his bedside and quietly left Edmund groaning to himself, tormented by anxiety caused by a mental drawer that he couldn’t close labelled ‘first love letter’. Inside the mental drawer was a small scrap of paper that read, ‘Whereabouts unknown; task uncompleted.’

Jerking awake Edmund waited impatiently for his friend to arrive. Ten came and went. The servants assured him they’d delivered his message. At one in the afternoon a knock on the door dragged him fully awake as a blurry man stopped at his bedside.

“Doodle? Is that you?”

“Who elsh would I be? Thish had better be good Lucky. I have a...Head...Ahtchoooooo...” Edmund flinched in pain as his ears nearly popped from the noise of his friend’s sneeze and then winced in disgust as he wiped his friend’s snot off his face. “...I have a head cold.”

“Obviously. I need you to take this to your cousin, Penny, and don’t sneeze on her.”

“I don’t have a coushin named Penny.”

“Miss Priscilla Stanley.”

“Why do you call her Penny?”

“Never mind that, just deliver this into her hands. You can have your lucky snuff box back... it’s in the top drawer. Tell her I’m gravely ill with fever. Tell her I wish I could have the pleasure of delivering it myself.”

“You’re not in love with the old thing are you?”

“Yes.”

“And you want to marry her?”

“The sooner the better...” Doodle’s eyes lit up as his Uncle’s promise to pay him five thousand pounds if he could marry Priscilla off to Warenne became a glorious certainty.

“Congratsh Lucky...you mush be mad, but I’ll be devilish glad to have you in the family...”

“Can you come tomorrow? I want to send her a letter every day.”

“Don’t you have a footman?”

“Lady Catherine won’t let my footman present anything to Penny...I’m desperate...”

“If I musht...you could inspire my promptness with a loan. Mulgrave picked my pockets.”

“There’s a purse in my desk...in my study. The key is behind Dante’s Vita Nuova...it’s on the middle shelf near the left side. You’ll tell me how she receives it won’t you? Tell her I’m ill. Tell her I wish I could be there...”

“You’re repeating yourself. Go back to sleep...Ahhhtchoooooo.”

“Ugh. Go away before you deafen me.”

Five days later, Edmund’s fever had been joined by a head cold exponentially increasing his misery. Doodle came every day promptly at one and left with a cheerful tally-ho. Donald insisted she got the letters and that she wished her suitor good health. Edmund’s heart was starving to hear anything about his beloved, but Doodle’s cryptic responses merely caused more agony. Learning the Duke of Strathmore was attending Lady Catherine’s reception room daily, didn’t improve his mood. Nor did Doodle’s revelation that the latest craze haunting Bath’s smoking rooms was an oft repeated wager demanding the dared man to ask the aging spinster, Miss Priscilla Stanley, to marry him. It was surmised she’d turned down at least thirty men that week alone. It was only time before she said yes and the unlucky man would be stuck with the old thing. The thought of hoards of young men courting Penny made Edmund groan in misery in-between sneezes. After two more days in bed Edmund couldn’t bear to think of another day passing without seeing Penny and fighting off his rivals. Exhausted by the acts of bathing and dressing, he had to rest fully clothed for another two hours before he had the energy to descend to his carriage. His pockets bulging with clean handkerchiefs, he was shown into Lady Catherine’s drawing room. His hungry eyes found his heart’s desire meekly embroidering as the densely packed room chatted at an ear splitting level. He heard someone say, “Hey Lucky, where have you been?” Penny’s head snapped in his direction; her smile lighting a bonfire in his chest. Sniffing, he returned her smile. With his heart beating a rhythmic Hallelujah Chorus, he strode into the room like a conquering hero. One minute the floor in front of him was empty, the next he was tripping over an extended boot. One minute he was standing upright owning the world, the next he was flat on his face the roar of laughter bruising his tender self-image. If only the floor would open up and swallow him. What woman wanted a man who couldn’t even enter a room without making an ass of himself? He was losing all will to live when he felt soft fingers on his arm and heard the rustle of silk skirts at his side.

“My Lord?” Hearing Penny’s voice he groaned in relief as he automatically turned over onto his back so he could see his would be nurse.

“Penny...”

“Your nose is bleeding.”

“Devil take it...he tried to take a handkerchief out of his bulging pocket and managed to pull out the lot causing the room to ring with laughter as someone shouted out, that it was better than a play. “...my letters? They weren’t too...forward?”

“Letters? What letters?”

Edmund felt panic vie with anger for supremacy. “Doodle assured me that he delivered them. I’ve been sick...”

“Yes, you look awful.”

Edmund’s bruised self-image reeled at the blow. She thought he looked awful? “I’m still sick...” He held his breath as she lightly pressed the back of her hand to his forehead. “...Oh Penny...” Her touch seemed to penetrate his skin and soothe his heart.

“You’re burning up; you should have stayed in bed.”

“I had to see you...you must have received at least one of my letters.”

“No.” She leaned over him and lowered her voice to a whisper...but Doodle has been coming every day, which I thought very odd as he loathes Cousin Catherine and never looks at me. He’s been sitting by The Duke of Strathmore...I’ve seen him handing letters to Strathmore.”

“The Devil he has...I’m going to kill him. I paid him to deliver my letters.”

“Never mind Doodle, I’m wearing your necklace...” Edmund smiled as his eyes focused on the silver locket dangling from a silver chain. In his letter with the necklace he’d begged her to wear his offering if she felt disposed to marry him.

“My necklace...I didn’t think your beautiful throat could appear more beautiful. Did you like the Elizabethan penny inside? I picked it out especially...”

“It’s my new good luck charm.”

Edmund groaned with pleasure. “Oh Penny...if you knew what those words mean to me. I feel like I could...” He sneezed into his sleeve. “...conquer the world.”

“You’re going back to bed to conquer this fever...how long have you had it?”

“Didn’t Doodle, tell you I was sick?”

“He hasn’t said a word, the louse.”

“The day you went for a ride with Strathmore. I tried to follow on my horse, but I couldn’t find you. I got wet.”

“Promise me you’ll go back to bed.”

“As you wish my Lady, but there’s something I need to tell you...” Edmund’s heart nearly burst as the Duke of Strathmore’s sneer came into view cutting off his declaration of love.

“Ah, Lord Pinhead...” He paused to allow the room to snicker with laughter. “...you look a dog’s dinner. Shall I help you up or do you prefer lying on the floor? Are you hoping someone will fall on you and be poked?” The room roared with laughter as hushed wagers were made as to which man Miss Priscilla would choose. “If you were attempting a romantic pose I’m afraid you look merely tragic...or do I mean prostrate?”

“Go to the devil.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t quite catch that Pinhead. It must be the rug absorbing your muttered prayers.”

“I said go to the...Atchooooooo.”

Edmund felt like a bug about to be stepped on as Strathmore elegantly took out a handkerchief and covered his face before bending down. “Bringing illness into a house with children brings bad luck. Miss Penny won’t think you a hero when Lady Catherine’s babes die of fever. There’s a long chance she’ll marry you anyway, but I think it more likely she’ll snub your boring thorough kisses for a more thoughtful man.”

Edmund sighed in relief as his Penny eyed Strathmore with ill-disguised loathing as the room erupted with excited wagers. "Baiting a sick man is hardly thoughtful."

"Come my dear, you must admit that Lord Pinhead looks droll lying there with blood and snot all over his cravat. I expect him to sit up any moment and perform a monologue on how he once counted out Six-hundred and seventy-two bricks in a neighbour's wall and couldn't sleep until the man accepted an offering of three hundred and twenty-eight extra bricks. The man's wall is now an unsightly mess, but at least Pinhead can rest in peace knowing they add up to a thousand. If you don't think that's absurd I could recount stories told me by his Mistress that would alienate even the most sensible of sweethearts, though of course I wouldn't willingly sully your ears."

"No of course you wouldn't Your Grace; you're far too kind and loving to contemplate such an offence." The room instantly hushed as three dozen cod-eyes ogled the theatrics in the center of the room; the lady's tone implied quite the opposite.

"My dear Priscilla, you're going to spoil my hard won reputation as a misanthrope. Whatever will I tell my friends?"

"What friends?" The laughter in the room wilted in shock. Even Edmund's mouth gaped in horror as he looked back and forth between his beloved and the cold eyed Duke."

"Madam, one does not have to see the end of the rainbow to know the rainbow has an end. One day I'll introduce you to my friends. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. None of them resemble toads and a few even know how to read and write." The room erupted in enthusiastic clapping.

The room took no notice of the footman who delivered a note to Lady Catherine, fuming at being forgotten in her own drawing room. The footman waited next to her chair while she broke the wax seal on the letter. Her scowl faded as she snorted in amusement, her eyes shining with unholy glee. She passed the note back to the footman and nodded that the caller be admitted. "Lord Warene..." Three dozen heads swung in her direction. "...how could you think to inflict sickness on my drawing room? How insupportably dull. Take yourself away. My Lord Llewellyn would never forgive you if his precious heir caught your infirmity and was buried before his fourth birthday."

Edmund sighed with relief as Penny returned her full attention to him leaving the Duke without a foil. "It feels like forever since I saw you; I don't want to go."

"You need your bed my Lord. You shouldn't have left it. Return when you're feeling better... won't you?"

"Wellington couldn't stop me...Penny...I need to tell you that I..."

Edmund's next words were drowned out by Lady Catherine's greeting to the strange looking man standing in the door way. "Welcome Captain Foster; I believe you're acquainted with my cousin?"

"Prissy Stanley; what are you wearing on your pretty head? I've never seen such a hideous cap...wait, didn't your Mother used to wear that old thing?"

Edmund watched Penny's head slowly turn towards the door. "Jeremiah?" She stared at the man sporting an eye patch and two gold earrings for several long seconds before her eyes rolled back as she fainted, falling forward knocking the wind from Edmund's lungs. Once he

could breathe he was submerged in the pleasure of holding her close. He could smell heaven as his heart rumbled another Hallelujah Chorus. She was wearing his necklace. She was as good as his. Still lying on his back, Edmund clutched Penny as the stranger's face appeared above him. "I thought she might faint. Here, I'll take her."

Edmund snarled into a single blue eye set in a face well leathered by sun and sea. "I've got her. She's perfectly safe where she is."

"Give me the Lady." Mr Foster's tone had an edge that promised grave bodily harm. "If her fiancé can't pick her up off the floor, who can?" Lady Catherine appeared to be the only person who didn't find this piece of news astonishing.

Edmund's head rung like a cracked bell. "Fiancé? Why the devil would she marry you? You look like a stupid pirate."

Captain Foster snickered in amusement as he struck a theatrical pose. "Aye matey...give me yer purse and I'll kill ye quick before I feed ye to the fish." He clapped his hands and laughed at his own performance causing the room to follow suit. Lady Catherine's drawing room was turning out to be the best playhouse in town. Loud excited whispers sailed across the room as wagers were made as to who would end up chained to the old maid with two thousand pounds annuity.

Edmund sneered up at the smiling pirate. "Your face could be used as book binding, you appear to have one eye and your suit looks like it was stitched together by a drunk. The only thing missing is a parrot pooping on your shoulder. Why the devil would she want to marry you?"

"We can't all afford to pay snooty man milliners to prod us about in sensitive places, Pretty Man. Give me my bride or I'll show you how a seasoned seaman deals with unwanted competition for his sweetheart's affections." Edmund grunted in pain as the seaman's boot crushed his ankle. The man swooped down and easily tore Penny from his weak grasp before throwing her limp body over his shoulder and carrying her from the room like a sack of corn.

Edmund was trying not to cry when the Duke's leaned into view. "Who the devil is Jeremiah?"

"How the devil should I...wait...the seaman she fell in love with...the one who died... Blast! Why couldn't he come back from the grave after she'd married me?"

"Your luck appears to have run out Pinhead. You'd best go back to bed Boy. Leave rescuing the maiden in distress to a man who can stand on his own two feet." The Duke elegantly bowed to the room and left the stage to a burst of applause.

In contrast, the room echoed with laughter as Edmund crawled towards the door on his hands and knees. Someone was going to die, and it would probably be him. He could feel his ankle swelling as he mentally cursed the ugly pirate-seaman to a watery grave. Edmund needed a cunning plan...he'd recently inherited a small midge infested estate in Scotland that he didn't really want. He'd offer it to the ugly Jeremiah in exchange for faking his death a second time. He clearly hadn't drowned or spent many hours in civilized company. Penny might have once been in love with the rogue, but Edmund couldn't believe Penny would marry Robinson Crusoe. She was wearing his necklace. She'd as good as promised to marry him. Just because some smelly bore had been washed up on England's shore didn't mean she was going to forget Edmund's kisses...unless she preferred the pirate's kisses. The thought made his ankle throb in time with his head.

On reaching home, Edmund sent for Doodle to explain himself. He wasn't surprised when the servant returned to report his friend had left town in a hurry. He fell into bed fully dressed knowing his love letters had been sold to Strathmore. It was a thoroughly unthorough situation that demanded resolution. Why had luck turned against him? Where was the happy side of the coin? Was this was it felt like to be doomed?

Chapter 12

Priscilla came to her senses overpowered by the scent of ammonia. She turned her head away from the smell and opened her eyes to find the horribly familiar yet unfamiliar face of her dead fiancé. Her eyes started to roll back into head, but the smell of ammonia was cruelly pressed against her nostrils. She slapped the ammonia away and sat up on her bed and rubbed her aching neck. She felt like she'd been hung upside down like a side of beef. "Where have you been?"

"You're supposed to say, 'Jeremiah...you're alive!' and start weeping for joy."

"You can't be alive. I received an official letter from the Admiralty detailing your death. They pulled your body out of the water, sewed you into your hammock with a cannon ball and dropped you back into the sea. I find it difficult to swallow that your captain imagined your funeral."

"It was thoughtful of them to put your mind at rest, but the truth was we ran into some trouble. I was kidnapped and taken for ransom by pirates. Captain Rollicks refused to pay. My hosts were about to make me walk the plank when providence arrived in the shape of a merchant ship. The captain decided my execution would wait 'till after the ransacking. Fortunately the captain died of battle wounds and I survived and voila...here I am."

"You always did enjoy a good story."

"Where's your heart Priscilla? I've come back from the dead. I've thought about you on occasion and wondered what life would have been like if I'd been able to make it home to marry you, but alas..."

"Yes, alas my dowry was only an annuity of five hundred pounds until my parents' death. I heard you; that day you demanded my father give me a better settlement because you refused to be live under another man's roof. Papa always said you just wanted me for my inheritance. He said you spent time in the hedgerow with that buxom wench Mary Peel, but I didn't believe him. I understand she disappeared the day I got your letter...I don't suppose that was a coincidence?"

"How should I know? I don't keep a file on every woman I've tumbled. The paper would fill up a ship."

Priscilla reached for her neck and clutched Edmund's locket for moral support. "You tumbled Mary Peel when we were engaged? How could you?"

"What difference does it make? She's history. We'll marry and you'll never wear that ugly cap again. I must say, you're quite fetching for an old maid. I certainly won't mind fulfilling my conjugal duties." The man rudely scratched his trouser flap as he leered. "When I come into Bristol I won't have to board with the old slag; I'll have a bed of my own warmed by a tempting wife who bathes. A seaman need's his own hearth fire brightened by a pleasant smelling wench when he's on land. Here, give us a kiss..."

Priscilla rolled out of reach as the man approached with puckered lips. "And just how many English ports boast a Mrs Captain Foster?"

"Oh really Prissy, how can you be so indelicate to even think such a thing? I thought you were a lady. I feel disappointed, but let me remind you why you fell in love with me..."

“Get a way from me. I’m not the doe eyed simpleton who fell for your lies. Thirteen years of heartache, fear and loneliness have strangled the stupid girl who loved you. I’m going to marry Lord WARENNE. He’s good and kind...”

“You want to marry that pansy child-lord on the drawing room floor?” Jeremiah Foster guffawed with laughter. “What will he call you; Mamma?”

“Lord WARENNE is only five years my junior...” Tears of laughter spilled from his eyes. “... and he happens to be ill.”

“Then the pansy should have stayed home in bed instead of making an ass of himself. I had no idea your tastes were so exotic.” Captain Foster wiped his eyes and nose on his sleeve. “Never mind, you’ll get used to being Mrs Captain Foster in no time. What would you want with a Lord anyway? They’re all pansies who have to unbutton their flaps hourly to remind themselves they’re men.”

Priscilla felt an urge to slap the sneering face, but didn’t dare go close enough to accomplish the deed. “Lord WARENNE is man enough for me.”

“You poor old thing...you’re in love with that pansy-lord aren’t you? Well that’s too bad Prissy, because you’re going to marry me. I have a pressing need for two-thousand pounds. It’ll be the easiest money I ever earned. Pack your bags. Your maiden head is scheduled to be broken by the time the church bells ring noon tomorrow. As soon as I have my two thousand pounds I’ll be setting sail.”

“Never! You’re a hateful ugly pirate...”

“I prefer Captain Jerry Foster in refined company otherwise I’m known as...” The man struck a fierce pose, “The black heart of Calcutta...I was going to call myself Mad Jerry, but my crew didn’t think it savage enough.”

“You should have called yourself The Cad of Canterbury that would have been more accurate.”

“I would have been the laughingstock of the seven seas. My enemies would have called me Captain Pansy. Never mind Canterbury, I’m going to marry you and we’ll live happily ever after. It’ll be an easy matrimony. I’ll only see you once a year when I come to collect your annuity and formalise my ownership of your mattress. It shouldn’t be too painful. I understand refined ladies prefer their men a little rough.”

“You disgust me. I’d rather marry The Duke of Strathmore whose heart is a block of ice. I hope you end up crabmeat on the bottom of the ocean after the seagulls peck out your eyes.”

“That’s no way to win a seaman’s heart.”

“I don’t want your stinking heart...Captain. It can rot on Neptune’s fork for all I care. I’ll never marry you.”

“Oh I think you will Prissy, because if you don’t I’ll cheerfully snip the head off your beloved Pansy and stick it in a big vase. Marry me or bury your pansy-lord; it’s not a difficult choice if you love him; is it?”

Priscilla clutched her locket as tears gushed from her eyes. “You wouldn’t be so cruel...he’s done nothing to you.”

“They don’t call me ‘The Black Heart of Calcutta’ for drinking my coffee black. I’ll go tell your dear Cousin Catherine the good news and do take good care of your clothes. You’ll need them. Two thousand pounds will nicely cover my ship repairs and pay my crew, but it won’t stretch to a bridal wardrobe. I’ll be off for warmer climes while you stay with your sister till I return next year.”

“My sister hates me. Her husband tried to ravish me and then accused me of trying to seduce him. She tells everyone I’m dead.”

“Then you’ll have to live here. It makes no difference to me.”

“I’m an unpaid servant you imbecile. This isn’t a home and I’m not safe here either. Lord Llewellyn keeps trying to catch me alone. I can’t live here as a married woman. I’d be pregnant within weeks and not by you.”

“What do I care? I won’t be feeding the brat.”

Priscilla burst into tears as she flew at her old lover intending to claw out his eyes. She tore off his eye patch revealing a second angry perfectly good eye and dug her fingers into his face before he could ply her off and throw her on the bed. “I don’t care where you live or who beds you Prissy, but you’re going to marry me. Accept your fate. Where are your manners? You used to be such a sweet girl. A Captain needs a wife who can act like a lady. I don’t want my crew to think I married a tavern wench.” Priscilla sobbed into her bedclothes as the door slammed shut. She was too distraught to hear the muffled exchange outside or notice the door opening and closing and the key turning quietly in the lock. If she could just put her head on Lord Warrenne’s shoulder and feel his arms around her everything would be alright. He’d make sure life landed happy side up, but she didn’t even know where he was staying. She was doomed.

Feeling the end of the mattress give as someone sat down nearby she recoiled up off the bed. The Duke of Strathmore was nonchalantly folding his long elegant limbs and looking at her with mild amusement. “I was outside the open door in case you needed rescuing. I’m relieved to see you’ve forgotten your embroidery in the drawing room. So, you’d rather marry me than become Captain Calcutta’s latest bride?”

Priscilla felt her eyes fill with tears. “He’s threatened to kill Lord Warrenne.”

“So I heard. I can ensure Lord Pinhead’s safety...if you promise to marry me.”

Priscilla ogled the smiling man in disbelief. “You’d use my misfortune to leverage your advantage? That’s despicable!”

“Promise to marry me and I’ll rescue you from Captain Calcutta. Of course Lord Pinhead might be able to rescue you, but you’d have to get word to him and he’s young. He doesn’t have as many contacts as my good self not to mention he’s ill.”

“I think the word good is a little inappropriate.”

The man’s mild smile remained in place. “I always get what I want.”

“Well I don’t want to be your Duchess. I’d rather...”

“You’d rather marry Captain Calcutta and live here as a free servant? I don’t think you’re being honest with yourself my dear. What is this about Lord Llewellyn?” Priscilla felt her

cheeks blaze as the beautiful man on her bed raised an eyebrow. “Has he been...upsetting you?”

It had been so long since anyone cared about her safety Priscilla felt almost relieved as she sank on to the bed next to the man as she sniffed back her tears. “He was my suitor. I thought he loved me, but he married Cousin Catherine because her dowry was a lump sum. He seems to think because I once kissed him I should be willing to suffer his revolting attentions. He’s a vile pig. I have to keep my embroidery in my pocket all the time in case...”

“Ah...the embroidery is explained. Accept my proposal and no one will dare touch what is mine.”

“Why do you want a woman who doesn’t want you?”

“Simple; I want you.”

“I wouldn’t be happy.”

“You’ll be far happier as my Duchess than Mrs Captain Calcutta.”

“I need time...I need to speak with Lord Warenne...”

“No. Decide right now if you want me to rescue you or not. If not I’ll walk away and let you ruminate the Captain’s half-mast celebrations and your future ruin.”

“You give me your word of honour that Lord Warenne will be safe?”

“Lord Pinhead will be perfectly safe from Captain Calcutta...if you agree to marry me.”

Priscilla felt her heart ache as she clutched the locket for support. If Lord Warenne loved her marrying Strathmore would break his heart, but if she didn’t marry Strathmore he might be murdered. “I’ll marry you. Don’t expect me to like you and don’t expect a happy wife.”

“Happiness is irrelevant. It’s simply a passing emotion that makes the rest of life dreary. It’s best to accept life is one long misery; it makes life easier. I shan’t expect an engagement kiss today. I’ll wait until you’ve stopped crying and you realise how lucky you are to be rescued.” Priscilla was sobbing as the man let himself out of her bedchamber. Her heart felt like it would crack in two as she longed for Lord Warenne’s kind hands to soothe her red tear stained face. She really was doomed.

Chapter 13

Still wearing his boots; Edmund lay face down on his bed shivering from fever in-between coughs and sneezes, mentally tortured by his undelivered letters and his inability to rescue his Penny. The need for resolution overcame every sensible thought that demanded he remove his clothes and curl up with a hot water bottle. After another sneeze he rolled off the bed and staggered down stairs where he ordered his carriage. Ignoring his servants' protests that he was going to die if he didn't stay in bed, Edmund crawled into his carriage and asked to be driven to Lansdowne Crescent.

In Bath, the Duke of Strathmore always stayed with his school friend James Smirke, a man who refused to believe anything bad about the people he loved. In the Smirke household Strathmore could find laughter, acceptance and affection at least from his friend. It was well known Mrs Agnes Smirke particularly disliked Strathmore. She was a giant blonde beauty whose piercing stare left few men in doubt that she found them wanting. Edmund was too agitated to worry about Agnes Smirke. He wasn't paying a social call he was rescuing his sanity.

The weak winter sun was setting as he sent up his card. If he was really unlucky he'd catch Strathmore at dinner. His card was returned and he sighed with relief as he was let inside the elegant house. He reluctantly handed over his hat and coat and laboured slowly up the stairs to the first floor drawing room. Catching his breath, he stared at the domestic scene in disbelief. Was he hallucinating? Strathmore was sitting in an armchair with a tiny blonde fairy creature draped over his knees with a picture book. A replica fairy creature was lounging in James Smirke's arms working a tiny sampler. The frigid blonde Agnes sat alone on a sofa working her own embroidery, her basket artfully spilling open at her side.

Five pairs of eyes returned his stare of disbelief as if his appearance was equally bizarre. He belatedly bowed respectfully to the lady of the house and then to both men before needing to grab a handkerchief out of his left pocket to catch a deafening sneeze. He shoved the used handkerchief into his right pocket and turned to the mistress of the house. "Forgive me Madam for calling while obviously infirm. I have an urgent need to speak with His Grace in private." His polite speech was punctuated with a long sniff.

Agnes Smirke looked unmoved by the caller's request. "Strathmore?"

Edmund met the man's smiling eyes as a sinking feeling prepared him to face his doom. "I have nothing to hide. Speak away."

The Duke's innocent expression was almost believable. Nearly losing his balance, Edmund steadied himself and tried to sound authoritative. "It is a private, private matter Your Grace."

"Then it can wait 'till tomorrow afternoon Lord Warrenne when I will be at your private disposal." The Duke looked down at the child in his arms as if closing the conversation.

"It can not wait Your Grace; I won't be able to sleep."

"Why ever not?" The Duke's tight lips betrayed a faint smile of satisfaction.

"You know perfectly well..."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about Lord Warrenne. Perhaps you should return home and take yourself to bed. You look ill."

"I must have resolution..."

“Well you may have it tomorrow afternoon when you’re feeling better.”

“I won’t be feeling better.” Edmund mentally noted that the walls were moving and started counting the movement. He got to fifteen before being interrupted.

“If you must speak then speak. I have nothing to hide from my friends.”

Edmund was unaware of his disbelieving scowl, “As you wish my Lord; give me my letters or your word that you’ll deliver them to their intended recipient by tomorrow afternoon.” Four heads turned to stare at Strathmore with open curiosity.

“I’m sorry; I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“My love letters; the ones you bought from that traitorous…” Edmund managed to comprehend the presence of children and silencing his more colourful abuse. “…Doodle.”

The fairy creature on Strathmore’s knees looked at her mother with confusion, “What’s a doodle?”

“Doodle was my friend.” Edmund’s answer left the child equally confused.

“Mamma, can I have a doodle?”

“Is Nursesey a doodle?”

“Is Papa a doodle?”

Agnes Smirke’s eyes shimmered, “Doodle is a pet name like how your Uncle John calls you Imp.” Bored by the answer the two children returned their interest to the sick man.

“Mamma, what’s a love letter?”

“It’s a letter a man write to a woman he loves.”

“Does Papa write you love letters?”

“Yes.”

“Will a man write me love letters?”

“If you’re good.”

“I’ll be good.”

“I’ll be better.”

Edmund had lost count of how many times the walls had moved back and forth to the ticking of the bracket clock. “If you’ll give me my letters I’ll return to my sick bed with pleasure.”

Strathmore shrugged his shoulders at his friend’s look of concern. “I don’t know what you’re talking about Warenne. I think you need to send for a quack; you’re hallucinating.”

“Penny wasn’t hallucinating when she didn’t get my letters. She saw you…she saw Doodle hand you letters.”

Strathmore shrugged his shoulders again. "Life is filled with strange coincidences. Why would I want your love letters? I'm quite capable of writing my own when the need arises. I sent one this evening in fact to my fiancé." Edmund could see that he was the only one who found this piece of news astonishing.

"Have you proposed to another stranger at dinner?"

"Miss Priscilla Stanley accepted my offer of marriage this afternoon after I rescued her from Captain Calcutta."

Edmund snorted in contempt as he shook his head. "No! She wouldn't agree to marry you."

Strathmore raised an eyebrow. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"There is no way Penny would have accepted you; she was wearing my necklace. I asked her to wear it if she felt inclined to accept me and she was wearing it this afternoon. There is no way she would marry you unless you've forced her...if you've hurt her...I swear..."

The Duke calmly said to the room. "I fear Lord Warenne is having a turn; he certainly sounds insane to me."

"I'm perfectly sane."

"If you say so Lord Warenne; but I assure you Miss Stanley willingly accepted my offer of marriage without being beaten over the head."

Edmund's lips were trembling as he shook his head again. "You're doing this to torment me...because of that stupid coach...you're a fiend!"

"Mamma what's a feen?"

"Uncle John calls us feens."

"Is a feen a fairy Mamma?"

Agnes eyed the two men with pursed lips, "I think it might be time for you two to return to the..." Five pairs of eyes watched in fascinated horror as Edmund slowly succumbed to gravity and fell forward. After a stunned silence soft muffled sobbing could be heard coming from the carpet. "Frederick. We're in need your assistance."

The footman stepped into the room. "Yes Madam?"

"Lord Warenne has been taken ill and needs a bed. Master James will help you carry him up to the blue chamber. Put him to bed and then ask the kitchen to prepare hot water bottles and the usual cold remedies. Tell Cook I'll be down to prepare a sick tray."

"As you wish Madam." James Smirke reluctantly dropped his daughter in his chair and leaned over his wife to whisper something unintelligible, his hand gestures indicating he thought the young man on the floor should be shoved back in his carriage and sent home. The look on his wife's face left no room for discussion. The man was sick; he would stay. Edmund found himself turned onto his back, his tears running into the blood dripping from his nose. He couldn't even muster the strength to protest his undignified exit as the two fairy creatures danced either side of him as if he were some sort of macabre entertainment. His heart cracked as tragedy stamped its hallmark on his inner organs.

Chapter 14

As the mantel clock struck midnight, the Duke of Strathmore was sitting on his bed in his quilted silk dressing gown, his feet propped against a hot water bottle. With his last pipe of the day tucked in the corner of his mouth he was glancing through a magazine when a light knock on the door pulled him back to the present. It was probably his friend come to wish him good night. "Come." Peering over the rims of his reading spectacles his lips twisted in disgust as Agnes, balancing a tea tray on her hip, closed the door behind her and approached his side of the bed. She stood there staring at him with that frozen enigmatic look that said nothing, yet somehow conveyed an impression of contempt.

"I brought you a pot of warm honey-milk." She set the tray on the bedside table and then returned to staring at him.

"Thank you Mrs Smirke." Strathmore sighed in irritation as she eyed him like a flea under a microscope. "Madam, is your husband having difficulties performing his conjugal duties or is this just a midnight social visit? Either way, I'm not in the mood."

Her eyes raked over the length of his person and then looked him in the eyes. "The day I'm tempted by your scrawny limbs Strathmore, I'll be chained in Bedlam."

"That's a relief Madam; I find you as alluring as an empty coffin on a perfect day. If I'd been forced to wed you, you wouldn't ever have died in childbed."

Agnes pursed her lips, but it was impossible to tell if she was amused or irritated. "James says you loved your wife. Of course that would have required a heart. I find it difficult to believe such an organ resides in your chest."

"You'll have to take my word Madam that I have one. I'm afraid I'm not in the mood to carve open my rib cage to prove a point."

"It's just as well. Your blood would ruin my bedclothes."

"So to what sin do I owe the purgatory of your presence Madam?"

"My curiosity was aroused this afternoon by Lord Warrenne's dramatic demand for lost letters. While you and James were smoking in the study early this evening I ordered the carriage and called on Miss Priscilla Stanley. It was quite illuminating; Lady Catherine was in hysterics at the thought of her old maid cousin becoming a Duchess. Lord Llewellyn had an ugly head wound where his wife had thrown a vase after he unwisely refused to call you out and your supposed fiancé was locked in her chamber sobbing for Lord Warrenne. Her trunks were packed for what I suspect was a one way trip against her will to some uncivilised colony where you'd never find her. On learning that I too thought you a heartless fiend Miss Priscilla was exceedingly loquacious...aren't you going to ask me what happened next?"

"I assume you're about to tell me...there's no torment in silence."

"True; on finding me in her cousin's room Lady Catherine abused me roundly as your accomplice. I then gave Lady Catherine some pointers on running a smooth household and removed Miss Stanley to somewhere safe."

"Is that all? I was hoping to get some sleep tonight."

"You certainly won't have to worry about Captain Foster disappearing with your unwilling bride...I've taken care of him."

“What did you do, give him the kiss of death?”

“Did you know your cousin Gwen was in town to take the waters? Apparently she’s been suffering from some sort of bilious complaint; probably due to eating too much marzipan. She’s a beautiful intelligent woman and desperate, as you know, to marry before her brother spends her dowry. It’s a pity her penchant for pirates seems to irritate most men. I would have thought they’d be keen for an excuse to swagger about singing, ‘What Shall We Shall We Do with a Drunken Sailor?’.”

Strathmore sat up straight, his eyes protruding in horror as the unthinkable was given weight by Agnes’s cold smile. “You didn’t. You couldn’t. Blast you!”

“I was quite lucky. I found her at home dressed to go to the Assembly rooms for the evening entertainment. It was easy to persuade her to meet Captain Foster otherwise known as ‘The Black Heart of Calcutta’. When she saw him her eyes lit up like...well like a woman who sees her dream man approaching like a storm at sea. Captain Foster took some convincing to attend a dance without being properly attired, but I assured him his rough seaman clothes would be to his advantage with a certain wealthy lady who dreamed of pirates. Playing cupid gives one such a good feeling, especially when there’s the bonus of knowing it ruins your latest scheme. I’d wager your carriage that Gwen beats you to the altar. I’m sure it’ll be a trial having Captain Foster in the family, but I suspect Gwen will keep him so occupied swaggering about singing awful songs, that he won’t have time to pinch your silver...at least not much of it.”

“You’ll regret your interference.” The ferocious growl merely raised an elegant eyebrow.

“I don’t think so Strathmore. James loves me; anything that hurts me will hurt my husband. Do you remember what it feels like to love a woman Strathmore? Ah, I see by the pain in your eyes that you do. Perhaps you have a heart after all. Perhaps you should use it, before it shrivels up and dies.”

“I’ve sent the announcement to the papers. I’m going to marry Miss Stanley and that’s the end of it.”

“Let it go Strathmore; making other people miserable will never ease your own misery.”

“I’ve made up my mind.”

“Yes I’m sure you have...James’s family will start arriving soon for their annual Christmas gathering. I hope you’ll spend Christmas with us. You could even send for your son. Peter’s boys are all about Bowmont’s age. James’s little brother John is expected any day; he always sleeps in here. Just because you hate each other doesn’t mean you can’t share a bed for a few weeks. Good night Strathmore; pleasant dreams.” Strathmore sneered as the ice maiden gracefully put more coal on the fire and quietly pulled his door closed after her. He slumped over on his side overwhelmed by the awful need for his wife. He tried to imagine her in his arms, but the soft soothing roar of the fire was irregularly disturbed by the sound of the man in the next room sobbing in his sleep. It was impossible. He couldn’t pretend anything with that racket disturbing his thoughts. He jumped out of bed, unlocked his travelling desk and grabbed Lord Warrene’s love letters. He quietly crept into the next room and closed the door behind him. He marched over to the bed and viciously jabbed the sleeping man in the chest until long wet lashes fluttered open.

“What the devil...?”

Strathmore held up the letters, “One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten; they’re all here. No one’s read them. Who’d want to? Look; I’m putting them safely under your pillow. One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten; now shut up and stop bawling in your sleep. Are you a man or a milksop? Stop whinging and moaning about evil Strathmore cutting in. If you want your lucky Penny then get a spine and do something about it.”

“I can’t, I’m ill.”

“I feel ill every time I look at you Pinhead. Now stop bawling; you’re disturbing my sleep.” Back in his own room, Strathmore heartily wished he’d never met either of the sobbing lovers. His impulsive wrath had landed him in yet another miserable bramble bush. He was now honour bound to marry a woman who loathed him. It was true he needed to marry and produce a few more brats, but not at the expense of turning his favourite pleasure into daily torture. Sharing a marital bed with the sobbing Priscilla promised to be as pleasurable as hell and it was all Lord Pinhead’s fault.

Strathmore carefully removed his glasses and put out his pipe as he muttered curses at the sick man in the next room. The young idiot had insisted on wagering his stupid carriage in a game of cards and then refused to accept the worth of Strathmore’s old carriage in gold. The pinhead had insisted on like for like within earshot of a large sneering audience. Not wanting to expose his heart, Strathmore had been forced to wager the carriage his wife had finished refurbishing for him weeks before she died. The happiest months of his life had been stitched into the seat covers and window shades she’d lovingly embroidered with his coat of arms. He’d been forced to betray his sweetheart because the lucky pinhead didn’t want to win coins he’d have to count.

Her needlework had probably been torn out and thrown away along with his most precious memories. If Lord Pinhead had been as good and kind as Miss Priscilla Stanley thought him, he’d have taken one look at Strathmore’s old carriage with its faded feminine decorations and sent it back with a gentleman’s compliments. It seemed strange to think that he’d been younger than Lord Pinhead when he’d married the girl he’d courted for three years.

Feeling old and miserable, Strathmore gulped down a cup of hot milk, threw off his dressing gown and climbed into bed naked. The pleasant feel of clean linen against his skin reminded him of the imminent arrival of John Smirke. He’d burn in hell before he shared a bed with the pretty devil. He’d had enough of bramble bushes. He’d decamp first thing in the morning and return home where he could pretend his wife was away visiting her sister and pray his unwilling bride would jilt him. He’d have to see his son, but that could be kept to meal times. He’d have to remember to buy the boy a gift or the servants would think him cruel. Why did it always come down to what other people thought he should do or feel? It was a senseless chain around his neck that crushed him with hourly reminders of his inadequacies. The push and pull of daily life constantly threatened to wash away precious memories as if the cosmos had wagered it could tear even treasured moments from his heart, but he’d never forget his short taste of happiness. The insufferable Lord Pinhead had no idea of what it felt like to long for a woman or to suffer for love. Strathmore exhaled his jealous irritation into his pillow and cursed the sobbing lovers to hell. If he was lucky they’d run away to Scotland and leave him in peace.

Chapter 15

Three days later Edmund was torn from Penny's arms as he made love to her in a bed of ripe strawberries. Waking up on his stomach, he felt something sharp jabbing the bottom of his foot. His feet automatically curled away from danger as he stared at the blurry rain spattered window surrounded by blue silk. He was still at the Smirke's, but he felt better and life smelled of strawberries. He was going to find his Penny and...his smile twisted into a painful grimace as his innocent left foot relaxed against something sharp. "What the devil..." Pulling himself into a seated position he shuddered in horror. He was in a living nightmare; lounging at the end of his bed was the blonde devil John Smirke, dressed like a wasp in black and yellow. Hoping he was hallucinating, Edmund rubbed his eyes and yelped in pain as his foot was stabbed with something hard and pointy.

The pretty man at the end of the bed tucked a tortoiseshell letter knife into his coat pocket with a satisfied smile. "Ah lucky me...you're awake."

"What do you want?"

"I'm bored. Luckily, James mentioned you were in residence recovering from making an ass of yourself. I wish I'd seen Strathmore accused of stealing another man's love letters. That would have been priceless."

"I'm sure it was. Now if you don't mind, I was sleeping."

"You were moaning for pennies; I thought I'd oblige you." The pretty man's black marble eyes gleamed with devilish delight as a heavy tuppence cartwheel penny hit Edmund on the forehead and bounced into his lap."

Rubbing his head Edmund glared at his tormentor, "That hurt you bastard."

"Penny..." The pretty man in black and yellow stared at Edmund with an exaggerated look of longing, "Oh Penny...let me melt you in my crucible. Let me recast you with my..." The pretty man's face took on the look of ecstasy as he groaned an exaggerated, "Ahhhhhhh." The pretty devil changed his voice to a high falsetto. "Oh Lucky...take me...take me...put me in your pocket and take me home before I get lost in a gutter. I long to share your drawers..." Another cartwheel penny landed on Edmund's head and bounced off into the bedding. The pennies sat there tormenting him with the number two. He ignored the onslaught of anxiety and silently waited for another penny to be thrown his way. Rubbing his head, Edmund scowled as the devil in black and yellow jumped off the end of the bed and approached for a closer inspection of his victim. "You should have locked your door Pinhead; the fiends have slathered your hair with strawberry preserves."

Edmund stopped rubbing his head and looked at his jammy fingers with disgust. "Yuck!"

"You're luckier than Cousin Mildred. She woke up with orange marmalade in her hair, in her ears, up her nose, and in her shoes."

"Poor woman."

"Don't feel sorry for her; she's ugly. If I were you, I'd be praying the fiends haven't stolen your chamber pot or filled it. Anyway, who cares about that, I'm bored. What are we going to do today?" A third Cartwheel penny was dropped onto Edmund's head where it landed in a large glob of strawberry preserves. "We could play a game of cards, though I insist we play for money." Another two pennies fell into Edmund's lap. "I hate wagering personal items; it's so predictable. Why play cards when you know what you'll win?" A small number of pennies

were thrown over the bed and splattered the wooden floor. “We could go shopping; I need some lemon drops...” Several more pennies bounded off Edmund’s head. “You’ll have to take a bath and borrow some of my clothes, they should just about fit.”

Edmund stared into black eyes with loathing, “Since when are we friends?”

“Since I’m bored and James has taken the fiends for a walk. They’ll drag him all over town for sweets and by the time he crawls home he’ll be too exhausted to entertain me. Why do pleasures of the flesh have to produce such onerous trials as children?”

“I’ve no idea. Why don’t you ask your mother?”

Smirke’s eyes narrowed in irritation. “Why would I ask my mother?”

“Who else would you ask?” Edmund crawled out of bed and reached for his trousers.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m putting on my trousers. I’m going home where I can bathe, eat and be ill in peace.”

“No you’re not.”

Edmund finished buttoning his trouser flap and reached for a boot. “Yes I am.”

“No you’re not...you’re going to spend the day with me. I have something of yours that says you will.”

Edmund shivered with fear as his imagination conjured up a mental image of his Penny at the mercy of John Smirke. “And what exactly do you have Smirke?” Edmund reached for his second boot and grimaced as his foot squelched into strawberry preserves.

“I found ten reasons under your pillow. Reason number one...” Smirke pulled a letter from the strange bulge in his waistcoat. “...a letter addressed to Miss Priscilla Stanley. Now since this virgin letter has never been opened, we can surmise that it hasn’t reached its intended addressee and therefore the task has not been completed...Oh no!” Smirke pulled the letter knife out of his pocket and slid it up against the seal with a smile. “Luckily, you’ll entertain me one way or the other. Spend the day with me or I’ll read your stupid love letters and throw them in the fire. I assume the thought of being unable to thoroughly complete such a delicate task makes you writhe in agony. Thoroughness; what a boring Achilles heel.”

The thought of Smirke reading his letters was sickening, but the thought of losing them into the fire made Edmund blanch. “Don’t be cruel Smirke. I must deliver them to Penny. I must have resolution.”

“I think we’ll buy some lemon drops and then see if there’s anything on at the playhouse...we can throw pennies at people in the pit.”

“I’m ill. I don’t want to go to the playhouse; I need to find my Penny. Mrs Smirke says Penny is as safe as if I’d put her in one of my collection drawers, but she wouldn’t say where. All she’d say was that I was to go home and ask my housekeeper. I refuse to follow you around Bath like a stupid spaniel. I want to find my Penny.”

John Smirke’s black eyes chilled with irritation. “I understand your Penny is quite pleasing on the eyes. It so happens I know where Miss Priscilla is staying. James told me at breakfast. I suppose Agnes didn’t want to tell you in case it upset you and disturbed your sleep. If you

refuse to entertain me I may find diversion by delivering your letters. There's always the chance your Penny would rather be picked up by a more worthy and beautiful collector."

Edmund growled as he grabbed his waistcoat and started shoving buttons through holes with shaking hands. "Go near my Penny and you'll thoroughly regret it. She's mine and I love her."

"Don't tell me what I can or can't do infant. If you won't keep me company I know where to find some."

Edmund's aching heart threatened to burst from his chest as he grabbed his coat and pulled it on. "Alright. I'll be your toady, but only until five o'clock and I insist you first give me your word as a gentleman that you'll give me all ten letters and stay away from my Penny."

"Seven o'clock..."

"First give your word..."

"On my honour, I'll give you your poxy letters...pray I don't change my mind. Now about your clothes..."

"I'm not wearing another man's clothes and I certainly won't strut after you in black and yellow like a mindless drone. Take me to the playhouse smelling of strawberry preserves in my dirty shirt or go hang yourself. I trust I'm lucky enough to reach my Penny before you."

The black eyes visibly chilled. "I don't like your tone...Pinhead."

"Well luckily you won't have to endure it past seven...Smirke."

The black eyed devil scowled as he looked Edmund up and down. "If you insist on looking like a dog's dinner we'll have to stay home and play cards. I'm hungry; come keep me company. I can't stand Agnes on my own; frightening woman. Every time I look at her she makes my manhood shrivel. I've never met a woman so beautiful and so repulsive. How James can bed her I'll never know. I asked him once, but he thought I was asking for advice on how to..." A knock on the door interrupted the pretty man making him scowl.

Edmund sighed in relief, "Come."

Agnes Smirke opened the door and eyed her brother-in-law with her usual frozen look. "What is that strange bulge in your waistcoat? Don't tell me you've stolen someone's heart."

"It's none of your business what I shove in my waistcoat." The pretty devil froze with horror as his sister-in-law marched up to him and forcibly removed the bundle of letters. "Give those back."

"I don't believe you're acquainted with Miss Priscilla Stanley." Edmund eagerly accepted his letters and clutched them in relief. "Pray forgive my brother. Too many hours spent staring into mirrors has warped his perception of what constitutes acceptable behaviour. Do I smell strawberries?"

Edmund finished counting his ten letters a third time before shoving them into his own waistcoat where they warmed his heart with hope. "I woke up with strawberry preserves in my hair...and in my left boot."

She eyed her brother-in-law with a look that made the pretty man visibly shudder. “What are you looking at me for?”

“How old are you John, five or thirty-two? Shall I buy you a teething toy for Christmas? Slathering sleeping guests with preserves is a childish prank.”

“I didn’t do it. Your little fiends must have broken into the larder again.”

“You’re pathetic John. Grow up.”

Black eyes glistened with hatred as his cheeks rouged with embarrassment. “If you weren’t married to James...”

“...I wouldn’t have to put up with you; now go eat your lunch and leave Lord Warrene in peace. He’s a decent human being; he doesn’t want your company.”

John Smirke dug his hands into his pockets and violently threw two handfuls of pennies on the floor with a black look. “Here Pinhead, have some pennies to add to your collection; happy counting...”

Edmund stared at the floor in irritation as the pretty man stomped from the room. The overwhelming urge to find and count the pennies was for once irritating. He didn’t want to spend precious moments picking up copper coins when he could be holding his lucky Penny. “Smirke knows where you left Miss Priscilla...where is she? Just tell me.”

Agnes glanced up from the floor, “She’s at your house. Your housekeeper took some convincing, but eventually relented. You have to admit it’s the perfect drawer for your penny. Strathmore would never marry a woman who’d stayed unchaperoned in a bachelor’s residence. Luckily your Penny didn’t actually want to marry that devil; he’d be a formidable temptation if he wasn’t so heartless and miserable.”

“Why didn’t you let her come visit me? I could have seen her.”

“Yes and she might have caught my brother’s eye. Hurry home and carry her away before John gets one of his stupid ideas of revenge. You forgot your cravat...I’ll send for the carriage while you finish dressing.”

“Thank you Mrs Smirke...for everything...”

“You’re lucky; I’d go to any length of trouble to wreck one of Strathmore’s schemes. The man ruined one of my relations on a whim and left her broken hearted. I’d roast him on a spit if he wasn’t my husband’s dearest friend; happy honeymoon.” As the door closed Edmund realised he’d have just enough time to pick up the pennies and count them before the carriage arrived.

Chapter 16

Penny sat in Lord Warenne's parlour clutching the silver locket, her embroidery forgotten on her lap as she stared into the fire. The dark circles around her eyes spoke of sleepless nights spent worrying about Lord Warenne. What if he died because she wasn't allowed to nurse him or send him a message? What if he thought her the most impertinent woman ever born for moving into his house uninvited? What if he decided he didn't want to marry her after all, but felt obligated to marry her anyway? He'd loathe her. The thought made her chest ache and the flames blur.

Mrs Smirke had insisted that the delirious Lord Warenne would rather his Penny was safe than being carried off to Scotland against her will. It was logical, but Penny was finding it difficult to see the happy side of the coin. It was true staying in a bachelor's home made her an undesirable wife to Strathmore or any other man who valued public opinion, but if Lord Warenne didn't want her she'd have no where to go; none of her relations would acknowledge her. If Lord Warenne didn't want her... Her morbid thoughts were suspended as the sound of a carriage pulling up outside made her freeze with fear. Was it the neighbours' carriage? No, she could hear the front door opening. The servants' sudden flurry of activity meant the master was home. Penny took a deep breath as she set aside her needlework and stood to receive her life's sentence. "Where is she Collins?" The words were filled with anxiety and distress. Was he happy or infuriated at her presence? Feeling sick to her stomach, she smoothed her skirts and turned to face the open door. At least there were only two sides of the coin; a broken heart or marriage to the man she loved. Running footsteps slid past the door and then he was standing there clutching the door frame with both hands staring at her with a strange expression. She folded her hands and looked at the floor as his silence promised nothing. "You're wearing my necklace."

She glanced up at the man now resting against the door frame with folded arms. "I haven't removed it since I first put it on my Lord."

"And you no longer wish to be a Duchess?"

Penny failed to restrain her tears. "I'd rather be a Countess my Lord."

"And Captain Foster; he claims no dusty corner of your heart?"

"If he comes near my heart I'll poke out his eyes."

"So you don't compare my kisses with the rogue and find me wanting?"

"No." Her eyes fell back to the floor as footsteps approached from the doorway. She could feel him standing three inches away, the magnetic quality of his person causing the hair on her arms to stand on end. Her eyes slowly travelled up the dishevelled trousers, the wrongly buttoned waist coat with a strange bulge, white linen shirt spattered with blood gaping open revealing long straight brown hair on his chest and the half tied limp cravat. His face was made strange with a new brown beard that outlined smiling lips. Her heart threatened to burst from her bodice as tears gushed in relief as she looked into adoring chocolate brown eyes.

"I have a special delivery Madam." Elegant dirty fingers unbuttoned his waistcoat and removed a handful of folded paper. "Will you accept my letters? There's a special rate today; it'll only cost you a penny."

"What kind of penny?"

"Whatever kind you wish to give me."

“It would be an honour my Lord to receive your letters.” She held out her hand and felt an electric shock as the tips of her fingers rested against his warmth. “I hope you won’t be disappointed with your Penny?”

“Impossible!” Chocolate eyes shimmered, “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten; if you knew how much pleasure it gives me seeing them in your hands...”

Penny clutched the bundle to her chest as she sniffed back happy tears in hope of a kiss. “Your servants found your first letter...your footman shoved it under his mattress before running off with your purse. It’s in my pocket. I’ve read it at least hundred times hoping...”

Chocolate brown eyes were suddenly filled with anxiety. “Eleven? You have eleven letters?” “No...that number’s all wrong. Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

“But...” The handsome man ran from the room his greasy hair flapping. She could hear him in his study. A drawer was yanked open. A drawer was closed. Muttered curses at ink bottles were followed by curses at a squeaking quill pen. There were several long minutes of silence when it sounded like he was folding a piece of paper. A yowl of pain preceded final curses on sealing wax and tapers and then he reappeared sucking a finger. He closed the door firmly behind him and stopped again three inches from her as she finished tucking the ten letters into her bodice.

“Your twelfth letter Madam. Would you honour me by opening it in my presence?” Penny forgot the letter in her hand as her eyes locked with warm chocolate. “I’m not going to kiss you until you’ve read my letter.” Penny felt her cheeks burn as the smiling man put his hands behind his back and gave her a slow wink. She bit back a smile and looked down at the perfect square in her hand; the single word ‘Penny’ blotted the exact center. She turned it over and found a round glob of wax. It looked like he’d refolded the letter at least three times. She gently broke the wax seal and glanced again at the man now biting his lower lip as if afraid that his offering might displease. Unfolding the letter she rested it against his chest and stared at the three blotched words written in the center of the paper. She was aware of her hands shaking as she read, ‘I love you’.

She carefully refolded the precious piece of paper and shoved it into her bodice before looking into anxious eyes. “I wrote something for you the night Strathmore cornered me into accepting his hand. I didn’t want to marry him. It’s in my locket...” Dirty fingers lightly traced her collar bone before picking up the locket, snapping it open in a masculine palm and extracting the small piece of rolled up paper.

“My heart is the property of Lord Warrenne. I hope one day I can tell him that I know my wish came true.” Sniffing as if he still had a cold, he carefully rolled up the tiny piece of paper and returned it to the locket which closed with a loud satisfying click. “When I planned my final and private proposal, where you’d accept me and make me the luckiest man in the world, I was always freshly scrubbed and wearing a new suit of clothes. I even imagined I’d devise a new knot for my cravat that would make your eyes glow with admiration. Don’t laugh, it’s true. My pristine linen would gleam and of course I’d smell of something pleasant. I stink. I haven’t shaved or changed my linen in days and...” He looked down at his hands with disappointment. “...I’m filthy.” Chocolate brown eyes held her entranced. “I imagined I’d look so handsome that you’d fling yourself into my arms and beg me to drive like the devil for Scotland. Well maybe you wouldn’t use those exact words...”

Penny shyly pressed her nose into his shirt front as she tightly wrapped her arms around his waist. “You smell like strawberries and Lord Warrenne; it’s quite pleasant.” She shivered with delight as a masculine hand caressed the nape of her neck and a few seconds later another

began tracing her spine as she looked up into brown adoring eyes. “When you’re near I feel like a lump of iron being drawn to a magnet. I think you handsome in your crumpled trousers and your misbuttoned waistcoat with your greasy hair flapping like a leather cap. If you never bathed again I’d shove embroidery silk in my nostrils and think myself the luckiest lady ever born.”

His laughing lips brushed the top of her head. “I’m afraid I couldn’t bear to see your lovely face marred by blue silk hanging out of your nose. I’ll have to continue bathing three times a week. I hope that doesn’t disappoint you.”

“Do I get to help scrub your toes?”

The Chocolate brown eyes lit up. “Do you like feet? Do you like rubbing feet? Oh...I’ve been dreaming of you rubbing my feet. You don’t find that impertinent do you?” The man’s voice was filled with panic.

“I’d rather rub your feet than watch you pick your nose and eat the crust.”

Lord Warenne appeared to freeze, “Did you just offer to scrub my toes while I was in the bath?”

Penny felt her face burn as she eyes suddenly concentrated on his filthy limp cravat. “After we’re married...is that impertinent?”

“Most certainly not!” Lord Warenne celebrated the promise of future pleasures by nibbling her right earlobe making her giggle. “If I’m really lucky...” His hoarse whisper into her ear made her shiver forcing her to cling tighter for warmth. “...all my dreams will come true.”

“I have a dream...”

“What sort of dream?”

“I’m sitting at the dining table across from my husband...”

“I hope the blighter facing you is me.”

“I sit there gazing at you thinking how lucky I am to be married to a handsome man with such exquisite manners and wondering when you’ll kiss me next.”

“While I’m being handsome at the table I’ll feast my eyes on a delicious wife who causes the most luxurious throbbing imaginable. I fear you’ll think me unaccountably rude when I hurry you through pudding so I can drag you up to bed.” His slow wink drove Penny’s burning cheeks into his waistcoat as he laughed in her ear. “Silly Penny; are you trying to avoid my kisses?” Lips made softer by his bristly new beard lightly explored the line of her nose. Relaxing into his strong hands, her head tilted back as she stared into loving eyes that were suddenly serious. “I hope you weren’t dreaming of being married over an anvil, because there’s no way I’m travelling all the way to Scotland. We’ll go to London and I’ll buy a special license and if anyone tries to kidnap you or stop the wedding I’ll...” Penny bravely stood on her tip toes and silenced his lucky lips with her passionate consent.

Chapter 17

Epilogue

Large flakes of snow fell gracefully unnoticed past the windows as the Duke of Strathmore sat alone in his library staring at his wife's harpsichord wishing it would play. A soft knock drew his eyes to the door. "Come." A tall beautiful boy rushed into the room with an irritating cheerfulness and handed him a letter. "Are you now a footman Bowmont?"

His son appeared blissfully ignorant of sarcasm. "I was in the hall when the carriage arrived. I was coming to ask you something so I said I'd bring it up."

"What carriage? I'm in no mood for company."

His son's raised eyebrows silently demanded if he was ever in the mood. "It's your carriage and it's empty. May I walk over to the parsonage? Mrs Searle is having the young people over for a Christmas dance. She promised to make us ginger biscuits. They're almost as good as Miss Jenney's at school."

Strathmore eyed his sixteen year old son with a mixture of revulsion and envy. "Why are you mixing with the parish? Don't tell me you're eying one of the farmer's daughters. If you must sow your seed, use a trollop who doesn't know who you are so she can't blackmail me."

Lord Bowmont's pale cheeks flushed deep pink as he stared into his father's eyes. "I merely wish to dance to music and laugh with childhood friends. Nothing remotely sordid will happen nor would I treat any woman with such contempt. Women may be the weaker sex, but they're just as deserving of respect and honour as men."

Strathmore groaned in disgust. "Who's filling your head with this chivalric nonsense?"

"Miss Jenney says..."

"Tell Miss Jenney from me to mind her own business and leave my son's mind unpolluted. What's so funny Bowmont?"

"I'd like to see you try to tell her that Father."

"You will address me as Your Grace or nothing do you understand?"

The boy's smile faded instantly into misery. "Yes Your Grace...may I go to the Christmas dance or would you prefer that I sit in my room and stare at the wall?"

"Go make yourself sick with my blessing, just don't even think about falling in love with some farmer's daughter."

His son's expression for once mirrored his own. "You mean like how you fell in love with my mother?"

"You'll marry who I choose or face my wrath. Now get out and leave me in peace."

Strathmore picked up his letter knife and dismissed his child without further acknowledgement as he broke the wax seal. Had his son said his carriage had arrived empty? Strathmore jumped out of his chair and dashed to the window. Her carriage. She was home. With the letter still in his hand he forced his excited legs to maintain a casual dawdle all the way down the stairs and out the front door. Carriage tracks in the fresh snow had stopped at the stairs, but there were no petite footsteps from the carriage door or large footmen's boot

prints to retrieve her trunks. He covered his distress with a black scowl and sneered at the waiting coachman. "What are you waiting for? Take it to the carriage house."

"Yes Your Grace..."

Strathmore stared at the virgin snow as his precious carriage was carefully driven away. He impulsively raced down the steps and stomped in the snow where there should have been footprints. He stood there staring at the ground until he caught sight of the letter in his hand. Standing in the falling snow he opened it and squinted at the paper. He wasn't wearing his reading spectacles, but he could just make out the words.

Your Grace,

Whether you want it or not, I'm returning your carriage at my Penny's request. I hadn't noticed the feminine interior, but then I haven't used it. Penny insists you loved your wife and believes the carriage holds special memories for you. I find it hard to believe this blissful contentment ever existing in your chest. It's strange to think you were once a happy man with your life ahead of you like an unwritten love letter. You must be in agony, but hopefully no longer because of me.

I feel lucky to have faced your wrath. When I wake up and find Penny's arm draped over my chest I remind myself that I could end up as unlucky as you. I could lose my beloved Penny in childbed or in an accident or to some wretched disease. It makes me cherish every laugh, every kiss. When I find half finished embroidery on the sofa, which irritates me, I tell myself I'd rather know she was leaving a mess than never coming back to pick it up. The stars shine brighter when she gazes at them with me. My coins are more valuable when she holds them. Whatever happens tomorrow, today with Penny in my arms I'm the luckiest man in the world.

P.S.

Penny wishes me to tell you that she's glad she stabbed you in the leg with her hatpin.

Your Servant,
Edmund Lord Warrenne

Strathmore crumpled the letter in his hands and hurried as fast as his cold legs would carry him to his bedchamber where he muffled his jealous rage into a pillow.

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