

CROSS THE OCEAN

By

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Dedication:

To Eileen, Susie, Linda, Sarah and Kate . . . wonderful women who were, are and will be.

Chapter One

London 1871

“Pardon me, ma’am?”

The starch in Mrs. Wickham’s black dress seemed to wilt as she quivered. The soft folds of her jowls shook. “The duchess is not coming down,” she repeated.

The Duke of Wexford stood stock-still. The guests were to descend on his ancestral home in a matter of moments. The candles lit, the buffet laid, the flowers had bloomed on cue. The last remaining detail was the receiving line.

“Mrs. Wickham. There is a small matter of greeting two hundred and fifty guests arriving momentarily. The duchess needs to attend them,” Blake Sanders, the Eighth Duke of Wexford, said sternly to his housekeeper.

When the woman had announced his wife would not be joining him, Sanders was certain he had not heard correctly. The Duchess knew her duties. As did he. He turned abruptly to the staircase. A shiver trailed down his arms. He turned back. The rotund woman had not moved other than the flitting of small hairs peeking out of her mobcap. After twenty-five years of service to his family he supposed she stood rooted for good reason.

The Duke spoke quietly. “Is there a problem conveying this message, Mrs. Wickham?”

The woman swallowed. “Yes, Your Grace. There is.”

“What is it, Mrs. Wickham?” he asked.

It was then he noticed a folded piece of vellum in the woman’s hand. As with most lifetime retainers, he had seen worry, seen anger and joy in her face. But never fear. And it was fear, indeed, that hung in the air, widened her eyes and had the missive shaking in pudgy fingers.

A lifetime later, in his memory, he would envision the slow transfer of paper as it made its way from her hand to his. The moments stretched out when life was sure--before he read it. With the reading, life changed.

“The contents of this note, I gather you read?” he asked.

The mobcap nodded. “‘Twas open and laying on your grace’s pillow.”

“Very well,” he replied and stared at the ornate wall sconce and the shadows the candles threw. The butler’s distant voice broke through his emotional haze. He knew he must ready himself for the onslaught of guests, but not before he made clear his wishes with Mrs. Wickham.

“We must be certain the duchess is left alone with such a malady.” His eyes met hers with a dark intensity. “You will be the only one in her attendance tonight.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The housekeeper nodded to leave and turned back with tears in her great gray eyes. “The children, Your Grace. What if...?”

“I will handle the children tonight, Mrs. Wickham,” he answered.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she whispered.

The composure he had been born with, cultivated, and that now ruled his life, wavered as he slowly made his way down the staircase to his butler. Briggs stood sentry near the newel post as he had done for as long as anyone could remember.

“The guests are arriving, sir,” the butler said.

“The duchess is unwell, Briggs. Lady Melinda will stand attendance beside me.” “Very good, Your Grace,” Briggs replied.

Somehow Blake found himself between his children in the receiving line. On his left stood his sixteen-year old daughter, Melinda. Fourteen-year-old, William, the heir to the title, was to his right. Donald, the youngest, was certainly fighting his nursemaid to escape and peek through the balustrade at the splendor of the upcoming ball.

“Where is Mama?” Melinda asked softly.

“Terrible headache, sweetheart. She needs to stay abed,” he said and made yet another crisp bow. Melinda would make her come-out in a few short months, but she had not as of yet. Blake had made the decision to have her play hostess in an instant, not knowing what else to do. “You are doing beautifully in her absence.”

Between greeting the next guests, Melinda whispered to her father, “I’ll go to her as soon as I can. You know how--”

“No,” he shouted, startling guests nearest to them in the receiving line. His daughter’s look of shame and surprise shook him. His menacing gaze softened as he turned to Melinda. “I didn’t mean to snap, my dear.”

Melinda’s lip trembled until an aging matron shouted in her ear. She turned a practiced, polite face the dowager’s way.

Moments in every life indelibly etch in the mind. The birth of a child. A father’s grudging respect seen in a wrinkled face. The first time love is visible in a woman’s eye. But that evening and all its details were a blurry mass of glad tidings and lies. Conversations muted amongst his thoughts leaving his mind only capable of a nod or the shake of his head. One stark moment glared. Blake’s long time friend and neighbor, Anthony Burroughs, looked at him quizzically as he repeated his wife’s excuse. The man’s eyes bored into his and Blake nearly spilled the details of this dilemma in the midst of the glowing ballroom. He shuttered his feelings quickly. But he knew Tony was not fooled.

William and Melinda were so exhausted by night’s end that he had no trouble convincing them to wait to the following morning to regale their mother with the evening’s excitement. For himself, he could have cried for joy when the last guest left near four in the morning. He sent his valet to bed, untied his neck cloth and slumped into the dark green damask chair in front of a wilting fire.

He would be a laughingstock. The Wexfords took their pride seriously today in 1871 the same as they had in 1471. The current Duke of Wexford had spent his entire life guarding against any impropriety that might sully that pride or good name. Married at nineteen by decree of his father to Lady Ann Murrow. A beautiful fair child, Melinda, born nine months to the day from the date of his wedding. The heir, William, born two years later with the spare, Donald, arriving seven years ago.

Blake did not overindulge at the game tables or with drink. He kept a trim figure, and while not vain, was never seen without proper attire. His estates were in order; he treated his servants fairly and generously, and reaped the profits hence.

My life has been a model to the English aristocracy, Blake thought. Until now. He withdrew the letter from his pocket and read again, that which his eyes saw but what his mind refused to believe. *I'm leaving you....* What in his life had he done or not done to deserve such treatment, especially from his wife, the mother of his children? The Duchess of Wexford for God's sakes he railed silently. He continued reading. *He's a well-to-do merchant....* A man of business yet.

Would Ann stop at nothing to humiliate him? He would never again be able to show his face at White's. The English peerage took delight and excruciating pains to reveal or revel in another's debacle or misfortune. They tittered about the smallest transgression; a loss at the game table, a stolen kiss exposed before the banns were posted. He would be branded, bandied about, laughed at behind his back until his last breath and beyond.

Blake wondered if the Earl of Wendover would reconsider the marriage arrangement between his son, the viscount and Melinda. Blake had not told his daughter of the agreement because he had wanted her to enjoy her come-out without a cradle betrothal to dampen her spirit. Let her dance and meet young people and then tell her about the long ago made plans. But Blake admitted to himself there would be no triumphant union of two of England's oldest families after the duchess's betrayal became public.

The sun was peaking over rolling hills, he saw as he gazed idly out the window of his bedchamber. How would he tell his children? When their nursemaid had died, he had gone off to town rather than deal with their tears. Let their mother handle these things. But there was no mother. The scheming wench had gone off and left her own children without a word.

There was a horse at Tattersall's he'd been eyeing. Blake wondered if he should head to London now before everyone knew of this scandal and he'd be forced to deal with the ton's whispers and stares. *I'll deal with the children first. I must. It's my duty.* He rang for his valet and thought perhaps Mrs. Wickham would be the better person to explain things. The housekeeper was a soft soul and the children adored her.

Benson helped him bathe and dress and he sat down bleary-eyed at the breakfast table. His morning regimen was placed in front of him as he was seated with a footman's help. Blake was suddenly so angry, so horrified at the situation he found himself in, he merely stared at his oatmeal. Tea was being poured on his right. The morning paper carefully folded to the business section on his left. All seemed the same, should be the same. But it wasn't. Ann would not glide down the stairs this morning. She would not inquire politely how he had slept. She would not explain her plans with the dressmaker or morning calls. *As if he'd cared.* But even still ... it wouldn't be the same. He would not kiss her cheek and tell her she looked lovely. Dismissing her for the day and from the room and his thoughts with one brief sentence.

He was stirring his oatmeal when he noticed Melinda at the door of the breakfast room. His daughter's face was pale.

"Good morning, Melinda," he said. "Come sit down."

There was a letter in her hand.

"You ... you knew," she said softly from the doorway.

“Come in. Sit down,” he said. Blake eyed the servants. “Leave us.”

Melinda sat and unfolded her letter. “Mother’s gone and you knew.”

Blake raised his brows and dipped into his now cold gruel. “I found out just as the ball started. There was no opportunity to tell you.”

Melinda’s lip quivered. “Why not?” she asked.

Blake tilted his head. “Was I to announce this ... this incident in front of two-hundred and fifty guests?”

“Incident? Is that what you call this?” Melinda whispered. “An incident?”

Blake was surprised at her harsh tone. But considering all, her age, this unfortunate well, yes, he thought, incident, he would overlook her glare.

“It is of the utmost importance that we conceal this as long as possible. From the servants, friends, whomever. I will contrive to make a conceivable explanation but you must ready yourself.” Blake paused. “There will be gossip.” Tears poured from Melinda’s eyes. He stood, went to his daughter and picked her hand up from her lap, patting it as he did. “Now, now, my dear. You are the oldest. You must face this head on and set an example to your brothers. Cry it out now, dear. There’s no one here but me.”

Melinda wrenched from his grasp. “As if I care who hears? Our mother’s gone. Why didn’t you send them all home?” She melted into the chair, her hands covering her face.

Blake hated emotional scenes. Hated the tears. Hated Ann for leaving him in this mess. He noticed William in the doorway of the breakfast room.

“Can’t have him saying, ‘Go on home now. The duchess ran off with a clerk.’ Think Melinda. Father did the right thing,” William explained.

Blake saw his heir held a letter as well. “Come in, William.”

The next Duke of Wexford went to a chair. Fourteen years old, nearly six foot tall and all long thin arms and legs. His blond hair, like his sister’s, was wet combed and his face as usual was blotched red. Fair complexion his wife had explained when he inquired why his son always looked as if someone had punched him about the cheeks and nose.

‘It will fade when his beard comes in. My brother’s did.’ Blake could hear Ann’s voice in his head. Always calm. Serene. The thought hit him like a carriage had run him over. *I will miss her. I didn’t love her, was unnecessary...but I will miss her.* Did he take for granted her small ways, her quiet voice, her very existence? Not prone to regrets, he hadn’t had any thus far; Blake awoke to his children’s sharp words.

“Mother must have had her reasons,” Melinda shouted.

William stood at the table, angry, his face red mottled. “What reasons, sis? What could make her do this?” His face crumbled and he sat again, now toying with a spoon. “She doesn’t want us.”

The streaks of emotion frightened Blake nearly as much as the ton’s censure. He watched his children’s

faces ebb from sadness to anger in an instant. Blake's head snapped up with Melinda's next words.

"That's not true. I'm sure. We'll ask her all of this when we see her in two weeks." Melinda moved to her brother's side. "Don't judge...."

"You'll do no such thing, young lady," Blake roared. "Your mother has made her choice. You'll have nothing to do with her."

Melinda's mouth dropped. "Nothing to do with my mother?" she asked in a whisper.

"She'll be staying at Grand mama's then," William said.

Blake could not believe his ears. He would not believe. "The dowager will never allow it. She'll insist her daughter has died rather than face the scandal."

Melinda lifted her letter and faced her father reading. "My mother, your grand mama, knows of my plans. She doesn't agree but is rectified with it. I know your father will never keep you from my parents." Melinda faltered. "Not that their love for you would hold sway but certainly with the dowry my father set aside for you, Melinda, he will not cross her. As you know, turning down the Haswood gems would make your father positively ill."

Blake blanched. The Haswood jewels were worth a fortune in value and prestige. Bequeathed from the king two generations ago. The topic had been discussed on many occasions. Blake often wondered if that was part of the reason for Wendover's pursuit of Melinda for his son. But to hear his wife's sharp words as if the only thing of importance to Blake were a string of baubles. Exquisite baubles, granted, but certainly worth less than his respect. He would not acquiesce

"You've no need of the Haswood jewels," Blake said.

Melinda's eyes opened and narrowed. "Father. If I didn't know better I would think those jewels meant nothing to you. But in this case, it's not the necklace you covet. It's your pride."

"Hardly the thing to be saying to father. Mother's left him. Have some pity," William stammered.

"I need no one's sympathy, thank you." Blake shouted at his son and turned to stare out the window. "This ... this incident will be blamed on the duchess's conniving duplicitous ways. To leave me, leave her duty, with no thought to the consequences. Pitiful, thoughtless baggage." Blake turned back to see his son standing before him, the young man's fists clenched.

"Whatever she has done, no one, no one speaks of my mother, like that."

William's voice cracked as he spoke. Fierce anger, hurt and pride warred in Blake's head. He remembered the first time he had stood up to his own father. The scene flashed through his mind. *My son is becoming a man. Where have I been?* The door to the breakfast room opened.

"Sir Anthony Burroughs," Briggs announced.

Blake did not look at his best friend. "Another time, Burroughs. Family business," he said abruptly.

Melinda's mouth dropped. "You'll not tell him? Your closest friend? William's godfather? Do you intend to explain her absence to anyone?" she asked.

Anthony stood, quiet grace, in the doorway. He smiled at Briggs and pulled the man's hand from the doorknob. "Won't be needing anything right now, Briggs." Anthony turned to the assembled before him. Melinda's tear-stained face. William's anger and confusion. And wild unholy wrath on the face of Blake Sanders.

"Whose absence?" Anthony asked.

Blake ran his hand through his hair, unwilling or unable to speak. The room was quiet while Anthony poured himself a cup of tea. Blake could not begin, could not voice, would not mutter, the explanation. His embarrassment was overwhelming. Melinda finally gave way in a flurry of tears, running to Anthony.

"Uncle Anthony! Mother's left us," Melinda cried and crumbled into Tony's arms.

"There, there, puss," he crooned. Anthony sat Melinda down and poured her a cup of tea. "Cry it out."

Melinda blubbered as Blake stood ashen at the window and William swallowed time and again as the story and their letters were retold.

Anthony's eyes were wide, faraway and his voice soft when he spoke. "I wouldn't believe this if it hadn't been you telling the tale. Ann's left us."

"Left us?" Blake exploded. "She left me. Me. She left me."

Anthony took Melinda by the hand and jerked his head to William. "Your father and I need a chat. Dry your tears. Hurry along now, till we decide what's to be done."

As calm as Blake had always strived to be, Anthony was the opposite. Wild youth, horrible temper, impetuous ways all rolled into one tall, loyal friend. His marriage, two years prior was the only reason he still lived, Blake was convinced. Elizabeth Burroughs ruled him with a beautiful face and a strong will. Blake had never seen a man and wife so besotted. He was surprised when Anthony calmly told him to sit down.

Anthony smiled and his pleasant tone belied his sharp words. "You are a spoiled, unfeeling, pompous ass."

Blake's mouth fell and he sputtered, "Ann was the one to...."

Anthony's eyes closed and one finger came to his lips. "Do not besmirch her name in front of me or your children. Regardless of what you're feeling. She was wrong. As some of us are on occasion. Present company excluded of course."

Blake's mouth closed and Anthony continued. "You are an adult, Blake. You've been an adult since you were five years old. Your children need you. Now more than ever. Don't hold onto this hurt jealously as if you are the only one involved." Anthony sat back in his chair. "There are others in much more pain simply because they loved her. An emotion you are fortunate to not have to deal with."

"I loved her in my way," Blake said staring out the window.

Anthony harrumphed. "Really, Blake. Did you ever tell her?"

“She’s my wife, damn it, Burroughs,” Blake muttered.

“Ah, yes, easier to tell your current mistress than your wife,” Anthony replied.

“What does my having a mistress have to do with anything?”

Anthony laughed hoarsely. “Only you, Blake, would pose a question that absurd.”

“Why did she leave with him though? Why not just...?”

“Just bed a man who is not her husband as most rich titled women do? Perhaps Ann’s sense of honor wouldn’t allow it. Perhaps she didn’t wish to teach her children such faithlessness. Perhaps she loves him.”

Although he had no argument to make in defense of himself, Blake was furious at Tony’s conclusions. “Besides my being an ‘ass’ what do you propose I say about this?” Blake asked. He was tired, so very tired, but this mess, this incident, needed thought.

The two men spent the morning trying in vain to think of a way to cover the affair up. It would not be done. Each time they thought a plan through, one corner of the blanket lifted revealing just enough to whet the appetite of the ton. Did someone see Ann as she boarded a ship with her merchant? Would she be seen by peerage traveling abroad? And how does one, even one as powerful as the Duke of Wexford explain a wife who has suddenly disappeared? They would think he locked her in the attic or worse yet Bedlam.

“Brazen it out, Blake. Tell the truth and dare them to laugh. I see no other way.” Anthony jumped up as the clock chimed the hour. “Is that the time? Dear God. I told Elizabeth I’d be home at twelve.”

“So what if you’re late? With Elizabeth’s confinement what’s she to do but lie about? What’s the hurry?” Blake asked, now sulking.

Anthony turned from the door. “The ‘so what,’ Blake, is I told Elizabeth I’d be home.”

Blake dismissed him with a flit of his hand. “At least I won’t be the hen-pecked husband of the neighborhood. You do very well.”

Anthony stared boldly. “Think what you will. You always do. But I’ve not got a shrew for a wife. Nor did you. I don’t run home because she told me to, Blake.” His friend raised his brows to mock. “I run home because I want to be there. I love her. And she me.”

The door closed softly and Blake was left alone. He was glad for the solitude. Of all the ugliness, the shouting, the accusations, Anthony’s declaration shook Blake as nothing else did. His throat clogged. Tears sprang to his eyes. Not for love lost but for the truth whirling around in his head. The cold, black stark reality that he would die without ever knowing that love. Ann had loved him all those years ago. Perhaps even in her disgrace she would be the victor. She had loved someone. Him. Her husband. With an all consuming passion and clarity that he would never experience. Blake had watched that love wane and fade as time and inattention whittled it away. Did Ann love this merchant? Was she so lucky as to love twice in her life? Would his children love like that? Like Anthony and Elizabeth?

“Where’s Momma?” a young voice said from the doorway.

Blake turned to see Donald. All of seven years old. "She's gone away for awhile, son."

The boy nodded.

Blake stood and walked to the doorway.

Donald smiled. "She'll be back. She told me she might be taking a trip, 'cept she didn't know when. That I'd see her at Grand mama's soon after she left."

"That's right, Donald," Blake said stiffly.

Donald turned, hands in his pockets, down the vast hall.

"Where are you going?" Blake shouted.

The boy cocked his head. "Same place I do everyday, father. To the pond so Mrs. Wickham's grandson, Malcolm, and I can sail our boats."

"Yes, of course," Blake lied. He watched Donald and Malcolm be enveloped in Mrs. Wickham's arms. She had a basket packed and they ran down the hall swinging it between them. The housekeeper faced him.

"Mrs. Wickham, would you be so good as to gather Briggs and Benson and join me in my study," Blake said.

"Yes, Your Grace," she replied.

Blake sat down behind his desk. He had best make some explanation or rumors would abound. The three servants he trusted entered the room. They stood expectantly. Blake cleared his throat.

"The duchess has ... the duchess has...." Blake's mouth was dry and he searched for the right words.

"The duchess is away," Briggs said clearly.

"Yes, Your Grace," Mrs. Wickham said, "the duchess is away and ... and we need to make sure that everything runs smoothly in her absence."

"Certainly, Your Grace," Benson said. "We have no intentions of allowing any mischief or ... talk until things are back to normal."

Now Blake could not speak. They had spoken for him and would not let him humiliate himself. He managed to blurt out, "The children..." but the Duke of Wexford could not continue.

"Don't worry yourself, Your Grace. Not a soul will sully those children without answering to us," Benson said.

All was silent.

"Is that all, Your Grace?" Mrs. Wickham asked.

Blake nodded, staring out the window.

Chapter Two

Soul searching had never been Blake's strong suit, but the weeks following Ann's leaving left naught much else to do. He begrudgingly allowed the children to spend a week at Lady Katherine's while their mother was there. Allow would be to strong a word, he admitted to himself. William and Melinda armed with Donald's innocent pleas and Blake's reluctance to explain much to the seven-year-old saw the trio to the family carriage. He had spent little time away from home, not yet ready for the questions of society. The house was devilishly quiet with the children gone. Blake ambled around, rechecked accounts, read a bit and was generally bored to tears.

Blake received a letter from his current mistress, Helena. *She missed him. She died a bit each day in his absence.* She certainly didn't love him. Loved the diamonds and the evenings at the theatre but she didn't love him. What kind of ridicule had Ann been subject to while he paraded Helena to a private box for a play or to a dinner party? He cringed at the thought of the last trip to the theatre he and his mistress had gone to. Helena had drunk a bit too much champagne and was amorous. Amorous was a benign accounting of Helena that night. Although wildly exciting, when Helena opened her dress as she pulled the curtain of their box in the last act of the play, there could have been no doubt what was taking place. Sofas rocked and fabric swung as Helena shouted her bliss.

All the peerage had mistresses, Blake thought to himself. When one is married at a young age to someone one barely knows and could easily be as ugly as sin what did one expect? What did Ann expect? He laughed without humor at himself or perhaps at the flimsy justification for his own excuse. Ann was gorgeous. Petite, polite, blond, impeccable lineage. Could he have loved her? Can one will themselves to love? The sex had no spark. Was that his fault or hers? Could she have given more of herself? Could he have? Now she was rolling around with some merchant. Blake could hardly say he was jealous. Maybe angry that someone else had his wife in their bed. Much like being out bid at an auction. Not jealous for the woman. Just angry he hadn't won.

Three days after the children left he would've given his home for someone, anyone to address him by something other than 'your grace.' Benson, Briggs and Mrs. Wickham closed ranks about him and while he understood their good intention, Blake felt as if there wasn't enough air to draw breath. He went to the stables, had his mare saddled and rode to Anthony's estate. Maybe Elizabeth will ask me to stay for dinner, he thought. Then she'll go to bed and Tony and I can drink a bottle of brandy and get stewed. He could stay there if he couldn't ride. A room was kept ready for him. He even kept a change of clothes there, harkening back to when Tony was a bachelor and their nights together often ended in the wee hours of the morning. Blake smiled and felt better than he had in days.

As the butler escorted Blake down the hall of Anthony's home to the drawing room, he heard a loud but feminine ... snort. And Elizabeth's trill laughter in reply. Damn. He remembered. Some cousin of Elizabeth's from America sent as an escort to another cousin was staying with them. Anthony had described and dreaded the arrival of cousin Gertrude with horror. A spinster remotely connected to Elizabeth's father's side, she was big, bold and here for a month. Her arrival had curtailed Anthony's visits.

Blake stopped and hissed at the butler. "Think I've changed my mind, Jenkins. I don't want to disturb their company."

"Quite the coward, are we, Your Grace. Leave your life-long friend alone with this Amazon from America." Jenkins stared as he spoke. "In any case they saw you ride up the drive."

Jenkins spoke his mind to all, including Anthony and Elizabeth. There'd be no expecting servile behavior. "I'm sure you did not miss the opportunity to point out my arrival," Blake said.

"Of course not, Your Grace." The butler paused at the door. "The Duke of Wexford."

"Blake," Anthony nearly shouted and jumped to pump Blake's hand. "I am so very happy you are here," Anthony said in Blake's ear.

Blake's eyes widened. Cousin Gertrude was coming to him. She was every inch as tall as he. Anthony made the introductions. She held out her hand. Blake grasped it and bent to place a kiss there and was surprised when she began to shake it, hitting him squarely in the nose. Blake covered his face with his hand.

"Oh, dear," Miss Gertrude Finch exclaimed. She threw a look at her cousin Elizabeth.

"No harm done," Blake said. He moved to Elizabeth and kissed her cheek. "You look lovely, my dear. Blossoming very nicely."

Miss Finch tilted her head. "Does that mean pregnant? I like the sound of that. Blossoming," she said.

Pregnant was a word never uttered before in Blake's presence. He looked to Anthony. His friend was beet red. Elizabeth nodded to her cousin.

"Please sit down, Blake. Staying for dinner, aren't you? I'll ring for another place," Elizabeth said.

Blake's well-laid plans were for naught. The cousin continued a conversation apparently started before he arrived. American women were campaigning for the right to vote. Too bad women didn't vote during the 'revolution,' he thought. A Union Jack would fly in Washington. Blake concealed his humor and horror, listening politely. Occasionally. Miss Finch wasn't ugly, he observed. Just large and loud. Not fat, but tall and very well endowed. Her eyes were lively and intelligent. Green eyes. The oddest color Blake had ever seen. She had thick black hair, darker than his own. It wasn't pulled up, but curled over and around her shoulders and back. Quite decadent. Mayhap he needed to visit Helena.

"What do you think, Mr. Sanders, Your Grace? Whatever do I call him, Elizabeth?" the American asked.

"Well, I ... ah, I..." Blake stuttered.

"Woolgathering, were you?" she smiled at his blank stare. "I'm not offended. Used to it by now. People often nod off when I'm on my podium."

* * * *

Gertrude could have guessed Sanders would have no reply. Was always silly when she got the notion in her head to preach to men. She didn't really care what they thought but it would be nice to meet one who

would listen. Last night Elizabeth elbowed Sir Anthony and to his horror his head fell off his hand, where he had been napping. Embarrassing for everyone, really. And here she'd done it again. For whatever reason Gert had hoped this one had been listening. Handsome as sin, Elizabeth had said about him and had been right. Tall, regal, well muscled. Sanders would do fine on Uncle Fred's ranch. She giggled and covered her mouth as she envisioned him riding a bronco and yelling 'Tally ho.'

"Something humorous, madam?" the duke asked.

Gert shook her head. She had best be civil. This man was, after all, Tony's closest friend. "I understand you have three children," she inquired.

"Melinda is the oldest and will make her come-out this spring. William is fourteen. The heir. And Donald is seven," Sanders replied.

"Melinda is beautiful and will set society on its heels. And the boys will break hearts all over London, I'm afraid," Elizabeth said smiling.

"How wonderful," Gert said. "You and your wife must be awfully proud." Gert didn't know what she had said but clearly something was wrong. Everyone froze. "I'm sorry. Is your wife ill?" she asked.

"No," he replied.

No one of Gert's friends or family would ever accuse her of being afraid to say what she thought. But still she hesitated with such a personal question. The silence in the room, however, was fairly screaming with unanswered questions. "Did she die?" she asked finally.

"The Duchess of Wexford is well. Thank you," the duke said.

That certainly did not explain anything at all. Gert lifted her brows and eyed him.

"She is currently residing elsewhere," he added.

"She's taken a trip?" Gert asked. "Is that all? The way everyone was acting you'd of thought the poor woman had some horrible illness. Some disfiguring thing." Gert sat back in her chair and rolled her eyes. *These English are a strange bunch, she thought. Never content to call a male cow a bull.*

"My wife is not on holiday, madam," Blake Sanders replied.

Gert stared at him. The wife isn't sick or dead or visiting. Unfortunately, Gert's thoughts spewed from her mouth before she could stop them. "Where is she then?"

"She's at her family's home, currently." Sanders sat up straight and shot his cuffs. "The duchess no longer resides with me."

Gert studied Sanders. It was clear the admission cost the man. "I'm thinking this wasn't your idea."

Blake Sanders smiled tight-lipped and replied, "No, it was not, Miss Finch."

Gert sat back in her chair and tapped her forefinger on her lip. "Dumped you, huh? Over the barrel? The heave ho. Left you holding the bag. Seems unusual for your kind." She turned her head to Elizabeth. "From your letters, the way you made everyone so in a fuss about being proper this is a doozy, wouldn't

you say?"

Elizabeth nodded quickly. "I've known Ann for years and I will say I was shocked. She's always adhered strictly to society's rules. Truth be told, cousin, I've never in all my years heard of anyone of her station leaving a husband."

Gert turned around in her chair to face Elizabeth. "What do you imagine happened?" She tilted her head to the duke and whispered, "Did he beat her?"

"I did not beat my wife," Sanders said sharply as he stood. "And I would greatly appreciate it if you two would not chatter as if I'm not in the room."

"Well, maybe we wouldn't if you'd say more than two words at a time. How are Elizabeth and I to figure this out or help you get her back if you don't tell us the details?" Gert said.

"You mistake my meaning and overstep your boundary. I have no intention of trying to drag the duchess home, nor would I ask your advice if I did," he bellowed.

Gert looked around the room. Elizabeth fixed her skirts and her husband stared away blankly. The duke however was pacing, red-faced and angry. Maybe she had mistaken the man. Maybe he loved this Ann so passionately he wanted her to be happy. Even without him.

"You love her that much, then?" Gert whispered. The duke spun around to face her.

"Love her? Love has nothing to do with it. She's blackened the Wexford name. Tarnished it. I would not accept her back now if she crawled through the streets of London."

Gert stared wide-eyed at the man pacing in front of her. From the look on his face, he may have been regretting his harsh words. Regardless, he did not need or deserve her sympathy. "Sounds as though she's better off without you. I hope she meets a nice man and forgets all about you," Gert said.

"She's already met one," Elizabeth said.

"Elizabeth! Gossip is not called for," Anthony shouted.

"Hardly gossip, dear," Elizabeth said. "You told me the children's letters said she left with a merchant."

"Oh, dear, the children. They must be devastated," Gert said, just now remembering the three.

"The Wexford heirs are not devastated," Sanders said.

"You refer to your own children as the Wexford heirs. How would you know how they feel?" Gert asked.

"I'm their father," he boomed.

"The only thing you're worried about is your family name. Somehow I can't picture you patiently answering their questions," Gert countered.

"Anthony said Melinda was near hysterical and William looked stricken," Elizabeth added.

"I did not come here to be skewered by two females. Making me somehow to be the devil. Ann left me. This subject is closed," Sanders shouted.

* * * *

Dinner was a tense affair with the duke saying little. Now, Elizabeth sat on Gert's bed in her nightclothes. She noticed her cousin's hand went often, mostly unaware Gert was sure, to her rounded stomach. But this evening's discussion would not focus on Elizabeth's child.

Gert had made the trip across the Atlantic with worry. A month she had to stay with a distant cousin she had never met. Cousin Annabelle deposited safely with her family, Gert made the journey alone to Anthony and Elizabeth's estate.

All of her fears were for nothing. Gert knew she made Anthony uncomfortable but still all in all he was generous to her with his time and his home. Elizabeth and she however were on their way to becoming best friends. They had corresponded prior to Gert's trip and Elizabeth seemed formal and stuffy in her letters. But she was not. Elizabeth was kind, smart and her husband fell over himself to please her.

Gert sighed. To have a man gush and worry was something she had never experienced. At her home, near Chicago, Uncle Fred and the hands at the ranch were good to her, disagreeing with her politics, but defending her to the last. She was an oddity to them but they loved her still, she knew. But not like Anthony and Elizabeth. Their eyes met often, knowing smiles exchanged as he clasped her hand or kissed her cheek. Gert had long ago weaned herself of fairy stories of dashing heroes, but before her eyes were the real Prince Charming and his lady.

"Blake was terribly disagreeable this evening, cousin," Elizabeth said.

"Not to himself, Elizabeth. I've never met anyone so full of himself in all my days," Gert replied. "And I suppose I was far too forward having just met him."

Elizabeth laughed. "He's not usually that bad, you know." She tilted her head. "And I don't think he's really that conceited. Raised differently to be sure. Sure of his station and situation. Blake has no idea how to be any other way. Truly I think Ann's leaving was more than he can take. He has no idea how to respond. No long-ago set rules to reference how a duke behaves when the duchess leaves him."

"I suppose he must have some redeeming virtues for your Anthony to consider him a best friend. I didn't see any tonight of course," Gert said and smiled. "You know his wife. Why do you think she left him?"

"I can't be sure. When I first heard I didn't believe it. Ann's feelings were always closely guarded, other than with her children of course. This will be difficult for all of them. Ann and her children are very close," Elizabeth replied.

"I wonder what happened," Gert said. She felt morbidly drawn to the story. What would make this paragon of virtue leave a handsome, wealthy husband and her children? England, like the States, gave women virtually no rights. She could easily never see her children again. "How does a woman support herself in England if her only training is to be the wife of a duke?"

"That will never be a problem," Elizabeth said. "Ann is very wealthy in her own right. It was not money that drove her to the arms of a merchant."

"A merchant is so bad?" Gert asked.

“In England, if one’s wealth isn’t bequeathed, no amount of it will turn society’s head. The only way new money gains some acceptance is by marrying a titled but desperately poor peer of the realm.”

The women laughed, bid each other good night and Gert pondered. Ann Sanders sacrificed much for some reason. Gert smiled. More than two weeks left in her stay. Certainly enough time to find out.

* * * *

Blake awoke the next morning with a blinding headache. Caused, most certainly by the giantess and her unending, inappropriate questions. He had made a quick escape after dinner with Anthony and Elizabeth and the cousin. When Miss Finch had challenged him to give an explanation for Ann’s desertion he had thought about Anthony’s advice. *Brazen it out. Dare them to laugh.* Was good practice for when his answers held consequence. This woman knew no one in his circle. And certainly Anthony would not allow her to be introduced to society.

But this was merely the beginning of the speculation and this interview had not been conducted with the steely aloofness he was accustomed to wielding. Wisely, Anthony had escorted the American dragon woman to the dining room. The ‘cousin’ continued through dinner her discourse on women’s rights.

At the breakfast table, Blake heard his children’s arrival from their grandmother’s home. He was itching to find out the details of his wife’s betrayal. Donald shouted his greeting and raced off. William and Melinda took their seats beside him at the dining table.

“Welcome back, children,” Blake said.

“Good to see you father,” William said. He shot his sister an angry face.

Melinda said nothing.

“You look lovely, dear,” Blake said to Melinda. “How was your trip?”

“Fine.”

Blake had no intentions of revealing how anxious he was for news. But Melinda was stewing about something. They ate in silence. Blake watched William mouth something to Melinda. The stubborn girl narrowed her eyes.

“Is something amiss? Is there something you wish to discuss, Melinda, William?” Blake asked.

William colored. “No, sir.”

Blake stared at his daughter. “Well, Melinda?”

No reply.

“I assume your sullen behavior has something to do with your visit with your grandmother,” Blake said as he stirred his gruel.

Melinda sat silently until tears began to streak her cheeks. Her silverware hit the table with a sharp rap and she turned to him, on him. “How could you, father? How could you?” she hissed.

Blake shook his head. "How could I what? What will I be blamed for now?"

"All these years, mother loved you faithfully," Melinda trailed off. She stood abruptly and hurried to the door.

The hairs on Blake's arms stood. "What are you trying to say, my dear? That I somehow am the cause of your mother's betrayal?"

Melinda turned in a flurry. "You took everything from her. And she did nothing but give. I hate you."

Blake threw his napkin down. "I will not stand for this kind of behavior. Apologize this instant."

"I will not apologize. What will you do, father? Discard me, disown me?" Melinda's eyes narrowed. "Find someone else to take my place?"

"Make your meaning clear, girl," Blake shouted. In that instant he knew what she spoke of and wished he had not pressed her for an answer.

"Helena. Does that name mean anything to you, father?" Melinda said.

"Melinda, hush," William shouted.

Blake swallowed. Visibly, he knew. "I suppose your mother filled your head with..."

"No," Melinda interrupted. "Mother would let us think the worst of her before she would slander you. But Grand mama, as you know, feels no such compunction."

The room was silent. Blake had no revelation to expunge himself with. "These are not the things you should know of," he said.

"But we do," Melinda whispered.

Blake stared past her. "Many men, most, I dare say, keep or have a companion of sorts."

"A companion, father? Companions are spinster aunts. Helena is no companion. I've met her, you know," Melinda said.

"Where?" Blake said as he stood, astounded. "I'm sure you're mistaken."

"No, no. She introduced herself to mother and I when we were at the dressmaker's last year. I didn't know of course. And mother withstood the stares as your *companion* greeted us," Melinda said.

Blake paled, shoved his hands in his pockets and turned to the window. But Melinda was not through.

"If most men have such companions then you are saying when my husband, whomever he may be, chooses his, I should shake hands and smile?" Melinda asked.

Blake turned around. "Your husband will never betray you. I won't stand for it."

William hurried to his sister and nearly pushed her out the door.

Melinda stood her ground long enough for one final barb. “Neither would mother.”

Blake sat down slowly in the silent, gilded room. Melinda’s announcement shocked him. He was as embarrassed for himself as he was angry with Helena. The thought of Melinda’s future husband being unfaithful hit him in the pit of his stomach. Like too much goose pudding or a cheap bottle of port. Leave it to Lady Katherine, Ann’s mother, to reveal all. Although proper to a fault, his mother-in-law had never liked him. The signs were subtle but clear. He had never wondered why, until now.

A few moments later, Melinda appeared at the door of the dining room. Quietly dignified ... like her mother. “I’m going to visit Lady Elizabeth.”

The door closed behind Briggs and Melinda. Blake sat up straight in his chair. Melinda would reveal everything to Elizabeth. Blake walked a fast clip, a stilted run rather and pulled the door open to see Briggs’ shocked face.

“Stop the carriage,” Blake shouted.

Briggs turned and called to a footman. “You there. Stop the carriage.”

The liveried young man ran but to no avail. Briggs turned to him. “Terribly sorry, Your Grace. Shall I call for your horse to be saddled?”

Blake’s shoulders slumped and he scratched his head.

“Your Grace, is anything amiss? Lady Melinda...” Briggs asked.

“Never mind, Briggs. I’ll speak to Lady Melinda when she returns.”

Blake wandered to his study and plopped in the soft confines of the leather chair behind the desk. What had upset him so to race down the hall, like Donald moreover, and reveal his distress to Briggs? He didn’t relish the thought of Elizabeth knowing about Helena. Blake turned in his chair and propped his feet on the desk. But certainly Anthony had told her everything by now. He was sure Elizabeth had seen him at some time before her marriage to Tony, squiring Helena about town. Elizabeth was not stupid, to be sure. She had certainly put together Helena and Blake’s association. Then why the simpleton’s flight down the hall? Why the rolling in the stomach, he now was experiencing? Damn. To admit what came in to his head, even to himself, was baffling, embarrassing, and uncomprehensible. Blake did not want Gertrude Finch to know of his dalliance. Especially from the lips of his daughter.

The behemoth would laugh at him and the plot of his own making. This would reinforce her bold man-hating claims. “And why do you care,” he said aloud. A footman opened the door.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“Nothing,” Blake said. He took a deep breath as the door closed. Why did he care? The question could not be answered rationally nor diminished for lack of one. And one fact remained. In truth, this unsolvable piece of him was the dilemma. He did care.

Chapter Three

“Melinda, how good to see you,” Elizabeth said smiling.

Gert saw the young woman at the door of the morning room and her heart clenched. She was close to tears. A torment was revealed on the girl’s stunning face.

“I wanted to ... mother and I wanted to know ... to know,” Melinda stuttered. She composed herself with a deep breath. “How are you feeling, Lady Elizabeth?”

“Fine, dear. Come sit down. I want to introduce you to my cousin.” Elizabeth turned in her chair. “Lady Melinda Sanders, Miss Gertrude Finch.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Melinda said.

“My God, Elizabeth,” Gert said in awe. “You were right.” Melinda’s eyes darted and Gert realized her gaffe. “I’m sorry. Where are my manners? Gawking like a coal miner at gold. You are beautiful. More so than Elizabeth described. And I hear you are the picture of your mother.”

Melinda’s lip trembled. “Thank you.”

Elizabeth stood and reseated herself next to the nervous young woman. “Are you alright, Melinda?” Elizabeth asked softly.

Melinda whimpered.

Gert stood. “I’ve been thinking of touring the stables. Excuse me.”

Melinda shook her head. “You needn’t leave. I’m fine,” she said stiffly as Elizabeth’s arm reached around her.

The tortured look on the girl’s face tugged at Gert’s heart. “My father left me at my Uncle Fred’s when I was about your brother’s age.” Melinda’s head came up as she continued. “I had a hard time of it that first year.”

“What happened?” she asked.

Gert smiled ruefully as she remembered. “I was mad at the world. Mad at my father for leaving. And my mother for dying. Aunt Mavis finally sat me down and gave me a talking to.”

“What did she say?” Melinda asked.

Gert smiled at Melinda. “She told me to say whatever was on my mind. Let it all spill out. The good and the bad. That the talk was staying right there. I miss Aunt Mavis. There’s not been a day since her death I don’t think of her.”

Elizabeth kissed Melinda’s forehead. “Nothing you say will leave this room.”

Melinda stood gracefully. Her full skirt barely moved as she walked to the window. Her hands were neatly interlaced at her waist. Gert remembered the shame and anger in her own voice the day she finally broke down to Aunt Mavis. But clearer still, Gert relived the lifting and release of emotions that had weighed her down and plagued her thoughts.

“Your mother left your father,” Gert said.

Melinda whirled around. “She should have years...” She bowed her head.

Elizabeth glanced at her and back to Melinda. “Well, your father doesn’t seem to be an easy person to love. A little stiff, I think,” Gert said.

“He’s my father. I love him but...” Melinda faltered and looked at Gertrude beseechingly.

“Of course you love him,” Elizabeth said.

Melinda whirled in a bustle of skirts and Gert and Elizabeth sat back in their chairs. “I hate him too. I hate him. I’m angry with mother, as well. Why didn’t she stop him?”

“Stop him from what?” Gert asked.

And then the words came in torrents, unleashed and bald. Melinda hissed Helena’s name and swayed from unabashed love to unbridled anger for her parents. Self-doubt emerged as she questioned any part she may have played. Confusion in her now shaking world. Deep shame to reveal to anyone their family’s situation and embarrassment for her own shallowness. And the hopelessness she felt when her mother stood her ground to William and refused to come home. Melinda wilted in to Elizabeth’s arms for a long cry.

When the hiccoughs ceased, Gert leaned forward and asked, “Do you feel any better?”

“A little,” Melinda said.

“Good,” Gert said resolutely. “The matter at hand now is to understand that none of this is your problem.”

Melinda looked up from Elizabeth’s neck. “Of course it’s my problem.”

Gert shook her head. “No. It’s not. Your parents are adults. You can be angry and unhappy but it doesn’t change a thing. They’ve made their own decisions.”

“There will be such gossip and my come-out is this spring,” Melinda whispered.

“Do you believe a child of a murderer should be hung next to their parents?” Gert asked. Melinda shook her head. “Or that the mother of an outlaw should be jailed? Of course you don’t. We, each of us, are responsible for our own actions. Have you done anything to be ashamed of?” Gert asked. Melinda sat up and shook her head again. “Then to hell with the gossips, Melinda. They’re not worth your time.”

Melinda covered her mouth and looked at Elizabeth. “I never heard a women swear.” Then she giggled. Melinda sobered as the other women laughed. “It won’t be easy to not care about what they say.”

Elizabeth held Melinda’s hands. “No, it won’t. Life isn’t always easy.”

Gert smiled. "But look around you, Melinda. You live lavishly in lovely clothes. With plenty of food on your table. And you're beautiful. Getting ready to meet a handsome prince to sweep you off your feet. How lucky you are."

Elizabeth laughed with Melinda. "Cousin, how romantic. I would have never guessed you had such a tender streak."

Gert laughed but not heartily. How silly notions came to her head sometimes. A longing unfulfilled left her hollow. Melinda's announcement awoke her from her own pining.

"Come to dinner tonight, Miss Finch. With Elizabeth and Anthony. I want you to meet my brothers," Melinda said.

"Your father doesn't think much of me. I think I'll make him uncomfortable," Gert replied.

Melinda smiled shyly. "Did you do anything to be ashamed of?" She watched Gert shake her head with a knowing smile. "Then to Hades with my father."

"Apparently I've been beaten with my own words," Gert replied with a smile.

So Ann Sanders grew a backbone after sixteen years, Gert thought as she watched Melinda climb into the carriage. The philanderer kept a mistress all of his adult life and she waited this long to leave. *I would have dumped him and his handsome face years ago.*

* * * *

Blake heard Melinda arrive. With little regard for stealth, he met her in the domed entranceway. "Melinda?" he said hesitantly.

She turned from removing her bonnet and faced him. "Father. I was just about to come looking for you." Melinda tilted her head with small smile. "We're having guests for dinner." She turned to Briggs. "Would you please tell Mrs. Wickham there will be three more for dinner? Thank you."

Blake stood hands on his hips and stared. His eldest looked so much like his wife; sometimes he forgot she was not. But Ann would have never announced guests. She would have questioned his wishes quietly. But not this vixen, even more beautiful than her mother. Oh no. She sashayed in, explained her plans and was now about to climb the stairs.

"Am I to know whom I'll have the pleasure of dining with this evening?" Blake asked.

Melinda's curls tossed over her shoulder. "Sir Anthony, Lady Elizabeth and their houseguest, Miss Gertrude Finch."

Blake gritted his teeth. Melinda was less unhappy and angry to be certain. Was he willing to risk this truce by barring the houseguest from the door?

"Is there a problem, Father?" Melinda asked.

Blake stared at the wall.

Melinda came down the two steps of the staircase and put her dainty white hand on his cheek. "I didn't think entertaining the Burroughs would upset you. We've not had a guest for such a long time."

"It's not them," Blake said.

Melinda's brows rose. "Oh, so it's Miss Finch who has you anxious?"

"I'm not anxious," Blake whined. Sounding even to his own ears, suspiciously like Donald after the denial of his third dessert. "I just don't like her."

"Don't you?" Melinda's eyes opened wide and then she smiled. "I adore her. We had a lovely chat." She turned to the staircase. "I'll be in my rooms if you need me."

Briggs stood at attention still. "How many for dinner, Your Grace?"

"You heard the exchange, Briggs. Apparently however many my daughter has invited."

* * * *

Later that day, Blake waited in the library for his guests. The six long windows faced the entrance and he stood staring through the glass at the wide manicured lawn and the snake of a drive that wound through the gardens to the door of his estate. The American and Melinda had a lovely chat, she had said. Certainly his daughter would not reveal family business to the woman. Certainly her own embarrassment would keep her silent. But what of Elizabeth?

Blake paced. From the fireplace to the curio cabinet and back, steadily staring down at the elaborate design in the carpet. *I am anxious. Why?* He had nearly convinced himself to cloister in his study and dally long enough to keep them all waiting when a sight coming up the drive caught his attention. Donald and William had seen it too just as they walked into the library. Two horses, running full tilt, charged down the drive, with a carriage coming sedately behind. Were those skirts blowing in the wind?

"Do you see her?" Donald shouted.

William stood with his younger brother at the long window. "She's riding astride," Blake's heir breathed.

That was when Blake realized for certain. Cousin Gertrude, the Amazon American loud mouth was riding full out with Anthony trailing her.

"She's going to beat him," William said with worry as he looked at his father. The three of them raced to the door. Briggs' hand was on the ornate knob when he saw the trio running at him. The servant backed away.

Father and sons charged through the foyer to stand together on the marble walkway. There was the American, pantaloons flapping, and bonnet flailing as her skirts rode the wind. Miss Finch leaned in close to the neck of the mare with a smile on her face.

"Good God," Blake said.

Donald jumped up and down and slapped an imaginary steed. William appeared forlorn. Anthony looked horrified and Elizabeth hung her head out the window of the carriage shouting encouragement. And this woman, Blake realized, was stunning. Shining masses of black hair flew around her head. And

then she winked at him. Winked. At the Duke of Wexford. Cheeky girl. Woman, Blake corrected. Girls didn't have breasts that bounced quite like that. The two riders stopped in a cloud of dust, just feet from the marble entranceway.

Anthony nearly fell from his horse. "Terribly sorry, Blake. Cousin Gertrude. You've given us a fright," he shouted.

Miss Finch sat up in the saddle. "Why?" she asked.

"You could have broken your neck. Why didn't you pull up?" Anthony said.

She grinned. "Would have been my neck. And anyway, I wanted to beat you."

"You were racing?" William whispered.

Gertrude Finch pushed the groom's hand away and slid down the horse. "You must be William." She slapped the dust from her hands, righted her bonnet and held out her hand. William touched it tentatively.

"Don't kiss it. You'll end up with a bloodied nose," Blake said.

Miss Finch tilted her head back and laughed. "And you must be Donald," she said to the boy now jumping up and down.

"Donald, your manners," Blake said sharply.

"Oh pooh." Miss Finch sat down on the marble step, eyelevel with the boy. "It's too exciting to watch a horse race and stand still, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. It is," Donald replied.

"Do you like to fish?" she asked the boy.

His mouth dropped. "Yes. How did you know? I have a little sailboat too."

"Will you show me?" she asked.

Blake interrupted. "We are going to have sherry in the library."

Miss Finch stared at him and said hello to Melinda near the door. "I never cared for sherry. Thanks anyway." She picked up Donald's hand and proceeded through the gardens.

Blake could hear their trailing voices. Donald telling her everything at once and Miss Finch laughing. They disappeared from sight. Blake turned to the rest of the party.

"So sorry, Blake," Anthony said.

Elizabeth came up the steps. "Something so wrong in paying attention to a little boy?"

Everyone filed past Blake into his home. He stood as still as the marble columns beside him. Then marched to the lake. Miss Finch, Donald and Mrs. Wickham's grandson lay flat out in the grass at the edge of the water.

“What are you doing?” Blake thundered.

Miss Finch rolled on to her side. “Looking at Donald and Malcolm’s sailboats.”

Blake wanted to pull every last hair from his head. “I know that. Where did you learn to ride like that?”

“Like what?” Miss Finch asked.

She was being purposefully obtuse. “Like a man,” he shouted.

“On my Uncle Fred’s farm.” Gertrude Finch said as she stood and looked down at the boys. “Where’s this tree house?” she asked.

Blake followed as the trio walked to an enormous oak tree. The threesome stood pointing and talking while Blake dropped his head and rubbed his eyes and wondered what it was about this woman that made him behave so completely out of character. When he looked up he saw the American climbing the rope ladder to Donald’s tree house. He made swift work of the space between him and the ladder swinging under Miss Finch’s weight. He grabbed her around the waist. “You can’t climb trees, Miss Finch.”

“Why not?” Miss Finch asked over her shoulder.

“It’s not done, it’s not,” Blake stuttered.

“But having your nose in my behind is?”

Blake wrenched his neck back and stared. Dear God in heaven, he thought and stumbled away to the grass. Leaving the ladder to swing.

Miss Finch’s hand slipped from its hold and she fell to the ground atop Blake. His hands flew furiously trying to rid his face of yards of petticoat. The bruiser atop him squirmed and pitched forward. He sat up and straightened his cravat.

“Well done,” he shouted as he stood.

Miss Finch flew to her feet. “I was fine till you stuck your face in my bustle.”

Blake and the American were inches apart, both shouting and pointing fingers. Blake grabbed the woman’s arms to keep her from sticking the offending appendage in his face.

* * * *

Elizabeth, Anthony, William and Melinda stood at the side window of the library facing the lake and wilderness walk around it. The women giggled when Blake shook his finger and leaned back to shout. The men shook their head. From the vaulted window of Wexford House they watched the scene in wonder as Blake grabbed Miss Finch’s arms. But all four sets of eyes widened and all four mouths stilled as they watched the Duke of Wexford lean forward and kiss Gertrude Finch.

* * * *

I will melt into a puddle of my own clothes, Gert thought. I'm dissolving as I stand under a tree. Gert pushed closer. His tongue is in my mouth. She sighed as a long ago forgotten fantasy roared over her lips, to her breasts and beyond. Her mind had a vague understanding now of why women swoon when they're kissed. Kissed?

They broke apart and stared at each other, both breathing hard, his hands still holding her arms. Sanders swept his eyes from the top of hair, to her lips, to her mouth standing agape. To her heaving chest, her grass stained skirts and muddy shoes. And back to her chest. "Big bosoms."

Gert's mouth dropped. The ignoramus. She did the only thing she could think of doing. What Uncle Fred and the hands had taught her to do if and when a man took liberties or insulted her. Gert punched the Duke soundly in the nose.

Sander's head snapped back. Blood was dripping onto his white cravat. "You punched me," he said.

Gert was unnerved. Not angry. Not happy either of course. But completely unstrung. This arrogant English man had kissed her. Her mind swung from wondering if he would do it again to punching him again if he did. Gert blustered and blubbered and turned to hurry to the house. She noticed the shining window of the mansion held Anthony, Elizabeth, Melinda and William.

"Father?" William questioned as she and Sanders entered the foyer.

"Are you alright, Miss Finch?" Melinda asked.

"There seems to be twigs or something sticking in your hair," Anthony said and reached to Sander's head.

Sanders slapped Anthony's hand away.

Gert surveyed the broad range of expressions before her. She could hear Sanders breathing hard. She needed something to keep her hands from shaking. "I could use a whiskey after I clean up." Gert turned to the stairs and Melinda hurried to her side.

"Mayhap your valet could work on that cravat, Blake. Seems to be sagging and well, blood stained." Anthony's mouth twitched.

"I'm going to change," Sanders said.

William followed. "I'll help you," the young man said.

* * * *

"Father kissed you," Melinda whispered as she closed the door to a guest room.

"Really," Gert said her face flushing. "I hadn't noticed." Gert finger-combed her hair and dabbed mud from her dress.

"Would you have boxed his nose if it was that forgettable?" Melinda asked.

Gert's face flamed. "I have no idea what possessed your father to kiss me. Nor why everyone needed to be staring out the window as he did."

Melinda giggled. "What will you say to him over dinner?"

Gert checked her appearance once more and walked to the door of the bedroom. Her host would get no dreamy, clinging looks from her. "Pass the potatoes, please."

Gert came to the top of the staircase at the same instant as the duke.

Sanders swept his hand to the stairs. "After you."

Gert smiled tightly and descended the steps, determined to not let this man upset her. She walked into the library head high. Anthony was holding a crystal decanter.

"Cousin Gertrude. You expressed a wish for whiskey."

Anthony handed her the glass, with no more than an ounce in it. Gert tilted her head and drank it down. The whiskey hit her immediately and she was glad of it. She held her glass out for a refill.

"That's hundred year old scotch, woman. Sip it," Sanders commanded.

Gert glared at the duke and sat down. She would absolutely not let his arrogance deter her. These were Anthony and Elizabeth's friends. She would be congenial and civil.

Elizabeth hurried ahead with conversation. "Donald seemed very proud of his boat."

"He smiled the whole time he showed it to me," Gert said. "Every inch a boy."

"The boys seemed excited as well over the tree house," Anthony said, tongue visible in his cheek.

Gert knew every mind in the room was picturing her collapse from the ladder. "I didn't get to see it," she said.

Sanders harrumphed and crossed his legs.

"How's your nose, Blake?" Elizabeth asked. "Has it stopped bleeding?"

Melinda stared hard at her father. "The first time a man kisses me I think I will do the same thing," she said.

"Especially if he mentions the size of your bosom," Gert said and sipped her drink.

"Pardon?" Anthony said. "Blake commented on your, your...."

"My bosoms," Gert repeated. "I think big was the word he used."

The room was silent for a brief moment. Melinda was wide eyed. William stared at Gert's chest. Elizabeth's hand covered her mouth. Anthony wiped tears from his eyes as he laughed aloud. The butler opened the door to announce dinner. Anthony hurried to escort Elizabeth. William held his arm out to his sister. Sanders offered his arm to her.

"May I?" he asked.

“I can walk unassisted. Thank you,” she replied and swept down the hallway trailing Anthony and Elizabeth.

Gert stared awestruck as she entered the formal dining room. The room was beautiful. Large, well lit and filled with flowers. The linen on the table seemed to go on endlessly. Crystal shimmered and silver twinkled in the light of the candles. A footman pulled a chair out for her. The conversation to her relief went on with no more references to the display outside. She glanced at Sanders, from the corner of her eye. He seemed to fit this world as if made for it. No wonder the man’s wife left him. He had a long-standing mistress and kissed his guests till they couldn’t breathe.

Chapter Four

Mayhap the woman does not know of Helena, Blake thought. He had certainly given her ample opportunity to use such information against him. Blake sipped his soup and nodded to Anthony. What had come over him to make a comment about the size of her breasts or worse yet, kiss her, he wondered? Impulsive wasn’t a word ever associated with the Sanders family. And he least of all. Impetuous? Devil may care? No. None of these words described him. Blake stared at the cousin from under his brow as he sliced his lamb. Nothing particularly attractive about her, he decided. Dark hair and lots of it around a nondescript face. An average nose over, well, yes, he admitted full lips, below green eyes. Green was not quite right. Rather a cross between clover and heather. Or mint. Anthony’s voice intruded on Blake’s musings.

“Certainly,” Blake said and nodded to Anthony.

“Good then, Blake.” Anthony leaned back to drink his wine. “I’ll say pea green.”

“Pea green?” Blake said. “No. I think more earthy tones like mint or heather. With just a touch of blue.”

“Perfect, I’d say.” Anthony smiled. “I’ll have your stable man paint all your horses that color.” Anthony leaned forward and winked. “Easy enough to watch when they race.”

Blake laid down his fork and knife. “Paint my horses pea green, you say. What’s gotten into you, Anthony?” His face colored. Had he really agreed to have his horses painted while he wondered over the color of the American’s eyes? Blake caught Anthony’s sly smile as his friend cocked his eyes to Miss Finch.

“You seemed to be somewhere else while I was trying to have a conversation with you. You would have agreed to wear pink garters and prance around St. James Square in nothing else.” Anthony looked him in the eye. “Where were your thoughts, Blake?”

Blake didn’t answer as he was listening intently to the conversation at the other end of the table.

“That’s when I learned to break horses. It was my favorite time of year. That and going to the yards to sell them,” Miss Finch replied.

“The yards?” William asked.

“The stock yards in Chicago.” Miss Finch put her elbows on the table and sat her chin in her hand, looking away dreamily. “Where everyone comes. The yards would be packed with people and pigs and cattle and horses. Uncle Fred and I stayed at a grand hotel every year. That’s where I first heard speakers on women’s rights. How I became involved.”

“What rights?” Melinda asked.

“Very few, I’m sorry to say,” Miss Finch replied.

“Sufferance,” Elizabeth added.

“Women’s right to vote and own property. All kinds of things,” Miss Finch continued.

“What do you do about those things, Miss Finch?” William asked.

“We speak at schools and churches. Whoever will have us. Lobby politicians in Congress. Trying to convince our fellow citizens that the constitution was written for everyone.”

“I’ve seen pictures in the newspaper of suffragists on the steps of the White House,” Elizabeth added.

“An ugly lot for certain,” Blake said and looked to Anthony.

“Father, what these women look like has nothing to do with anything,” Melinda said sharply.

Blake glanced around the table to the females now skewering him with their gaze. “I saw the pictures as well as Elizabeth. Not a comely woman among them,” Blake said.

“Blake!” Anthony hissed.

“What, Anthony?” Blake blustered to his friend and motioned his exasperation with his spoon. “You’ve seen them as well.” Blake blew his cheeks out. “All fat and feathers with no smiles.”

“Really, Blake,” Elizabeth said.

“Women in every country will benefit from our fight. We have brains, sir. God didn’t create women solely so you have a pretty face to look at. Your daughter, for example, is beautiful but smart and spirited as well,” Miss Finch retorted.

“This has nothing to do with Melinda,” Blake snorted.

“Why not father? What if I decide to move to America and rally for the vote? Or here in England, perhaps?” Melinda asked.

“Good God, Melinda. Forget that nonsense. You have a role to fill. And soon a title,” Blake said.

“You would make a beautiful suffragette, though, dear,” Anthony added.

“The only one, that’s for sure,” Blake said and leaned to Anthony, chuckling.

“Miss Finch is a suffragette, father,” William said.

A flush came over Blake’s face. “Of course, Miss Finch. I didn’t mean to imply...”

“Yes you did. More than implied. You dismiss your daughter out of hand, claim a lack of beauty on the part of women who’ve spent their life helping others. I’m ... I’m not pretty,” Miss Finch stumbled, “I’ll agree, but ... but to assume my goals are less than your own because of my lack of beauty is abominable.”

“And shallow,” Melinda added.

“Thick-headed,” Elizabeth said.

“Tea will be served in the music room,” Briggs announced.

Everyone rose quietly and left except William. “You kissed her, sir,” he said to his father.

Blake flashed him a furious stare.

The boy’s cheeks reddened and he shrugged. “She can’t be that ugly.”

Blake found his guests in the music room listening to Melinda play the pianoforte. “Miss Finch. May I beg a moment of your time?” he asked as he touched her elbow.

The two of them retreated out of hearing distance from the rest.

“Yes?” Miss Finch clipped and folded her hands at her waist.

“I find I do owe you an apology,” Blake began.

“And every other woman in the room as well,” she replied.

“I am not concerned with every other female in the room.” Blake stood tall. “I have many faults but hurting a guest’s feelings can not be one of them.”

“I agree with you there,” Miss Finch said and clapped politely.

“Agree with what?” he asked.

“You have many faults. The least of which are poor manners,” Miss Finch said.

“Yes, well, in any case, I apologize for what I said.” Blake looked away ashamed. “I was wrong. You are really quite attractive.”

Gertrude Finch put her hands on her hips and her voice rose with each word. “I could care less what you think of me.”

“Now, now, no need to call attention our way,” Blake said and glanced at the assembly listening to

Melinda. "No need to be defensive either. I am aware of the tender sensibilities women associate with how attractive they are. My own mother made us all kiss and coo over Aunt Ethel and she had whiskers longer than...."

"Listen to me, Sanders. I meant what I said. I couldn't care less whether you think I'm attractive or not. You dismiss ideas and brains for the lack of a pretty face. I think you're a pompous idiot. What do you think of them apples, your highness," she said.

Blake held his hands behind his back and a muscle twitched below his eye. "Miss Finch, the title 'your highness' is reserved for the royal family. You Americans bandy about titles as if a one of you could trace a history further back than the last mule you shoed."

"Lineage is over-rated, sir. You are a prime example," she said.

Blake calmed himself. "Miss Finch. I am trying to apologize to you. Isn't graciousness and a bit of tact called for in these cases?"

"So not only am I ugly and stupid but lacking in grace as well. Why did you kiss me considering all this?"

"Maybe it was the only way I could think of to get you to shut that flapping mouth of yours," Blake exploded.

Miss Finch narrowed her eyes and leaned forward to whisper. "Save your kisses for Helena and leave your dinner guests alone." She turned away. "Sir Anthony, I'm tired would you take us home now?"

Elizabeth rose. "I'm exhausted as well. Call for the carriage, Anthony."

Blake stood near the door where Miss Finch had left him. Elizabeth filed past with a nod and the American did not look at him. Anthony thanked him for the entertaining evening. William and Melinda slipped past quietly.

Blake plopped down; spread-eagled and slouched in front of the fire. Servants cleared the room of dishes and Briggs placed a decanter and one glass on the table beside him.

"I'm assuming that's for me?" Blake asked and nodded to the liquor.

The stoic servant explained. "Yes, it is, Your Grace. Will there be anything else?"

Blake shook his head and stared at the fire. The American knew of Helena. To her credit she did not shout his mistresses' name in front of Melinda and William. Blake had shouted. And cursed. Insulted a guest and generally behaved like an idiot. His behavior was certainly not ducal. Anything but. Where had his breeding gone? The expectations long set for him and his son in the future as well. Blake stood to pace. To his confusion, he must admit he had nearly enjoyed sparring with Gertrude Finch. Parrying words like honed steel, hunting for weakness to impale his prey. Blake's left arm curled up above his head. His right extended to thrust. *En Garde!* Blake's feet skipped forward and back until he caught a glimpse of himself in a gilded mirror.

* * * *

"Good morning, my dear," Anthony said and bent to kiss his wife's cheek.

“Good morning, Anthony,” Elizabeth said and picked up her fork. She stared at the plate and laid the utensil down.

“Are you unwell?” Anthony asked gently.

“No. Just tired with the packing and all for town,” Elizabeth replied.

Anthony’s mouth flattened. “I will not let Melinda’s come-out interfere with your health.”

“We’ve had this discussion before, Anthony. Lady Katherine will sponsor Melinda but someone has to be there to make sure she stays out of trouble. I’m fine, dear. Eat your oatmeal.”

“Melinda will have to limit herself to early evenings and few of them. That will be quite enough for you.” Anthony picked up his coffee and smiled suddenly. “Why don’t we ask Gertrude to help you?”

Elizabeth knitted her brows. “I didn’t think you cared....”

“Help you what?” Gert asked from the door of the cozy breakfast room.

“Cousin Gertrude.” Anthony rose and pulled out a tapestry-covered chair for her. “How was your morning ride?”

“Fine. Help you what?” Gert repeated as she was seated.

“Melinda makes her come-out in town shortly. Ann could never attend, now. So her mother, Lady Katherine will sponsor her granddaughter. But she’s near sixty and will plop down beside old friends and never leave her chair,” Elizabeth said.

“Leaving lots of freedom for Melinda. Ann wrote and asked Elizabeth to attend her. Stay close, steer her away from trouble,” Anthony added. “But with Elizabeth’s condition I’m worried it will be too much. Late evenings and early teas and dancing.”

Elizabeth leaned forward and smiled at Gert. “It would be a Godsend if you stayed and helped me.”

“I know nothing about the rules of English society. How could I help?” Gert asked.

“But I do,” Elizabeth said. “You can be my eyes and ears and feet.”

“Why can’t her mother go?” Gert asked as she began her breakfast.

“Ann is wise in this,” Elizabeth said grimly. “A young girl’s first come-out is nerve-wracking enough without gossip about her mother swirling about.”

“I told Uncle Fred I’d be home soon and anyway I’d have nothing to wear....”

“La de da. Anthony will gladly see to your wardrobe to ease my trouble. And no one should leave England without going to at least one ball,” Elizabeth begged. She turned to her husband. “Isn’t that right dear?”

Sir Anthony weighed his wife’s health and his best friend’s discomfiture against the sum needed to dress a woman for London. “Whatever she needs, my dear. It will be my pleasure,” Anthony said.

“Let me think about it,” Gert replied.

* * * *

Blake’s eyes throbbed when the heavy curtains were thrown back. His head seemed to have the weight of an anvil and his stomach turned over. “Briggs. Close the drapes.” He rolled and pulled the coverlet over his head.

“Hurry sir. Not a minute to tarry. I’ve fixed something for your headache,” Briggs said.

Blake wondered how the man knew of his ailments. Other matters seemed more pressing. “I want to sleep. Leave me alone.” Blake did not hear the door close and stuck one eye out from under the covers.

Briggs stood at the end of the bed; a chalky pallor covered his face. “I’ll tell Lady Katherine you’re unwell?” he asked tentatively.

“What’s she doing here?” Blake groaned.

“You asked her to come, Your Grace. I sent the note,” Briggs replied.

Blake sat up quickly and nearly lost his stomach. “Bloody hell. You’re right.” He eyed Briggs. “Since you apparently read the message, do you recall why I asked her to visit?”

“Lady Melinda’s come-out, I believe, sir.”

Blake jumped from the bed and stubbed his toe on the nightstand. He cursed and hopped about the room naked. “Hurry Briggs. Get me dressed. No time to wait for Benson.”

* * * *

“Lady Katherine,” Blake said as he bent to place a kiss on his mother-in-law’s translucent hand.

“Always sleep this late, Sanders? Idleness is the devil’s playground,” Lady Katherine said sourly.

“I was in a meeting with my steward...”

Lady Katherine cut him off with her flailing hand and the toss of her head. “Don’t bother. Your man at the door nearly fainted when I arrived. He ran up the steps to the family quarters not your study.”

As usual, Lady Katherine took great enjoyment at his expense Blake thought as he seated himself. “Thank you for coming and agreeing to sponsor Melinda since her mother will be unavailable.” Blake stretched out the last word and watched the old woman’s reaction. Minutes squeezed by under her icy stare.

“Melinda will enjoy her come-out. I want a good match for her and will not fail. This time.” Lady Katherine arched a brow.

Blake smiled thinly. “As you know Melinda is betrothed to The Earl of Wendover’s heir. But I want her to enjoy herself, as well.”

“The Wendover’s are dull ninnyes. Don’t want imbeciles for my great-grandchildren. And anyway after this mess, he’ll withdraw the offer, you know,” Lady Katherine stated the bald facts.

Blake raised his eyes to her frankness. “I wondered the same. Elizabeth Burroughs will stand in for Ann and assist you.”

“I thought she was carrying?” Lady Katherine asked.

“She is. But Elizabeth adores Melinda and insisted on helping even after her condition was announced,” Blake said.

Lady Katherine chuckled and her eyes twinkled. “Now there’s a husband. Anthony Burroughs. Almost makes me wish I was a few years younger.”

“A few?” he asked and watched the countess’ eyes narrow.

Briggs opened the door. “Sir Anthony Burroughs has arrived, Your Grace. Shall I have him await you in the library?”

“No, no. Send him in here at once, Boscoe. I want to speak to him,” Lady Katherine said without turning her head.

Blake met Briggs’ eye and shrugged at his mother-in-law’s long-standing propensity to rename servants and relatives as she wished. Anthony strode in.

“Lady Katherine. You are the picture of health. And as beautiful as ever,” Anthony said as he bowed and kissed her hand.

Lady Katherine harrumphed but smiled. “Burroughs. No one could fault Elizabeth for picking a smooth scoundrel like you over some limp-wristed, well ... sit down, then. I hear your wife is still willing to assist in Melinda’s come-out.”

Blake crossed his legs and shook his head. His mother-in-law never failed to remind him of her opinions regarding him. She had always thought him a dandy pandering to court and society. Lady Katherine did what she pleased regardless of censure and still somehow was exulted by the ton. He, on the other hand, had spent his life being a model for dukedom and now found himself, more often than not, the butt of a joke. Blake turned back to the conversation at hand.

“And who is this woman? An American, you say?” Lady Katherine asked.

“Elizabeth’s cousin on her father’s side. A spinster escorting a niece to her family. Melinda adores her. And I will feel better knowing my wife, in her condition, will not be unduly taxed,” Anthony said.

Tony would not look at him. “What are you talking about?” Blake asked.

Anthony smiled broadly. “Elizabeth and I have asked Gertrude to assist in Melinda’s come-out.”

Blake stood and waved his arms. “No. Absolutely not.”

Lady Katherine looked at him. “What’s the matter with her, Sanders? And why are you dancing around like some dolt. Sit down.”

Blake seated himself. "She's entirely inappropriate. She knows nothing of English society."

"Elizabeth and Lady Katherine will be there. Gertrude can do the following and watching and they can do the rest. It's a perfect solution," Anthony said.

"No," Blake said.

"What's the matter with the cousin, other than being American?" Lady Katherine asked Blake.

"Nothing," Anthony interjected. "She's coming here shortly with Elizabeth. We knew you were arriving to discuss Melinda's come-out and thought this the best time for you two to meet."

"Melinda is my daughter. I won't stand for a tall, loud, American know-it-all to be guiding her through her first season," Blake said.

Lady Katherine's eyes widened.

Anthony looked forlorn as he spoke. "After you kissed her, I thought you might enjoy spending more time with Cousin Gertrude."

Lady Katherine's head snapped to Tony. "He kissed her and you saw. Maybe she's not the right person for this task."

Anthony leaned forward and covered Lady Katherine's hands with his own. "It was not her intention or wish. I guarantee it. William, Melinda and Elizabeth and I watched the whole thing from the window."

"It's bad enough, Sanders, you parade around town with that doxy. Now you're bullying guests. What do you have to say for yourself?" Lady Katherine demanded.

Had he a sword in his hand, Blake would have gladly skewered them both. Briggs announced Elizabeth and Miss Finch from the door. He watched Elizabeth sweep by and introduce the American to Lady Katherine.

"Out with you both," the older woman said to Anthony and Blake. "Sit down, Elizabeth. Miss Finch. Ring for tea on your way, Sanderson."

Blake strode out the door and clipped one word to Briggs. "Tea."
In the library, Blake let go his wrath. "How could you do this, Tony? I thought you were my friend."

"I am," Anthony replied.

"Six weeks with her. In town yet, under the scrutiny of all. And with everyone still buzzing with Ann's leaving," Blake bemoaned and dropped to a chair.

"Miss Finch has not yet decided to stay, if it makes you feel any better," Anthony said.

Blake shrugged. "That's heartening."

Anthony leaned forward. "Come on, Blake. These balls are dreadful bores. Just think how Cousin Gertrude will liven things up."

“For you maybe,” Blake snapped.

Anthony sat back and stared. “You can’t lie. You never could. You don’t dislike her that much.”

“You were the one begging me to rescue you from her just a few days ago. What changed your mind?” Blake asked.

Tony tilted his head. “She’s grown on me. And Elizabeth will miss her terribly when she leaves. Gertrude’s not bad, you know. Actually, very handsome and witty. Full of fun and new ideas. I find it refreshing.”

Blake turned his head. “You must be joking.”

“No, I’m not,” Anthony replied and studied his hands.

“You must be in dire need of entertainment to consider Gertrude Finch refreshing,” Blake said.

“I didn’t kiss her,” Tony said smugly.

“Does everyone need remind me of my one lapse in judgment? You and William both? I spend my entire life doing as I was raised to do. That singular occasion will haunt me forever. I’ve just met the woman. Made a ghastly error that will not be repeated. Can’t the matter be dropped?” Blake asked.

“She’ll not bother you, Blake. I don’t think Gertrude will seek out your company. It will help Elizabeth and leave you with more time to see Helena,” Anthony said.

Blake’s hand flitted. “I sent a note and a diamond bracelet. I have no desire to see Helena again.”

“You what?” Anthony demanded.

“Helena introduced herself to Ann and Melinda last year in town. I no longer desire her company,” Blake said.

Anthony sat back in awe. “Well, well. Walked right up to them.” He cocked his head. “Can hardly fault Helena. She was with you more than Ann. Figured she had you for life.”

“She was wrong,” Blake answered. “I don’t know why I’m worrying. Lady Katherine will never approve of Miss Finch to assist in Melinda’s come-out. You know how she feels about Americans.”

* * * *

After exchanging pleasantries, Lady Katherine went in for the kill. “Why would I allow a woman who kisses a married man on the lawn to assist my granddaughter?”

Elizabeth cringed. Gert did not.

“Allow him to kiss me? I had nothing to do with it other than to stand there. Trust me, Lady Katherine, I do not relish the idea of spending one second more with Blake Sanders than I have to. I consider this only as a way to help Elizabeth and Melinda,” Gert replied.

“Spending time with my daughter’s husband has never been of great significance to me either,” Lady

Katherine said. "And this foray will have to be delicately handled. I will not allow Melinda to suffer for her mother's mistakes."

Gert raised her brows. "You disagree with your daughter, then?"

"Gertrude," Elizabeth said. She shook her head.

Lady Katherine stared at Gert. "It's alright, Elizabeth. The chit has the courage to ask. I suppose I'll supply the answer. Ann and Sanders' marriage was arranged from birth. Two old families joining. He was a decent sort as a young man. I thought for many years I had done the right thing. Just as my parents had done for me. The difference was I respected my husband and eventually loved him. And he me, I believe. Sanders never loved or respected Ann."

"But Lady Katherine," Elizabeth asked. "You and I both know love is an unusual ingredient for marriage in the ton."

"Yes, yes," Lady Katherine said impatiently. "But as I got on in years and watched my daughter fade from life for a lack of attention, it galled me surely. Ann dismissed everything she was taught, all that her father and I imparted to her and yet this is the first time I've seen my daughter happy in fifteen years. I can't deny I'm glad for her and her merchant."

"If she's happy then I suppose you've achieved your life work, Lady Katherine," Gert said. "I've no children but I can't imagine watching them suffer. Melinda was confused by it all."

"Melinda? What did she have to say on the subject?" Lady Katherine asked.

"We told Melinda everything that was said was in confidence. I'm not sure we should repeat it," Gert said.

"This is Melinda's grand mama, Gertrude. Surely she knows most of it anyway," Elizabeth said and proceeded to tell Lady Katherine of their meeting with Melinda. The girl's tears, confessions, fears and of Gert's advice.

"Told my granddaughter not to worry about the gossips. You're right, she's not to blame in this affair." Lady Katherine studied Gert. "I would be indebted if you would assist us in London, Miss Finch. Melinda will need every ally we can muster. I don't think you'd stand by idly and watch her spurned. Or allow gossip to be spread."

"It's kind of you to trust me but be forewarned. I speak my mind, especially with Melinda's father," Gert said. Had she just accepted this role? Gert could hardly believe her words. She had come at Elizabeth and Anthony's insistence to meet the grandmother, fully intending to refuse.

Lady Katherine rose. "Shows more good sense than you know, Miss Finch. Fool Sanders is to never realize the gem he had in Ann."

"In America we would call him a horse's ass," Gert said.

Lady Katherine laughed aloud. "Apt description, I'd say." She bellowed to the door. "I know you're listening, Boscoe. Fetch Sanders and Burroughs. Be quick about it."

* * * *

Blake was feeling confident when he went into the morning room. The American had probably prattled on about women's rights. With any luck his mother-in-law had fainted. He passed Miss Finch and Elizabeth in the hall. He nodded smugly.

"Miss Finch will accompany us to London. Burroughs has agreed to handle the wardrobe. She'll be staying with you and Anthony and Elizabeth in London," Lady Katherine said as he entered the room.

Blake skidded to a stop. "Certainly you can see the inherent flaws in this plan, Katherine." She shot him a look. "Lady Katherine."

"What flaws, Sanders?" the dowager asked.

Blake paced the room. "This will be difficult enough for Melinda. Any indiscretion by Miss Finch, Melinda will suffer for."

Lady Katherine stared at him and spoke regardless of her audience. "Could hardly be worse than any of your many indiscretions."

Blake swallowed. And admitted defeat. Two months under the same roof with the woman. Could he take it? For Melinda, he supposed he could. "Very well."

Chapter Five

The next week flew by for Gert. She sent a letter to Uncle Fred and stood on a dressmaker's stool being pinned, prodded and poked for days on end by Elizabeth's modiste. And then, of course, there was the huge array of fabrics and trimmings to choose. Styles to decide. Matching shoes, purses and cloaks to select. Gert tried desperately to convince the women she needed more fabric than they provided to cover her chest. But to no avail. Gert would die of embarrassment the first time she had to go out in public in these clothes. And the time was quickly approaching. They left for London the following morning.

* * * *

Gert had never seen such a procession in all her days. Carriage after carriage, hauling trunks and hatboxes with Benson, Briggs and Mrs. Wickham squeezed among them. What a bunch of hooey, Gert thought. But she could not deny the excitement. Melinda supplied an endless list of eligible men with Elizabeth nodding, sometimes shrugging and occasionally shaking her head emphatically. Melinda chattered the entire trip.

"You're too young to marry this year," Gert finally said to Melinda

"No, I'm not," the girl replied.

“You may be allowed to marry but knowing one’s mind at sixteen is another thing all together. You changed hats three times before we left,” Gert said.

Melinda sat back against the black leather of the carriage seat and frowned.

“What Gertrude is saying is that there is plenty of time. I didn’t marry Anthony till I was two and twenty.” Elizabeth cringed. “Thank God I waited.”

“Why?” Melinda asked.

“I’d be married to a pimply faced redhead with knock knees otherwise,” Elizabeth replied.

Melinda laughed. “You both think I should wait before accepting an offer. But Father and Grand mama will be angry if I do.”

“Let them be,” Gert countered. “Aren’t there things you want to do before you have children and a husband to care for?”

Melinda’s eyes widened. “I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it.”

“Then take the time to think about it. Do you want to travel or study?” Gert stared out the window dreamily. “Sail with a pirate or dig for gold. Study at a University? Climb a mountain or dance in the sand on a beach?” She turned from her musings to two shocked expressions. “What?”

“Miss Finch, those things aren’t for the daughter of a Duke,” Melinda whispered.

“Would be quite out of the norm,” Elizabeth added.

Gert sat quietly the rest of the trip. Obviously her opinions on some matters were too outlandish for her hostesses. Wouldn’t stop her dreams though as a smile came to her lips. Panning for gold in a cold stream somewhere in California, camping above the clouds at the top of the Rockies or sailing on the great seas. A handsome, dark pirate ravishing her after felling enemies with his sword.

Gert’s eyes closed as the pirate came into view. Snug black pants fit into high boots with a white shirt billowing in the breeze above a red satin sash. His face would be rugged and wind burnt when he bent his head to capture her mouth. Her eyes would be closed and when her lashes slowly fluttered open he would declare his undying love. She would stare into his blue eyes and ... heaven’s sakes, her pirate was Blake Sanders! They stopped in front of a huge mansion and Gert shook her head to clear her thoughts as she stepped down from the carriage. Her fairy tale had occupied her thoughts more vividly and thoroughly than ever before.

“Love to, my dear,” Sanders said as he assisted Melinda.

“What?” Gert said.

The Duke turned to stare at her as if she had grown two heads. And she stared back. Her fanciful, lusty pirate had emerged as a stuffy, pompous Englishman. Her daydreams were ruined. Sanders was handsome enough to be her pirate and lusty enough to kiss her at will, but he was such ... an ass.

“Seen your fill, Miss Finch?” Sanders asked. “What term did you use before? Ah, yes, woolgathering, I

believe.”

Gert swallowed. “Daydreaming.” His smug smile riled her. “About ... about the day men and women are equal,” she added.

He leaned close to her, blew a breath and whispered, “I think not.”

Gert covered her head with her hand. “Did you just blow in my ear?” A chill went down her spine.

Sanders stood, hands on his hips with his feet spread wide. “I would be happy to repeat the gesture if you were still daydreaming about suffrage.”

Gert pursed her lips as her face reddened. The way he stood evoked a ship under his feet as he laughed at the elements or pursuers. Her favorite fantasy was ruined and she was angry.

“Do you want to be punched in the nose again?” Gert asked.

He tilted his head. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. Rarely do women find my kisses cause for violence.”

Gert harrumphed and swept past him. Yet, his words stopped her.

“Should we repeat our moment by the lake and see if the effect is different this time?” he asked.

Gert was shaken when he referred to the kiss as ‘our moment.’ The words held intimacy, history, an impending future and words failed her. She turned to him with no witty barb emerging from her confusion. No repartee delivered with icy hauteur. The pirate, in her head, was blowing in her ear and she had to escape. Gert stuck out her tongue and hurriedly followed the others into the house. Anthony and Elizabeth were in the foyer with Mrs. Wickham who was directing where trunks were to be taken and which fires to be lit. Gert undid the clasp of her new navy cape and handed it to a servant seemingly only there to receive it. She straightened the new dress and tugged at the neckline. Sir Anthony found something vastly amusing when he looked at her.

“Something funny, Anthony?” Gert asked.

“No,” Anthony said and shook his head.

* * * *

Blake ran up the steps to the door, a cocky grin on his face. Although the thought of spending time with Gertrude Finch did not settle well with Blake, he had resigned himself to it during the long ride to London. More arguments would undoubtedly upset Melinda and this was, after all, her debut. Come-outs were the domain of the females in his sphere but he knew for a fact she was both nervous and excited. He would be a charming, attentive host and do nothing to make his daughter worry.

And he could clearly unsettle the American. It was an appealing thought and somehow soothed his bruised pride and ego. Let someone other than the Duke of Wexford act wholly out of character. The righteous Miss Finch had blushed when he blew in her ear. Where were her thoughts? He smiled triumphantly when he realized he may not be the only one to wake in a cold sweat reliving their kiss. Tony may be right. This may prove to be a vastly entertaining interlude. She had her back to him and he rubbed his hands together as he envisioned her shock when he told her his plans for that tongue she stuck

out.

“Miss Finch, never stick your...” Blake stopped mid-stride as she turned. A vast sea of white flesh held his eyes. Big, soft, cream-colored breasts jutted over the neckline of her dress. His lip twitched. He wanted to bury his face between them and not come up for days. He wanted to kiss and lick the mountains till he found their peaks. Blake growled and stared.

“Never stick what?” Miss Finch asked. She followed the direction of his eyes.

“Ah, pardon?” Blake asked and looked up briefly.

“You asked me a question about sticking something,” Miss Finch replied. Anthony laughed beside her.

Blake’s head snapped to her face and he swallowed as he realized what he wanted to stick and where. The thought overwhelmed any other sense in his head. Think, man, think, he said to himself. What was she talking about and what was the correct reply? We’re in London. Melinda’s come-out. Blake took a weak breath. Dear God. Miss Finch couldn’t be seen at balls like this. Not a soul would look his daughter’s way.

“Cover yourself, woman. Bloody hell,” Blake said.

“‘Tis the top of fashion, Blake,” Elizabeth said.

Blake’s hands flustered and flew, gesturing in Miss Finch’s direction. “Her bosoms are hanging out, Elizabeth. There isn’t a man in town who won’t be staring.”

Anthony quivered with laughter until his wife’s looks stilled him. “Anthony would not deny he noticed her décolletage,” Elizabeth said. “But I doubt the men of London would drool the way you are.”

“I am not drooling, Elizabeth.” Blake desperately tried to convey nonchalance as he straightened.

Miss Finch undid the clasp of her reticule and pulled a white, lace-edged hanky from inside. She met Blake’s eyes and patted her chest with the hanky as if to trill, ‘oh my’ as she walked across the foyer towards him.

Blake flinched as she touched the cloth to the corner of his mouth. Naked dancing women could never be as erotic as this act. Never before did he feel so completely undone. Mesmerized by a bit of lace as it flittered to his face. From those vast breasts, his mind thought and his eyes saw, to dab ever so lightly at his now, twitching mouth. He no longer heard Tony laughing or Elizabeth’s attempts to hush him. Or saw the assembled servants gape. Nor did he hear the clatter of William and Melinda’s steps on the marble staircase. Blake Sanders existed in a private vacuum, consisting of lips, breasts and a hanky. He grabbed the arms beside those breasts and crushed the body attached against his chest. His lips clamped over hers and held on.

“Father. You’re doing it again,” William said from the steps.

Blake and Gertrude flew apart. He ran his fingers through his hair as he scanned the faces in the room. He ran up the stairs, past servants and his wide-eyed children.

“Off with everyone now,” Mrs. Wickham said as she patted her flushing face. “Much to be done.” The servants scurried behind her.

* * * *

Anthony found Blake in his study, staring. He stood patiently. Finally, he clapped his hands together in front of Blake's face.

"Come on, old man," Anthony said.

Blake jumped and righted himself. "Tony," he said, bewildered.

Anthony sat quiet for a while, sipping scotch. "Anything you want to talk about, Blake?"

Blake swallowed. "My father would die if he had seen my display today."

"Your father is dead. Over ten years now."

Blake nodded blankly. "I don't know what came over me."

"You don't?" Anthony asked.

Blake shook his head. All his private, well-guarded thoughts tumbled from his mouth in a flurry. "I couldn't resist her. I couldn't see anyone but her. I ... I thought I'd die if I didn't kiss her."

Anthony harrumphed and looked away. "Consider yourself doomed. A sweet death, perhaps, but doomed all the same. Tis the same way I feel every time I look at Elizabeth."

"Yes, but you love Elizabeth," Blake whispered.

Tony glared over his glass. "And why would you consider yourself immune?"

Blake laughed without humor. "I am not in love with Gertrude Finch. Desire is one thing, love another." Blake crossed his legs and looked away. "Desire is bad enough."

Tony studied his friend. "So you are saying, if Helena had run a hanky over her bosoms you would have kissed her. In front of me, your children and the servants?"

"No, I, no," Blake stuttered. "Displays of affection of that sort are private. Mistress or wife. It's why I glare at you when you drape yourself over Elizabeth."

"There was nothing private about the way you nearly ate my houseguest in your foyer today, Blake. I thought you meant to suck the woman's lips right from her face," Anthony growled.

Blake groaned.

"I was waiting for you to drop your pants and take her right there on the steps."

Blake covered his face with his hand as Tony repeated his innermost thoughts.

"Throw her skirts up and claim her in front of your children, my wife and Mrs. Wickham, for God's sakes."

“Enough,” Blake said.

Anthony sat up straight. “She’s an unmarried woman in my protection. Here to help your daughter make her come-out,” he said as he stood. “Fine thing, I’ll be dueling at dawn with my life long friend.”

“I would never....” Blake began.

Anthony interrupted. “Bloody right, you won’t. I’ll not have you under Gertrude’s skirts and wave her merrily away at the docks. She’s not that kind of woman.”

Anthony was right. Blake knew it. The fact did not temper his lust.

* * * *

Gert had an idea why Sanders kissed her again. Although not confident in her womanly charms, she was no one’s fool. She knew the hands at the ranch and Uncle Fred himself thought large breasts paramount to sainthood. She had been prepared to make a witty comment about drool and feel victory in his embarrassment. But then he’d stared at her with such intensity; her legs had nearly buckled as if she stood on the deck of her pirate captain’s ship as the wind blew at her back. Sanders had grabbed her arms, focused on her lips and kissed her with a low growl. Red sashes danced behind her closed eyes. None of her fantasy kisses ever compared.

Sanders had run up the staircase as if the hounds of hell were on his heels. She stood in the middle of the marble entranceway breathless and dumbstruck. Elizabeth had taken her arm, guided her up the stairs and advised her to nap.

Gert looked blankly. “Can’t sleep. I’ll dream of pirates.”

Elizabeth tilted her head. “Pirates?”

But Gert conceded and woke up a short time later in a strange room. It took her a moment to remember where she was. Everything flooded back. London. Sanders. ‘Their moment.’ Times two. She shook her head, determined to not let this man make a fool of her. There would be no more kissing, no more arguing, no more fuel to this fire. Gert felt oddly disappointed and rolled over to hug her pillow. “Enough of this nonsense,” she said aloud and jumped from the bed. The man was worse than Uncle Fred’s prize stallion. Didn’t matter which mare. Just the one closest.

Elizabeth knocked softly and came into the room. “Did you rest well?” she asked.

“Fine, thank you. What should I wear tonight? What is Melinda wearing?” Gert asked in a rush.

“Is there anything you want to talk about, Gertrude?” Elizabeth asked.

Gert dropped her head and fingered the dress she had pulled from the wardrobe. “No,” she replied.

“Blake’s behavior has been ... strange,” Elizabeth offered.

“Strange?” Gert bellowed. “I’ve never been so mortified in all my life.”

Elizabeth tilted her head. “It looked like you were enjoying his attention.”

“Attention is what you pay to your teacher or your sewing or a book. I thought the man would swallow me whole,” Gert said.

Elizabeth giggled as Gert plopped down on the bed. “Gertrude, what’s wrong?” she asked as she swept around the canopied bed.

Gert shook her head and swiped her hands over her eyes. “Nothing,” she said softly.

“I’ve gotten to know you well, cousin. If it was nothing, you wouldn’t be crying.”

Gert looked away. “I never cry. It’s just....” Her head dropped. “I’ve never been kissed before this. Not really kissed.” Elizabeth picked up her hand and held it. “I always dreamed about it, you know.”

“Terribly personal of me to ask but ... how old are you?” Elizabeth said.

“Thirty-two,” Gert said grimly. “I long ago resigned myself to wonderful dreams of kissing, but now, well the reality is not what I expected.”

“Why not?” Elizabeth asked.

Gert hugged herself and wandered to the window. She shook her head in response.

“Do you love him?” Elizabeth said softly.

Gert turned swiftly. “I’ve only known him a few days, a week at the most. How would I know, anyway? Men have never stuck around long enough for me to know. I’m not the kind of woman men fall in love with. I’m tall and loud and plain. Sanders is certainly not the kind of man I envisioned in my dreams either.” Gert bowed her head and continued. “They were sweet and mild and even-tempered ... pirates.”

Elizabeth dropped her shoulders. She smiled sympathetically. “Those men would not be the right ones for you. You’re strong and need strength in return.”

Gert shook her head. “It’s a childish fantasy anyway. More suited to Melinda than me. Speaking of Melinda, shouldn’t we be helping her dress? We leave in less than an hour.”

Elizabeth’s hands flew to her cheeks. “Oh, dear.”

* * * *

“What takes women so long to get dressed, Father?” William asked.

“A mystery that would compare to the pyramids, and as unanswerable as well,” Anthony said.

“I don’t have the foggiest notion, William. I was ready in ten minutes.” Blake looked at himself in the mirror of the drawing room where he, Anthony and William waited for the women. Blake was determined to put the American out of his mind. “I wonder if Lady Elaine will be in attendance tonight?” he said.

“The Bentmore widow?” Anthony asked. “She’s a simpering fool. Why would you care?”

Blake smiled over his shoulder to Anthony.

“Who is Lady Elaine?” William asked.

“Just an acquaintance,” Blake replied.

“What about Miss Finch?” the boy asked.

“What about her?” Blake said. He could not look at his son’s face and chose rather to pick non-existent lint from his sleeve.

Anthony watched the exchange with interest.

William blustered with the curiosity of a boy becoming a man. “It’s alright then, to kiss lots of different women.” He stared away. “I wonder how many men my bride will have kissed. I don’t like to think about that.”

“It’s different for men and women, William. You will be the first man to kiss your bride and the last,” Blake said.

“Wasn’t for you and mother, you know,” William said in a quiet voice.

Blake gestured for William to sit down. “Your mother and my circumstances are unusual. It won’t happen to you.”

William’s face grew red. “If I have a mistress it might. Does that mean I shouldn’t? All my friend’s fathers do. Just like you.”

Blake had never in his wildest dreams imagined a conversation like this. His son was trying to figure out the why’s and how’s of growing up and Blake felt sorely lacking to be giving advice. Never more than at this moment did he regret having taken a mistress. His dearth of judgment hit him square in the face. What was accepted by English society was not always right, Blake imagined. But it was also all he knew. He glanced at Tony. No help from that quarter.

“I’m not proud of the fact I kept a mistress, son. Maybe, your mother and I would still be together if I hadn’t. I don’t know,” Blake said.

William’s eyes brimmed with questions. “Then why did you do it?”

The stark reality of the matter hit him like a dive in a lake. Was it the sex? He couldn’t explain Helena’s abandon to William. Or did he care so little for Ann that he refused to question his own actions. Glibly going along, heedless of the consequences. “I don’t know,” Blake replied.

“Terribly complicated,” William murmured.

Anthony smiled. “Don’t worry, William. When the right woman comes along, you’ll not have the time or sense to think about it.”

William smiled. “Like when you kiss Aunt Elizabeth all the time.”

Anthony nodded and smiled back, apparently willing to lighten the mood at his own expense. “I look like a besotted fool when I’m around her, especially when I kiss her, I suppose.”

“You surely do, Uncle Anthony. All moony eyed or drunk.” William laughed at his own joke. “Like father did when he kissed Miss Finch.” William sobered and looked at his father. “I’ll see what’s keeping Melinda.” He hurried from the room.

“Out of the mouths of babes,” Anthony said wryly.

“You could have jumped in earlier, Burroughs. I was having some trouble if you hadn’t noticed,” Blake said.

“No, no, Blake. I truly enjoyed watching you squirm. All a bit different seeing your son becoming a man and wondering if he will tread in your esteemed footsteps,” Anthony said.

The door of the library opened before Blake could form a retort. The sight of Melinda took his breath away. She was a woman. Hair piled high, graceful carriage in a flowing, gauzy dress.

“Well, Blake, do tell. What do you think of Melinda’s dress?” Elizabeth said and straightened the girl’s skirts.

Melinda stood expectantly.

“There will never be a match to your beauty, my dear. Never,” Blake said with reverence.

Melinda smiled triumphantly and hurried to him. “Oh Father, Thank you. I do wish mother ... never mind.”

Blake held her arms. “I wish your mother could see you tonight as well. She would be so proud.”

Melinda nodded and tears filled her eyes.

“No tears, moppet,” Blake said. “You can’t have red eyes as you take London by storm.”

“I feel sorry for the bachelors, don’t you, Blake?” Anthony said as he kissed Melinda’s cheek. “They won’t know what hit them.”

“Do you really think so, Uncle Anthony?” Melinda questioned.

“We know so,” Blake said. “Weren’t we once young bachelors?”

Elizabeth slipped her arm through Anthony’s. “This one longer than most, I dare say.”

Anthony leaned close and whispered in his wife’s ear. She colored.

“Oh, I do hope I can catch the eye of someone as dashing and romantic as you, Uncle Anthony,” Melinda trilled. She hooked her arm in her brother’s. “Shall we go?”

Blake’s shoulders dropped as everyone left the room except Gertrude Finch. “Like Uncle Anthony?” he repeated softly.

“She’d be better off with someone like him,” she said, ignoring his arm.

“One moment, Miss Finch,” Blake said as he hurried along behind her. “I’m her father. She should want to marry someone like me,” he said.

She stopped and turned. “Would that be wise, Your Grace?”

Blake followed her to the waiting carriage. Melinda and William rode with Lady Katherine. Miss Finch and Elizabeth sat on the forward side of the Wexford coach. Anthony and he were opposite them. The coach was completely dark until the light of a passing street lamp illuminated Gertrude Finch’s chest. An expanse of bosom that made Blake almost forget what he had to say.

“Miss Finch. I find I must again apologize to you. My behavior today was unforgivable,” Blake said.

“If it was unforgivable then why do you bother apologizing?” she replied.

Anthony chuckled.

“Why must you make it so difficult for me to do so?” Blake asked.

“Stop kissing me in foyers and on lawns. You won’t have any difficulties then,” she shrieked.

“Madam, my eardrum. Have a care,” Blake said as he winced.

“Actually I will accept your apology,” Miss Finch said from the darkness. “Not because your behavior has changed but because of how you handled Melinda tonight.”

“What do you mean?” Blake asked.

“She wanted your approval so badly. You gave it to her. And you didn’t even pitch a fit when she mentioned your wife,” she said. “She wants her mother here so much. I can see it in her eyes.”

Blake sat up straight and held the lapels of his jacket. “I did do rather well.”

Miss Finch harrumphed. “Cock of the walk, now.”

“We’re here,” Elizabeth said.

Chapter Six

“Miss Finch,” Lady Katherine greeted. “Burroughs, Elizabeth. Melinda, you look lovely. Sandersberg.” Everyone fell in step behind the matriarch and the staccato of her cane as it tapped a cadence across the marble floor. Her glare sent the group forward past other guests. “Hate waiting in these abominable lines. Catch a chill from the door. You there, step aside.”

Gert had never seen anything, any place to compare. Twinkling lights, jeweled women in sparkling gowns, servants with champagne amidst dancing couples. She had to sigh. She couldn’t stop herself.

Melinda's face was a reflection of the beauty and elegance of the room, Gert thought as she looked at the girl surveying her surroundings. Men, young and old, stared at her. Women did a glance from her shoes to her hair. Assessing, Gert supposed, the competition. Gert was introduced to a whirlwind of guests. She could never keep straight the earls from the dukes. Her thoughts were interrupted when Lady Katherine hit a young man on the arm with her cane.

"One dance, no more, young man. And don't ask again or there won't be any," Lady Katherine said. The man strode away in a hurry.

"Oh, Grand mama, don't be so hard on him," Melinda said and smiled.

Lady Katherine turned to Melinda. "You know the rules, gel. One dance per gentleman on your card, if you've been properly introduced and your family approves."

Sanders took his daughter's arm for her first dance. Gert could not deny they made a handsome couple. He all dark and tall and stately, executing the dance perfectly. She all blonde and petite, following his lead with her head tilted up in smile. Lady Katherine did as Elizabeth expected and found a chair among matrons her age. Anthony went to get refreshments and Gert found herself merrily humming along with the orchestra as couples gathered again on the dance floor. A man appeared before them and bowed deeply over Elizabeth's hand.

"My dear Lady Burroughs, you look lovely this evening." The man's head pivoted. "And who is your guest. I know her not and pride myself on knowing everyone worth knowing."

The man's eyes closed and his mouth wrinkled unattractively as he laughed at his own joke. Elizabeth introduced them. Lord Fitzmontique. There's a handle, Gert thought. The man's shoulders were smaller than her own, and his wig sat askew. The powder on his face had already begun to gather in his wrinkles from the warmth of the room. He looked up at her smiling, revealing far too many teeth for his rouged mouth.

"Do you waltz, Miss Finch? Do Americans waltz at their barn dances? Allow me to teach you. May I have this dance?" Lord Fitzmontique asked.

Fitzmontique's teeth never parted as he spoke, but miraculously still allowed gobs of spit to land on Gert's new burgundy dress. Anthony and Sanders joined them. The men bowed to each other and Gert noted there was no comparing this dandy to her host or her pirate. Both attired in black, no ruffles or frills on their shirts and thankfully no wigs or powder.

"I was just asking your delightful houseguest to join me in a waltz, Burroughs. Can't have a lovely girl like this standing without a partner. It won't do." Fitzmontique laughed and held his hand to his chest.

"Miss Finch does not wish to dance, Fitzmontique," Sanders said.

Gert did not want to dance with this she-man but would not allow Blake Sanders to decide for her. She was about to dance to prove her point when Fitzmontique's stale breath hit her nose. He reeked.

"No thank you, sir," Gert said.

"But my dear. I would be happy to teach you the waltz ... or anything else you need to know," Fitzmontique said.

Gert knew her look of disdain was on her face. She could not help it. The idea of the man touching her sent shivers of revulsion down her spine.

“Really, sir. No thank you,” Gert repeated.

Two more men joined them and after bowing and introductions, Fitzmontique continued his quest. “I was telling Miss Finch, here, how I’d love to teach her to dance.”

The two men were more of Fitzmontique’s ilk. One tall, one short and fat but powdered and jeweled all the same. The short one, chinless as well, stared unashamedly at Gert’s breasts. His jowls quivered and he rubbed his pudgy hands together.

“I’ll claim the next dance, Fitzmontique,” the short one said.

“No,” Sanders said.

The tall man eyed him. “Claiming her yourself, Sanders. A bit of muslin to ease your wife’s leave taking.”

Sander’s eye twitched. “Miss Finch is under my protection, Shuster.”

“Actually,” Tony said slowly, “she’s a cousin of my wife’s. Under my protection. If she declines a dance, so be it.”

“I will take care of this, Burroughs,” Sanders said. “Miss Finch is not dancing with any of you.”

The men descended quickly to finger pointing and name-calling.

“I’m not a mare that needs to be nipped on the ear to display who she belongs to,” Gert interrupted. The men stepped back, straightened their jackets and stared at her. The body odor from the three could have felled a tree, Gert thought as she covered her nose. “I’ve never danced with a man wearing women’s hair and make-up and don’t intend to begin now.”

Anthony hid a smile. Sanders beamed.

The men huffed and turned from the group. Scowling over their shoulders occasionally. Stopping to talk to other guests and pointing a none-too-discreet finger Gert’s way.

“I told you Elizabeth. Someone is going to have to do something about these dresses of Miss Finch’s. Anthony and I will be dueling at dawn with these fools,” Sanders said.

Tony arched a brow. “Which fool will I be dueling with?”

“I thank you both but I do not need help to stave off men who don’t bathe and are half my size. Uncle Fred and the hands at the ranch made sure I knew how to defend myself,” Gert said and looked about the room.

“She does have a wicked right hook, Blake. As you know,” Anthony said.

“Where’s Melinda?” Elizabeth said standing on tiptoe. “I can’t see her.”

The four of them set off in different directions. Gert wondered about the fuss being made for one sixteen

year old girl in a roomful of adults. How much trouble could she get into? Unless of course she was cornered by someone like Fitzmontique. Gert searched among dancers, groups of talkers and in the large room where women rested and fixed their hair. A set of French doors led to a balcony and Gert eased through. The night air of London was refreshing after the hanging vapors of cologne, tobacco and unwashed adults. She heard a familiar giggle.

“Melinda?” Gert said.

“Oh, dear,” Melinda said as she stepped into the moonlight. “Miss Finch?”

“What are you doing out here? Your father, Elizabeth and Anthony are searching everywhere,” Gert said.

A young man stepped out of the shadows to stand beside Melinda. “Lady Melinda wished a bit of fresh air. I escorted her.”

“The air’s just as fresh here in the light from the ballroom as it is in the shadows,” Gert countered. Even in the half-light, Gert could see Melinda blushed. “Come back inside with me, Melinda.”

Melinda straightened her hair and dress and looped her arm through Gert’s. They slipped into the room, unnoticed.

“Who was that young man, Melinda?” Gert asked.

Melinda shivered. “Isn’t he just wonderful? I danced with him a bit ago and when he asked if I needed some fresh air, well, I could hardly refuse.”

Gert raised her brows. “Why not?”

“It wouldn’t have been polite and ... and,” Melinda looked up at Gert, “and well, I wanted to see what all the fuss is about. Have a handsome man admire me. I am an adult, don’t you know.”

“Hardly,” Gert said. “From what Elizabeth and your grandmother say, an episode like that could cause a serious problem in your marriage pursuit.”

Melinda fumed. “I know.”

“What’s the dilemma then, Melinda? This scandal business seems like nonsense to me but here in England...”

“That is the problem, Miss Finch.” Melinda bit her lip and looked away. “Maybe I don’t want to get married off right now. Especially to someone just hoping to get their hands on my inheritance.”

Gert was surprised at Melinda’s admission. She agreed, for certain, but had been convinced by Melinda herself that marriage was her destiny and hope.

“I’m afraid that’s not all that young man wanted to get his hands on,” Gert said.

Melinda giggled. “He rubbed my arms and held my hand and I felt shivers. It was wonderful.”

Gert watched this novice hug herself and close her eyes. Caught up in the extraordinary feelings that

handsome boys evoked for beautiful girls. She had never been subject to what put a silly grin on Melinda's face but she could tell it was a heady, powerful longing. A longing not unlike what Gert felt when Blake Sanders kissed her. A long buried dream of a man gazing at a woman with hunger and want. A pirate to be specific, Gert admitted. The two women, one fresh in youth, one on the other side of desire, sighed audibly, together.

* * * *

"Where have you been?" Blake hissed in Melinda's ear.

Miss Finch jumped with a start. Melinda's eyes opened wide.

"We were getting some air, Sanders," Miss Finch said.

Blake watched the women. Something was amiss. Melinda looked guilty. Miss Finch's shoulders dropped and Blake could only describe her as, well, forlorn. A young man bowed over Melinda's arm and asked for a dance. His daughter looked up at him, charming him with her smile and he nodded his approval. Blake watched the young couple. Melinda blushed and batted her lashes. The boy grinned nervously and extended a tentative hand. Melinda laid her pale white fingers on his.

"The young earl would be a fine match for her," Blake said. Melinda laughed coyly and beamed a smile the boy's way. "I will admit I'll be glad when this business is complete."

"Don't hurry her, Sanders," Miss Finch said.

"I won't rush her but if she finds a suitable match this season it would stem my worries."

She turned to him and snapped. "Is that all you care about? That you have one less trivial detail to attend to?"

"No, I--"

"Wouldn't it be wise to prolong your suffering to ensure your daughter's happiness? That she found a mate she could love and respect?"

"It's not how we do things, Miss Finch. As I have said to others, you have no understanding of English society." Blake straightened his black cut away coat. "Marriage ensures the continuation of a fine tradition of duty and title. We have obligations to past generations and future heirs. A suitable mate for Melinda will feel the same way. Has naught to do with love. We, of the English peerage, understand the great weight and obligations entrusted to us."

"A bunch of horse manure," Miss Finch muttered. "If those three idiots I met earlier are any example of the English peerage, then I for one am glad no one's life hangs in the balance. And for your grand scheming marriages, I've been witness to at least one failure."

"I have heard quite enough scathing remarks this evening about Ann and I to fill this ballroom. I need not hear yours," Blake said curtly.

"By the way, where is Helena this evening? I haven't met her yet," she asked.

Blake scowled. "You won't."

Elizabeth and Anthony joined them but Blake was in no mood for small talk. He clipped off a bow and left them. The American woman got under his skin like no one before. Her curt comments fueled his anger. Her dismissal of English ways were brainless. Really who wouldn't want to be a duke or an earl?

Who wouldn't want to own property, have servants and a title? A silly American without responsibilities. Blake stopped mid-stride and sighed. He had never lived without people watching him for failure. Servants and tenants depended on him for their livelihood. Generations of ghosts, long dead and yet to be conceived, waited to see which father's son would doom their fortunes. Blake stopped in the middle of the ballroom and dropped his shoulders. What would it be like to be free, he wondered? What would life be like? What would he be?

Blake let his gaze roam around the room. Powdered idiots, like Fitzmontique, abounded. They laughed at their own silly jokes, laughed at each other's expense all the while sticking snuff up their nose while their hands were down some woman's bodice. They tittered and dueled, climbed into bed with their brother's wives and threw away fortunes at the game tables.

Many looked at Blake oddly while he stood in solitary thoughtfulness in the center of the ballroom. The frightening thing to Blake at that moment was not the crass, crush that surrounded him but the question their dismissal begged. If these fools and their opinions meant nothing to him, if they disgusted him with false rules and gossip, then what was important to him? Even though religion itself was a hotbed for politics and court intrigue, Blake knew without question he believed in a hereafter. What would he say to Saint Peter when his time came? Blake laughed coarsely and mocked himself. I never bet too deeply or beat my servants? I can waltz with perfection. I kept a mistress for nearly twenty years.

Blake hated these occasional bouts he had with his conscience. What had started all this anyway, he wondered. He turned slowly toward Gertrude Finch.

Blake high-stepped through the crowd and shook his finger at her. "What makes you so almighty certain of yourself that you think you can judge me and my peers?" She looked at him blankly as did Elizabeth and Anthony.

"Blake?" Anthony questioned.

Blake held his hand to his head and stared at his boots. He had been arguing with himself, silently, he knew. What possessed him to think she had answers to his questions? As if she was privy to his imaginary debate.

* * * *

"I know the difference between right and wrong, that's why. Between tits on a bull and the real thing. I know what's important," Gert said without hesitation. It had been exactly what she was thinking. The simpering snivelers around her had no purpose but their own amusements.

Sander's head snapped up. He was breathing hard and pacing. Anthony and Elizabeth stared at him wide-eyed. "What's important then?" he asked.

"Your children. Love. Courage. Fidelity," Gert replied. "There's more. Are you ready to hear them?"

"And you are an expert, I suppose, on these matters?" he asked.

“I am no expert, that’s for sure,” she replied.

Sanders waved his hands in the air, mocking her. “No expert, you say. But you have the audacity to throw them in my face as if I know nothing of them. My children are the very reason for my existence. No one has ever called me a coward and repeated their mistake.”

“Love, fidelity?” Gert countered. “You wouldn’t know of those if they hit you square in the face.”

“Father, Miss Finch,” Melinda said as she moved from the arm of her recent dance partner. “Lower your voices. People are staring.”

Sanders dismissed her with a wave. “As if I care what this group thinks. I’m arguing with the Miss American know-it-all. The philosopher.”

“Really, Blake,” Tony insisted and motioned to the gathering crowd.

“Love and fidelity, your almighty, high-on-the-horse, bonehead. You’ve yet to explain their importance. I’m waiting,” Gert said.

“They’re not important. They only clutter up good coupling with regrets,” Sanders shouted.

A crowd had formed and revelers peered over one another’s shoulders straining to hear. Fans covered the mocking grins of the women and men openly gawked and pointed.

“Coupling?” Gert said and heard the tittering around her. “I suppose you are the expert on that subject. I’m sure there are women right here around us who could testify from personal experience whether your skill is as remarkable as you think.”

Sander’s face turned red and his mouth twitched. Elizabeth’s intake of breath was audible.

A petite red head stepped forward. She giggled. “He’s divine, just divine.”

Lady Katherine marched through the crowd. “What’s going on? Get out of my way.”

Elaine Bentmore turned and shrugged. “The tall woman wanted to know if Sanders is as exquisite in private chambers as he is in public.” She giggled and latched onto Lady Katherine’s arm, leaning in conspiratorially. “And I told her. He’s divine.”

“That’s not what happened, Lady Katherine,” Sanders said.

“What happened then? Other than you making a spectacle of yourself,” the old woman demanded as she shook off Elaine Bentmore with a shrug.

“Lady Katherine, Sanders and I were discussing something entirely different. I’m sorry the woman mistook my meaning,” Gert said, her face burning red.

* * * *

The blood coursing through Blake’s head finally slowed. He realized he had been shouting like a fool in a ballroom. The damn woman had publicly called into question something he was very sure of. But was private as well. What was it about this woman that made his good senses leave him? He could have

shrugged regally and dismissed her and her words. But he hadn't. Was there any way to save face in this crowd of vultures? Did he care? Not for himself, he supposed but for Melinda's wide-eyed shock and the American's obvious embarrassment. He bowed low to Miss Finch.

"May I have this dance?" Blake asked.

Her eyes widened. Sanders pursed his lips and tilted his head ever so slightly to Melinda.

"I'd be honored, sir." Miss Finch held her head high and placed her hand on his. The crowd parted as they walked to the dance floor.

They stared straight ahead without meeting each other's eyes as they danced.

"We've embarrassed Melinda. I'm sorry," she said finally.

"And you as well," Blake said. He caught her look of disbelief. "I can see it in your face. I'm sorry for that."

"I never in a hundred years expected anyone to reply. It was a rhetorical question, you know," she said.

Blake shrugged. "Ah, hell, Gertrude, I did my share of baiting."

"We must have looked like a pair of fools," she said softly and looked up.

Blake harrumphed. "Let's hope our retreat to the dance floor brings the attention with us."

"And away from Melinda," she added. "I hope your boots are thick, Sanders. I've stepped on your toes enough."

Blake twirled her through the waltz, expertly and cocked his head. "Many a lady here tonight would testify to my skill on the dance floor. Do you care for a vote?"

Gertrude laughed aloud and then shuddered. "What was I thinking to pose a question like that? I didn't even know sex could be one or the other. You know, good or I suppose bad."

The subject matter, sex, her use of the word, the feel of velvet at her waist and the wide expanse of chest before him tightened the buttons across his groin. Ann had never once in all his married days ever uttered the word sex. This uninhibited woman was curious and he admitted to himself he was drawn to her. Could he charm her?

"I have heard that there is such a thing," Blake said. She looked at him. "Bad sex. I, of course, have never experienced it."

"Awfully sure of your aptitude, Sanders?" She tilted her head and stifled a laugh. "The redhead seems to agree. I suppose that's in your favor."

Blake looked in her eyes and at her hair. Her posturing was humorous and their arguments exhilarating. One thing to be certain, he would never be bored with Miss Finch, Gertrude, nearby. Life would be lively and thoughtful and ... and the sex would be good. The dance ended and he escorted Gertrude to Elizabeth and Anthony. Stares followed them. Oddly, Blake did not care.

“How was the dancing?” Anthony said.

“Where’s Melinda?” Blake asked.

“She was dancing right beside you, Blake. With the Crawford viscount. Didn’t you see her?” Elizabeth said.

Blake acknowledged to himself he had seen nothing on the dance floor but the woman in his arms. “She’s fine then,” Blake said.

“A bit embarrassed, but Lady Katherine sent the crowd scurrying away with one of her looks,” Anthony said. “That woman would have frightened Napoleon. Fawcett,” Anthony added.

“Sanders, Burroughs,” the man said as he approached, bowing over Elizabeth’s hand. “Lady Elizabeth. You look wonderful this evening. Would you be so kind as to introduce me?” he said, nodding to Gertrude.

“Cameron Fawcett, The Earl of Dover. Miss Gertrude Finch.”

“Mr. Fawcett.”

Fawcett’s brows rose. “An American.” He tapped his ear. “West of the Mississippi. Possibly Chicago.”

“How did you know?” she asked.

“Spent a few years in the States when I was young. Wandered about everywhere. The accents are quite distinct, you know,” Fawcett said and smiled. “Would you care to dance, Miss Finch? Or I could regale you with some silly tales of my travels over punch?”

“I would love to do either, sir,” Gertrude replied and smiled back.

Fawcett had maneuvered himself to Gertrude’s elbow. Sanders hissed in her ear. “I thought you didn’t want to dance with any English fops?”

“I danced with you, didn’t I?” she whispered.

Blake grabbed her arm. “Sorry, Fawcett. Miss Finch is helping my daughter Melinda with her come-out. She’s far too busy,” he said.

“Really, Sanders,” Fawcett said dryly. “Isn’t that your daughter over there with her grandmother, Lady Katherine?”

Blake saw Melinda amidst a group of men and women, her grandmother’s hand clutching the girl’s shoulder. Before he could turn back, Fawcett had Gertrude’s hand on his arm leading her away. “Damn that man anyhow. Sorry, Elizabeth,” Blake said.

“Such language, Blake,” Tony said smugly. “What has your cravat in a knot?”

“We both know Fawcett’s reputation with women. For God’s sakes, Anthony, he was with us on many occasions. Do something,” Blake said as he peered over other guests trying to see the dance floor.

“Gertrude Finch is well able to take care of herself,” Anthony said.

“I agree, Anthony,” Elizabeth said. “She’s very modern, you know. Anyway, what could happen on the dance floor?”

The crowd seemed to part on cue. Fawcett and Gert swung by. She was smiling and laughing at the dandy. “Look,” Blake said. “He’s got his bloody hands all over her.”

“Really, Blake,” Elizabeth said. “I’ve only heard you swear twice in your life and both times tonight.”

“I think it’s time we went home anyway,” Blake said. “Elizabeth is tired and Melinda need not dance with every man in London at her first ball. I’ll call for the carriages.”

Anthony looked at him. “As you wish, Blake.”

Anthony gathered wraps and Elizabeth went to Lady Katherine and Melinda. Blake found William amongst a group of boys his own age. The son of the evening’s host went to school with William and Blake had begrudgingly allowed William to attend. They met Melinda, Anthony and Elizabeth by the door.

“Where’s Miss Finch?” Blake asked.

Elizabeth looked up. “She’s staying.”

“What do you mean she’s staying?” Blake asked.

“Gertrude and Fawcett are telling tales about America to a growing number of guests. She seems to be quite the thing. Even with this evening’s unfortunate scene,” Anthony said. “Lady Katherine is staying with her and will bring her home in the second carriage.”

Blake spun on his heel. He found her, then, happily laughing to a large audience. His son included. “We are leaving Miss Finch. William.” The crowd turned to him.

“I’ll be home shortly with Lady Katherine,” she said. “Thank you though.”

The crowd turned back to Fawcett’s Indian story, which Gertrude was claiming he embellished. “Miss Finch. We are leaving.” Anthony was suddenly by Blake’s side.

“Come on, Blake. We need no more scenes this night. Gertrude will be home when she’s ready,” Anthony said.

Anthony pulled him along, while he stared over his shoulder. In the carriage, Blake was sullen. Melinda sung along about her fabulous evening and blamed her father for cutting it short. Blake shrugged. William whispered to Anthony about seeing their host’s famous collection of nude portraits. Everyone had enjoyed themselves. But him. He had no claim on Gertrude Finch, nor did he want one. What she did was of no consequence to him. Then why could he think of nothing but Fawcett’s hands at her waist as they danced? Blake folded his arms across his chest and tapped his boot on the floor. Fawcett probably had Gertrude bent over a chair by now. Why was everyone else so calm?

Chapter Seven

Gert looked at the painting above a huge marble mantle. Cameron Fawcett had insisted she view it and that their hosts would not mind their foray into a study.

“It is remarkable,” she said and stared.

Fawcett pushed a stray strand of hair from Gert’s neck.

“As are you,” Fawcett said.

Gert looked into the man’s eyes. She knew what he intended. Sanders had looked at her the same way. Fawcett is handsome enough, she thought as he bent his head to hers. I wonder if it will be the same. His lips touched hers softly and lingered. They remained so long in the same dry position that Gert opened her eyes. This first mate was no captain to be sure. No clenching of bodies, lashing of tongues or hands roaming at will. Her third kiss was a sore disappointment. She broke away.

“I must be going,” Gert said.

Fawcett held her hand in his. “I hope I’ve not offended you. I’d like to call on you if I may.”

“I’m not offended. I’m busy with Melinda’s come-out but I’m sure we’ll see each other from time to time,” Gert replied.

Cameron Fawcett bowed low over her hand and escorted her to Lady Katherine.

* * * *

After a quiet ride home with Lady Katherine, Gert handed her wrap to Briggs. She sang a song to herself and began up the steps. A voice behind her startled her.

“It’s after one in the morning.”

“Are you drunk, Sanders?” Gert asked as she turned. Her host was teetering about towards the staircase.

“Not at all,” Sanders replied. “I wouldn’t be anyhow if I didn’t have to wait up for you. The only thing to do was drink.” He hiccupped.

“Go to bed,” Gert said and began up the stairs. “You didn’t have to wait up for me.”

He was beside her in a flash. Nearly tumbling them both down the steps as he grabbed her arms. “Did he kiss you?”

“Good Lord. Are you trying to kill us both? Did who kiss me?” Gert asked.

Sanders shook her arms. “You know who I mean. Fawcett.”

“Let me go. I don’t have to tell you anything. I’m thirty two years old.” Sanders had no intention of releasing her, she could tell. “Yes, he did. What of it?” Gert could smell liquor on his breath and he swayed as he stood.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“I’m not going to confess anything to you. There is nothing to tell, anyway,” Gert said.

“A kiss is quite enough.”

“Not his,” Gert replied.

Sanders eyed her speculatively through red-rimmed eyes. “They were not pleasing to you?”

Gert’s eyes opened wide with embarrassment. She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation with this man. She answered anyway. “Let’s just say they were not memorable. Like a dessert that doesn’t taste as good as it looks.”

He leaned close and looked at her mouth. “Forgettable, you say.”

Gert’s eyes drooped and she licked her lips. His nose was nearly touching hers. “Easily done.”

She could no more turn away from the man, from the face and lips looming over her than swim the ocean home. His breath was warm on her mouth. The marble foyer surrounding them was reduced to a shadowy mist.

“You’ll not forget this.” Sanders angled his mouth and claimed her.

Gert succumbed to the heat and passion of his kiss. Fawcett’s weak attempts were gone in a flash compared to the all-consuming man kissing her. His hands and mouth were everywhere, demanding everything. Just as a good pirate should.

* * * *

Blake would burn the memory of Fawcett from her mind. He inhaled the scent of lemons and kissed the freckles on her nose. She was pliable, yet met his kisses with her own strength. Gertrude was no silly weak woman tittering in his arms. She was tall and lush and when he pulled her bottom to him she groaned. Sweet agony these layers of clothes.

She broke away, breathing hard when his hand reached her bosom. “What are you doing?” she asked.

Blake looked down and saw his large, tan hand around a plump white breast. Could he reach around the stay to her nipple? He groaned and dropped his hand.

“I’m terribly sorry. I seem to be caught up in the moment,” Blake said but could not drag his eyes from the breasts before him.

“Another apology, Sanders. Fawcett didn’t stick his hand down my dress or his tongue down my throat,” she hissed.

The liquor running through his blood loosened Blake's mouth. "He better not have." She was staring at him slack jawed and wide eyed. Blake straightened. "As unbelievable as it is to me I find I can not keep my hands off of you." She bristled. "Anyway, you admitted Fawcett's kisses were forgettable. Mine, I know, are not. Tongue and all."

"Of all the conceited...." Gertrude said. "Of all the arrogant comments you have made to me, that is the biggest of them all."

"Tell me it's not true. Look me in the eye and tell me that Fawcett's kisses make you weak-kneed. That you weren't imagining further than a few simple kisses just a moment ago." Blake grabbed her arms. "Tell me they don't drive you near insanity with the passion they generate. And tell me why, woman, why they do."

* * * *

Blake sat down in the middle of the staircase. Gertrude had run from him as if he were a specter. And why shouldn't she, he asked himself? He was sober enough to know he had spoken of himself. About his passion and its source. He admitted to the woman, to his own chagrin, that he could not keep his hands off of her. Why? Did she see as clearly as he that he railed not at her but at his own miserable self? Blake stood, praying for peace with the blessed escape of sleep. But as he passed the door to her bedchamber he could not stop himself from wondering what she was thinking and feeling. Did she sleep soundly or toss? Did she stare at the door and wonder if he would open it or wish the time away until she could escape England and return to her home?

* * * *

The next morning Blake sat at his desk and held his head. He had more hangovers in the last month than his whole life. He stared at the papers Briggs handed him from his barrister. What nonsense did the man require answered now? Isn't that why I pay the fool the ungodly sum I do so I don't have to deal with trivial matters? Blake swallowed as he read. His wife was requesting he proceed with a divorce. He sat back and snorted. She will marry her merchant then, he thought. Ann will happily move along and I will be left with the stigma, the questions and the loneliness. The door to his office banged against the wall. Anthony stood on the threshold, glaring.

"I'm busy, Burroughs," Blake said and waved the papers.

Anthony slammed the door shut and marched to Blake's desk. "Look at it another time, Sanders."

"What do you want?" Blake asked.

"What happened last night?" he asked.

Blake stared. "Other than my making a fool of myself in a crowded ballroom, I wouldn't know. It stands out singularly."

"Between you and Miss Finch," Anthony said.

"Miss Finch, is it now, Tony? Last week it was the ever interesting Gertrude." Blake picked up his quill and dipped ink. "Nothing happened."

"You are sure then you had nothing to do with her booking passage next week back to America? There

would be no reason for her to run home, would there Blake?" Anthony asked.

Gertrude was leaving. Blake stared at his desk. "Not that I know of."

"I know you waited up for her. You were drunk and angry about Fawcett," Anthony continued.

"Poor taste, I'd say to send your host packing, not to arrive home until the middle of the night."

Tony leaned over the desk. "Tell me nothing happened between Miss Finch and you that would make her scurry across the ocean weeks early."

Blake recognized the anger and impatience in Tony's words. He had heard the low growling tone before but never had been its subject. "I kissed her on the steps."

Tony stood straight. "Is that all?"

"I may have been a bit forward," Blake added.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. "How forward?"

Blake tilted his head.

"Elizabeth is convinced this has something to do with you. My wife is rarely wrong. Perhaps you need to speak to Miss Finch."

"Another apology," Blake harrumphed. "Gertrude will not be swayed by me."

"Swayed or not, Sanders, you will apologize."

"Fine," Blake said as he stood. "Fine. I will find her."

Blake found Gertrude in the library, engrossed in a book. He hesitated to disturb her. The sun poured in the window behind her and cast a halo about her hair. He knew why she was leaving. It was for the best. The distance of an ocean between them would certainly cool his ardor. Her image would fade from his mind. The memory of his hand on her breast would diminish. His life would be returned to him. Blake would march on, tending his estates and indulge himself with a new mistress. He would be dignified to all those around him and prove to them all he was still the Duke of Wexford. All would be right. As it had been.

* * * *

Gert had spent a sleepless night. She had held her pillow to her chest and stared out at the night landscape until the sun lit the sky wondering if Sanders had spoken of her longing or his? The man who kissed her was battling himself. Was his shock and wonder as profound as hers? Did he lay awake at night convincing himself there was nothing between them simply because there shouldn't be? Did he allow himself dreams of what it would be like as she did, only to curse himself later?

He's married, Gert said to herself as she closed the book in her lap. Still married. Would it matter if he weren't still legally bound? Would she ever matter to a man such as him? A Duke accustomed to freedom in all things. Used to having his own way? She recalled young women she had spoken to in the States, bound by law and love to a man who treated them poorly. If he were free to ask and did, would

she walk away? Could she? She had scolded herself for her weakness and decided at that moment to leave for home and not test her resolve.

And there he stood in the doorway. The cause of her discomfort, confusion and to be truthful, heartache. Beautiful was not a word that came to mind for Gert when she thought of men. But that was the only word she could use to describe him. Arrogant, high-handed, self centered, those may describe the man but the face was without question the handsomest one she had ever seen. He walked to her and seated himself across from her. He knew.

“Anthony tells me you are leaving us.”

“Yes, I am. I’m homesick and have booked passage to sail next week,” Gert replied.

Sanders nodded and studied his folded hands. “Does this have anything to do with last night?”

He was so cool and detached. She laughed as if light-hearted. “Hardly, Sanders. I am old enough to understand men’s natures.” Gert looked at him square in the eye, as Uncle Fred had told her to do when a lie was the only solution. “It meant nothing to me.”

“I told Anthony that very thing. A few kisses hardly bind us together,” he said.

“And you are still married. We both understand a casual flirtation,” Gert said. “You have commitments as I do.”

“Absolutely right, Miss Finch,” he said. “You will be coming to the house party with us this weekend, won’t you?”

“I don’t know,” Gert answered. “I doubt it.”

“Do come. Morgan keeps magnificent stables.” Sanders rose and Gert opened her book to page one.

* * * *

“Won’t you tell me, Gertrude? This sudden change of plans. It’s not something Tony or I have said or done, is it?” Elizabeth asked.

Gert turned from the window of her bedroom and smiled. “Absolutely not. You both have been wonderful.”

“Is it a matter of the heart?”

“No,” Gert replied.

“But it does have to do with Blake, doesn’t it?” Elizabeth asked.

Gert straightened the dress the maid had laid out for her to wear to dinner. “You’re like a dog with a bone, Elizabeth. Can’t seem to let it drop.”

“I’m sorry, Gertrude. It’s just that I’ve had few friends in my life. In a very short time I’ve come to believe I could tell you anything. I feel badly you don’t feel the same,” Elizabeth said.

Gert sat down on the bed. "I've no women friends to speak of. Other than you."

Elizabeth tilted her head. "I thought you were close to the other women of your cause. You travel with them."

"We're friendly, I suppose. But they're so single minded. Everything is the cause. Their whole life." Gert turned to Elizabeth. "I never wanted that. Oh, I believe strongly in what I'm doing but..."

Elizabeth waited. "But, what?"

"Do you remember the things I told Melinda in the carriage coming here? All the things she should consider? They're not her dreams. They're mine. A handsome man to sweep me off my feet. Adventures and new sights to see with him by my side. A confidant. Someone to listen to my innermost dreams and fears," Gert said.

"A lover as well?"

Gert laughed. "I suppose. Unmarried women aren't allowed to think about those things."

"I did," Elizabeth said with a smile.

Gert tilted her head. "How naughty of you, cousin."

Elizabeth preened. "From the first time Anthony kissed me, I could think of nothing else."

Gert smiled resignedly. She had been doing the same. Her day, her very existence was consumed with Blake Sanders. But he would be no partner to share confidences or dreams. No cohort to explore the vast wilderness or grand cities in the States. The Duke of Wexford consumed those around him. Gobbled them up along with their hopes and spit them out in accordance with English society. He had ruled too long to change. His wife didn't stand up to him. She ran away to salvation. What was left of the woman to leave her children whom she obviously loved and loved her? But Gert would not deny the passion Blake's kisses evoked.

"I know what you mean," Gert said.

"You and Blake seem to set each other afire. The sparks are visible to all," Elizabeth said. Her eyes lifted in understanding. "That's it isn't it?"

Gert went to the window. She nodded.

"You're afraid."

Gert turned in a huff. "Afraid of Blake Sanders? Hardly."

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, Gertrude. I don't mean you're afraid of Blake. I mean you're afraid of yourself."

"That's nonsense," Gert said.

"No, it's not. You're scared to love Blake Sanders. Afraid you'll lose yourself in the bargain."

Gert's mouth opened and drew shut. "I've had so little sense of me. Of what I am. If I loved him I'd never find out. I would be like everyone else in his life. Used for his own purposes and discarded."

"If you speak of Ann you should know why she married him. For the same purpose he did. To satisfy family and ensure her sons a title. William would be fourth in line to her father's title if she hadn't married someone with their own," Elizabeth said.

Gert sat down on the bed and pulled her legs under her. "That's so cruel. To plan out children's lives before they're born."

"May be cruel as you say but it's all they know. I could care less. It's certainly nicer to have servants and a grand home but I'd live with Anthony in a hovel if I had to," Elizabeth said with a shrug.

"I think you would," Gert said and laughed. "I can't see you as a wash woman though."

"I can hardly imagine that. But it's true, still. Would you live anywhere, do anything to be with the man you loved?"

"I don't think I'd care for a hovel, either," Gert said. "And I love the ranch and the wide open spaces of the west."

"Or a manor in London? Would you live in England to be with the man you loved?" Elizabeth asked.

"And give up everything I've ever dreamed of? I don't know," Gert said. "This is silly talk, besides. Blake Sanders does not love me. And I don't love him."

"Love is compromise, Gertrude."

"Probably true if the man you love loves you. And if he is as willing to compromise as well," Gert replied. But Gert could not imagine Blake Sanders bending to anyone's will. Even for love.

* * * *

Blake had not expected a rejection from Gertrude Finch to hurt. But it did. He had not expected her casual tone, so like Helena, to make him swallow a ball of pain lodged in his throat. But that was what had happened as he spoke to her in the library. He had spent the latter part of the day in front of the fire in his study.

"Did you speak to Miss Finch?" Anthony asked over brandy when he joined Blake for drinks before supper.

"Yes."

"Well?"

Blake turned in his seat and faced his friend. "She's homesick."

"And nothing you did or said caused it?" Tony continued.

Blake slammed his glass on the table and stood to pace. "In her own words it was a casual flirtation." He ran his hands through his hair and stared away. How could she call what passed between their lips

casual? She was an innocent, granted, but certainly she felt it as he had. Each kiss touching some long forgotten, stored away wish for a connection that transcended sex. He paled at his own thoughts. What connection is necessary past sex, he wondered?

"I'm glad it had nothing to do with you, Blake," Tony smiled. "I know the kisses meant little to you but I feared with our Gertrude, untried, she may have felt otherwise." Blake turned to stare at him. "I feel much better knowing she doesn't care for you."

Those words cut like a knife. Like a sword had severed a limb and his lifeblood gushed out. Blake picked up his drink and threw it back with a vengeance. "Would it have been such a shock to think she might care?" He swallowed. "About me?"

Tony stared. "Would take a strong constitution to care about you, Blake."

Blake slouched and stuck his hands in his pockets. "Why's that?"

"You don't know, do you?" Tony said. Blake looked numb. "For God's sake man, look at your life. Married to a beautiful, kind woman and in another's bed before Melinda's birth. Tread about your home and town like you're the bloody king. And can't wait to marry your children off to the same fate. There's more to life than your title."

Blake was sickened with the recounting. "It's all I know."

"And there in lies the rub, old man," Tony said. "Although I will admit when you and Miss Finch are together you seem ... different."

Blake's head snapped up. "I suppose so. I can't recall ever kissing a woman in front of servants and my children before. Nearly a stranger."

Tony stared at his glass. "Exactly."

"What do you mean 'exactly'?" Blake shouted.

William opened the door to the study. "Father. Supper is to be served shortly. The ladies want you and Uncle Tony to escort them."

"I thought you meant to join us, William," Anthony said. "Too young for brandy but you're old enough to sit with the men before dinner."

William's eyes widened. "Sorry, Uncle Tony. I meant to, but Miss Finch was telling me about the States. I didn't realize the time."

"What was she telling you?" Anthony asked.

William nearly ran to a chair to sit down. "About everything. The mountains and the cities and the wide-open places. I'd like to see it all. Her uncle's ranch and fur trappers from Canada and the Indians that live nearby."

"Enough," Blake growled. "Enough of the States. The next Duke of Wexford has no need to visit America. Don't you know the first immigrants there were mostly convicts and religious fanatics? They're all descended from that mix."

William's face fell. "Miss Finch was telling me about the Conestoga wagon trains going west. Their leaders sound courageous to me."

"No need to tamp the boy's enthusiasm, Blake," Anthony said. "We used to dream about far away places when we were his age."

Blake turned away and William regaled Tony with Gertrude's stories. He half-listened and followed them to the sitting room where the ladies awaited. Once seated in the dining room William begged Gertrude to continue.

"I don't think everyone wants to hear my tales, William," she said with a laugh.

"I want to hear," Melinda said. "Do go on."

"The Pony Express, you were telling me about the Pony Express," William said and leaned forward.

Gertrude described the country in great detail, from rivers to deserts and the men and women she had met and heard of that settled there. Of danger, tragedy, triumph and bravery and breath-taking sunsets. Streets filled with the wealthy, the poor, merchant and farmer alike. All at the table seemed mesmerized, except Blake.

"I've monopolized the conversation too long," Gertrude said to protests.

Blake watched his children and even Elizabeth and Anthony hang on her every word. "Miss Finch would like to eat her dinner. She can continue another time."

Preferably when he wasn't in the room. It was hard to watch the woman talk about something she so obviously loved and missed. Blake could think of few things in his life that held the same emotion for him. Conversation ceased. Certainly he could find a subject that was near and dear to him. His children.

"Melinda, my dear. What do you think of the young Crawford viscount? Rumor is he may make an offer for you. Fine match. I'm very proud," Blake said with a nod and a lift of his glass.

"He is nice, I suppose," Melinda sighed.

"Let's hope you think he is more than nice, Melinda," Elizabeth said with a smile. "If you're to marry him."

"After all, he will inherit his father's estate. First son, you know. Fine old family. Other than the one uncle. What mischief did he get himself into, Tony?" Blake asked.

"I don't recall," Anthony said.

"If neither of us remember it mustn't have been too much of a scandal," Blake said and chuckled. He looked up to the other diners' stares. "Probably nothing of consequence anyway. Don't worry, Melinda. It won't come back to you."

Melinda shook her head and rolled her eyes. "As if anyone cares but you."

Blake lay down his silver. "Of course, I care. I wouldn't have allowed his pursuit if I hadn't thought him

entirely eligible for you. Including long passed relatives linked to well ... whatever he did.”

Melinda stared straight ahead. “I’m not marrying him.”

“Maybe this is a discussion for another time,” Elizabeth said.

Melinda took a deep breath. “No. Everyone is here that I care about. Except mother.”

“What is wrong with the viscount?” Blake asked.

“Nothing,” Melinda replied.

“Then why do you say you won’t marry...?” Blake began.

Melinda turned to him. “I’m not marrying anyone right now. I’ve ... I’ve decided to further my education”

“What else could you possibly need to know about running a household that your mother has not taught you?” Blake asked.

“Is that all you think me capable of?” Melinda asked.

Blake rolled his eyes as he took a deep breath. “What is it you wish to study? Music? Your needlework?”

“I ... I don’t know,” Melinda replied in a low voice.

“Enough of this nonsense. You will marry the viscount,” Blake said and signaled the footman for dessert.

Melinda stared ahead red-faced, angry and embarrassed.

“You have not chosen a field of study, then?” Gertrude asked.

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t. But I shall.”

“My daughter does not need your encouragement, Miss Finch,” Blake said.

“She needs someone’s support,” Gertrude said.

“I will support her to the ends of the earth,” he replied.

“As long as she marries this viscount you’ve chosen,” she countered.

Blake’s hand flew in the air. “Well, of course. It’s what she’s meant to do. What she and William and Donald are born to do. The aristocracy of England won’t survive if the next generation doesn’t fulfill its obligations.”

Gertrude rose from her chair and turned to Blake. “What if it’s not what she wants to do? Did that ever occur to you? What if she doesn’t give a mule’s behind about the next generation of English aristocracy?”

“That, Miss Finch, is unacceptable. Be seated at once,” Sanders growled.

“No.”

Blake stood slowly, hands on the table in front of him. “Sit down, Miss Finch. This conversation is over and as a guest, one should comply with their host’s wishes.”

Gertrude shook her head around till her hair flew around her face. “No. Maybe I’ll strut around your dining room and flap my arms like a rooster.” She pushed her chair away from the table.

Blake came around the table in a huff. “Absolutely not.”

She pulled her hands under her arms and lifted her elbows. “Cock-a-doodle-doo.”

“I forbid it. Sit down and enough of this foolishness,” he shouted.

Gertrude threw back her head. “Cock-a-doodle-do.”

William giggled and his father flashed him a frown. “Sit down, I say. I won’t have a lunatic prancing around my dining room, spouting nonsense,” he shouted.

She dropped her arms. “Really, Sanders. It’s what you subject us to night after night.” Gertrude nodded to Melinda. “Come to my room later. We’ll discuss your education.”

Blake sputtered and shouted empty threats as Miss Finch sailed out the door. He turned to those left at the table. Elizabeth’s hand covered her mouth. William and Melinda would not look at him.

Anthony stared. “Well done, Blake.”

“She’s a madwoman run wild, I say.” Everyone stood to leave. “She ... she tries to make me the fool,” he said to their backs.

Anthony turned. “No, Blake. You do that very well on your own.”

* * * *

Blake stood outside of Gertrude’s door, his hand lifted to knock fully prepared to argue until midnight if necessary. Was that crying he heard? “Gertrude? No need for sniffles behind closed doors.” She opened the door. “I thought I heard you crying.” He looked at her eyes. “Must have been mistaken.”

“It’s not me. It’s your daughter,” she replied.

“Melinda?” Blake peeked around Gertrude’s shoulder.

“Go away. She needs to cry this out.”

Blake bristled. “I will not. She’s my daughter.”

“Go away,” Melinda said. Gertrude closed the door.

“Melinda? Can you hear me? Open the door please.” Blake waited and the door parted a crack. “Why are you crying?” Melinda walked away from the open door and sat down on the bed beside Gertrude.

Gertrude pushed the blonde hair out of the girl's eyes. "Your father's talking to you. Isn't that what you want?"

"He thinks I'm capable of nothing more than organizing sheets and tea service. And giving him grandchildren." Melinda replied and stared out the window.

Blake shook his head. His daughter's words wilted him. "No, that's not true."

Melinda nodded her head, spilling tears down her cheeks. "Yes, it is. William's the heir to carry your title. Donald's the baby, so you don't care about him yet. And I'm ... I'm the one to be obedient and useless."

"Why would you think that, Melinda? You are my beautiful, golden girl. I adore you," Blake said, a knot in his throat.

Melinda looked at Gertrude. "I told you. Has nothing to do with what I think or feel. Only what I look like and whose son I can snare."

"Did you put these abominable ideas in her head, Miss Finch?" Blake asked.

Melinda jumped up. Her lips trembled. "You don't even think I can form my own thoughts. Miss Finch has nothing to do with this. She said you love me."

"Of course I love you," Blake said, hands splayed.

Melinda shouted and cried, "Then why don't you know anything about me? About what I want? Because you've had it all planned since my birth. I tell you I won't marry right now. I may never marry." Melinda dissolved into Gertrude's arms.

Blake was afraid, truly afraid. Had he never given Melinda her due? Did she think so little of herself and her place in his life? The picture of Melinda at six running to him and smearing his face with wet kisses came into his head. Where had that little girl gone? How could she question his love? Was she lost to him, like Ann, because of his preoccupation with his horses and mistresses and society?

"I know more about you than you think. I know you like hot cocoa first thing in the morning. And prefer violets even though you always told your mother her roses were better." Melinda looked up to him. "I know you're smart enough to outwit William at his war games. Although you often let him win. And you read silly books about knights and ladies waiting in castles." The girl smiled softly and looked away. Blake looked down at his hands and back slowly to Melinda's face. "Even if I don't say it often, I think you are clever and witty and far more capable than I ever was at your age. If you feel you should wait awhile before marriage, I'm sure you have good reason."

"Do you mean it, Father?" Melinda's tears ran down her face in sheets.

Blake nodded.

"Oh, Daddy." Melinda threw herself into his arms. "I love you so much."

"There, there, poppet." Blake squeezed her tight. "I love you, too."

"I want to talk to Lady Elizabeth, Father," Melinda said and kissed his cheek.

Melinda hurried from the room with a light step. Leaving Blake and Gertrude facing each other.

"What I would have given to have my father talk to me as you just did with Melinda," Gertrude said.

Blake clasped his hands together behind his back. "Obviously I've not done it enough."

"Trust me. She'll cherish this talk forever."

Blake looked at Gertrude. She had forced him to do what needed to be done years ago. He had loosened the tight fist of English tradition and its hold on his family. He had yet to decide whether this freedom he granted Melinda frightened, or exhilarated him. "Come with us this weekend to the house party at Morgan's," he said to Gertrude.

She nodded and smiled. "Alright."

Chapter Eight

The intimate gathering at the home of Jane and Stewart Morgan was not as Gert imagined. At least fifty guests, including Cameron Fawcett, were lodged in the sprawling mansion. A ride was planned the first morning and Gert had dug through her trunk for her split riding skirt. She donned it now over her calf colored boots. She buttoned a crisp white shirt and placed her flat-rimmed hat on her head. The loose string tie hung at her neck. What ever had prompted Gert to bring the outfit, she didn't know but she was determined to enjoy riding one of the beautiful horses from the Morgan stable. And this was how it was done in America, she said to herself and tilted her head at the reflection in the mirror.

Elizabeth and Melinda flew into her room. "We could hardly decide which room was yours in this labyrinth of hallways," Elizabeth said. Her words trailed away as she looked at Gertrude.

"I feared we nearly opened the door of our host's room and saw him in his drawers," Melinda said with a muffled giggle. "What an interesting outfit, Miss Finch. Is this what you ride in at home?"

Gert nodded. "Will I embarrass you two?"

Elizabeth circled her, examining the skirt. "It's saucy to be sure. Blake will be beside himself."

"I wish I had one just like it," Melinda said. "Look at this silly little hat of mine compared to yours."

Gert looked at Melinda's blue velvet riding habit. The short jacket fit snugly over a full skirt with a matching hat. The feathers dipped attractively over the girl's face. A froth of white lace was exposed at her neck. She was like a picture from a book.

"Your outfit is beautiful, Melinda. But I don't ride sidesaddle. Aren't you riding Elizabeth?" Gert asked as she pulled on her calf gloves.

Elizabeth shrugged. "Tony won't let me. Afraid I'll fall. Truth be told I'm glad. I hate horses."

Gert laughed. "Well I can hardly wait. Let's go pick our mounts, Melinda."

They walked down the steps arm in arm with Elizabeth trailing behind. At least twenty guests stood in the entranceway of the Morgan home, all talking softly, and dressed for riding. The men in dark cut away jackets, riding crops in their hands and tall hats on their heads. The women were a rainbow of velvet colors in full skirts that swished of crinoline as they moved. Conversation ceased. Every eye was on Gert. Cameron Fawcett stepped forward.

"What do Americans call these outfits? Duds, that's it. You look spectacular, Miss Finch," Cameron said and offered his arm. The rest of the crowd murmured but followed close behind to the stables.

Sanders had picked out a gentle mare for Melinda and another for Gertrude. The groom led the animals to a mounting block as she and Melinda approached on the arms of Cameron Fawcett.

"I've picked horses for you both," Sanders said as looked at Gertrude up and then down.

Melinda placed her hand in the groom's as he helped her mount.

"I'll pick my own, thank you," Gert said as she walked by the calm chestnut-colored horse, towards the stables.

"Miss Finch," Sanders shouted and followed. He whispered when he approached. "What are you wearing?"

"What I ride in at home," she said as she walked from stall to stall. "Fine animals your friend keeps." She turned to a groom. "Would you saddle this one for me? No, not a side saddle."

"That animal is far too strong for you too control," Sanders said. "Choose another." He turned to the groom. "She'll take a sidesaddle."

The groom looked from Gertrude's shaking head to Sander's stern face. He picked out a sidesaddle.

"Oh never mind," Gert said and pushed past him. "I'll saddle him myself."

Blake stood beside her describing disasters she would befall all the while pointing a finger her way. She saddled the horse, led him from the stable, turned the stirrup and pulled herself up. Blake continued his chatter when she kneed the mount and shouted 'yaw'. Gert burst past sedate riders and her hat flew to her back held by the string tie. The wind whipped at her face as she let the animal hit a full run. The horizon of trees flew past and she leaned close over the magnificent animal's neck. Gert pulled up as they approached a low stonewall. The stallion took it with ease. She blinked back tears. She hadn't realized how much she missed home until then. Gert reined in under a stand of trees to admire the countryside. It was beautiful and well manicured. But not like home. There was no wild primitive landscape here. Even the fox they were to hunt had been let out of a cage. Other riders joined her in a thunder of hoofs.

"Remarkable seat you keep, Miss Finch," Cameron Fawcett said.

Sanders nearly ran her down and her horse sidestepped and snorted.

“Get control of your mount, Sanders,” she shouted.

“You’re the one in dire need of control, madam,” he said. “You ride like a demon.”

Gert smiled broadly. “I’ve been riding for years.”

“Would you care to meet me by the lake, Miss Finch,” Fawcett asked with a wry smile.

Gert tilted her head. “Last one there is a ninny,” she shouted as she kneed the horse, leaving Sanders and Anthony watching.

* * * *

The weekend dragged by for Gert. She studiously avoided Sanders and spent as much time on the back of a horse as possible. Because she had nothing to add to the clusters of women’s conversations after dinner, Gert retired early. She knew nothing of fashion or protocol, nor could care less about gossip, especially about people she had never heard of. Mentally she was already sailing and traveling by ship to her home.

Gert sat in her nightclothes by the window of her room at the Morgan’s. She stared through the polished glass. It had been a grand adventure to be sure. She had met relatives she didn’t know she had and liked them. The Sanders children were engaging and lively. Hopefully they understood the privilege they accepted as their due by birth. And the constraints that privilege brought. There would be no enlightening revelation by their father. Gert slouched back in the overstuffed chair. Blake Sanders. In her wildest dreams she had never imagined a man as handsome as he, kissing her. She laughed at herself. She could imagine no man kissing her. It would with all likelihood never happen again. Gert pulled her robe around herself and blew out a breath. As much as she hated to admit it, she would miss the anticipation of Blake’s kisses.

After the very first time, she found her mind wandering often to when he would take her by the arms and kiss her with the wild abandon he did. It was nothing to him, for sure. But to her, ah, to her it was the fulfillment of a dream buried deep. She could imagine him looking into her eyes with love, as he broke away, rattled from their embrace. Looking at her, yes, she said aloud as she sat up straight in her chair, Gertrude Finch with affection and possessive desire. She would be the object of that man’s deepest passion, the match to his soul and keeper of his faith and dreams.

Gert sighed and wilted back against the flowered chintz. Elizabeth was right. She was a hopeless romantic. Caught in a tall body with a sharp tongue honed to keep men away. For a man such as Blake Sanders would never hold her, love her and be her mate. She had chosen her life. Her passion, the liberation of women enslaved by money, power and ... love. Her ship sailed on Tuesday. She would return to the women who needed her. To Uncle Fred and the hands, where she was comfortably ignored. She would return to her speeches and causes and the land she loved. And she would tuck away her memories. Pulling them out and reliving them as she watched the sun set over the ranch.

Gert knelt to pray then, not for safe passage or the health of her loved ones. She did not beg God to keep poor women safe or for hungry children to know a full plate. She prayed instead, to her own mortification, to remember visibly, tacitly the feel of Blake Sanders’ mouth upon hers.

She tossed and turned for an hour, dancing pirates whirling through her head. Every time her eyes drifted closed, she felt the wash of Blake’s breath on her cheek and the strength of his grip on her arm. She had prayed fervently to never forget the feel of Blake Sanders. Maybe God played a grim joke on her. Never

allowing another sensible thought to filter through her brain. But sleep came finally, if not rest.

* * * *

Gertrude had retired early and quietly both nights at the Morgan's. Blake watched her slink away. She had made herself scarce to him. And rode like a she-devil when she thought no one watched. It was for the best that she left. For Blake knew he was nearly at the end of his rope. If he didn't bed a woman soon he would explode. He shifted and straightened himself behind a potted palm. Even the thought of sex made him rock hard. What a deplorable situation he found himself in. No wife, no mistress all the while a piece of his anatomy begged for solace. He closed his eyes and envisioned his Aunt Ethel's whiskers. Tried to hear her shrill voice and pick up the scent of soured soup that he associated with her. It had always done the trick in the past. One thought of his father's sister and the gray, stiff hairs protruding from her ears had wilted any unwanted desire. The ears he imagined now were hairless and pink. Small and holding back volumes of hair under a flat brimmed hat. The smell of roses hit his nose and he opened his eyes. Elaine Bentmore stared up at him and fluttered her lashes.

"If you need anything, Your Grace. Anything at all," Elaine tittered. "I'll do my best to help." She ran a tongue over her lips and a painted nail over her breast and dropped her gaze to his crotch. "Third hallway on the right. Past the portrait of the dogs. Up the staircase, turn left." She paused and blinked. "Mine's the second door on the right."

Elaine would do most certainly, Blake thought. Willing and he remembered very able.

"At midnight." Elaine turned away to look at him over her shoulder. From his boots to the top of his head. Her eyes dropped demurely.

Blake could have rubbed his hands together with glee. The trick in these cases was to remain sober enough to do the deed and be soused enough to not hear any of the woman's drivel. Ah, yes, he said to himself as he lightly made his way around the room, nearly whistling. Where's the whiskey?

An hour and a half later, Blake felt sure he tottered suitably on the peak of not being smashed or a drunken fool. Anthony eyed his smug smile but Blake would give no particulars. No one here needed to know the months it had been since he bedded a woman. Only to have his needs engorged further with the damn American. Kissing him anywhere it suited her, Blake thought to himself and stumbled over the edge of the carpet. Kissing him and bouncing those magnificent, large, white breasts, nearly under his nose. Quite a flirt, he thought, actually. The room began to spin and Blake put his drink down. Still confident in his manhood but wholly deaf in his mind to Elaine Bentmore's silly talk. Now what were those directions, he asked himself at the bottom of the staircase.

Blake wandered the Morgan home looking for a portrait. As in every titular home in England, there were hundreds. He peered and wobbled as he looked at another. Blake jumped back with a start. Damn ugliest woman he had ever seen stared back from the canvas. He grimaced and hoped his manhood would prevail. If Blake didn't get himself between a woman's legs tonight, he surely would be able to identify every one of Morgan's relations. Blake chuckled and the sound reverberated down the deserted hallway. He turned to the echo of his laughter. Ah, here's a staircase. Up he went and turned right. Second door on the left. Yes, he remembered dear old Elaine's instructions now.

Blake undid his cravat as he inched open the door. The little tease was under the blankets! Probably imagining him sucking her skin dry, he said to himself as he pulled off his boots. Waiting for me to spread her legs he thought and growled aloud as he worked himself into a frenzy and out of his tight pants. Blake hopped around on one foot in the darkness. He lifted the blanket and stretched out.

Had Elaine grown taller? Ah, well. Her back was to him and he fit one hand between her arm and her side, reaching for a breast. Oh, yes, he cried to himself as the nipple hardened. He didn't remember Elaine's breasts filling his hand to overflow like this. She moaned from deep within and Blake buried his head in her hair. Burrowing through, hunting for a neck, an ear. Any naked flesh. Elaine Bentmore in a flannel nightgown? Ah well, he would have it off her soon enough.

Blake ground his hips against a round, lush bottom. He filled the small ear with his tongue and she arched back against him. Slowly he lifted the nightgown and let his hands run their course over long silky legs. She turned to him as his hand skimmed her stomach and lower. Blake's mouth was on hers then. He kissed her fast and slow, languishing and burning, with restraint and consuming passion. She came alive under his mouth. Returning his kisses with moans. He was atop her now. Pushing himself at her, feeling her yield, impatient and out of his mind with hunger. Vaguely a thought filtered through his muddled brain. He didn't recall Elaine's hands burning his flesh as they did now. Nor gifting him with a passionate response such as this. He could swear he smelled lemons. The scent was driving him mad. He was long past the ability to speculate on why.

Blake was breathing hard through his teeth, eyes closed. He entered her swiftly and groaned.

* * * *

Gert thought she awoke when a deep moan emitted from her throat. She was kissing Blake. She dreamed. Oh, what a torment. So real. Hips ground against her and she held them and ran her fingers up a wide muscled back. That tongue. It ran circles around her mouth and her lips. Licked her neck and settled on a breast through thin cotton. Surely a merciful God would not make a dream this real. A dream wouldn't smell like a man and like whiskey. A dream wouldn't wet the nightgown on her breasts. Her back arched as he entered her with a male moan. Her eyes opened wide to the dim filtered moonlight.

"Sanders," Gert shouted. She looked down between their bodies at the same time as he.

"Gertrude!" Blake shouted.

She shifted and pushed.

"Dear God woman, hold still." He sank further into her. His eyes rolled.

"What are you doing?" Gert shouted. "Stop."

Blake was gritting his teeth and his lip twitched. "Miss Finch. I am struggling greatly for control. Can you please hold still?"

He was buried inside her. This would be the end of the dream. This connection, this stretching, this exquisite filling and tension. It would cease. She inched away and pushed back. What prompted that, she wondered. Instinct? Pleasure? Surrender to herself? To him? What superb torture. His voice opened her eyes.

"Please, madam. I am begging you. I am only a man after all," Blake growled. Gert stilled under him. His eyes opened wide. "Have I hurt you?"

Her head tilted left and right. A fat tear rolled down her cheek.

“Please, Gertrude. Don’t cry.”

Her lip trembled.

“Lie still. I will extricate myself as gently as possible,” Blake said softly.

Gert gave in and sobbed. Real, hiccupping, tortured cries. Tears streamed down her temples and wet her hair. “It will be over then?” she asked.

“Not concluded as usual, Gertrude. But over, yes,” Blake said as he brushed a damp strand of hair from her face.

What a memory this would be. It would be enough to store away and hold loneliness at bay for years to come. Gert’s voice shook. “Could you ... finish as usual? Would you want to?”

He dropped down on his elbows and held her face in his hands. “There is nothing in this world I would treasure more than staying right where I am.”

Blake kissed her lips softly. He deepened the kiss and stroked slowly, laboring over her mouth and breasts. A mystery of life had been revealed and Gert was certain no man could have shown her in the same masterful way. He murmured wicked intentions in her ear and then fulfilled them as Gert moaned and shifted under him. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her atop him. Never more in her rational sane life had Gert felt so in touch with her body and soul. Surely, her hands could paint a masterpiece, her voice ring clear in an opera. There was no task, no talent beyond her reach. She was as alive as she could possibly be.

Blake rolled her to her back and set a furious pace. He may have moaned. She didn’t know. She was too far away in her own pleasure. His weight descended on her. Whatever words he spoke were muffled in the pillow his face was buried in. Gert stared at the canopy above. She had no regrets. What of this joining was to doubt? It was mystical and erotic and far beyond any of her expectations.

Gert stroked his hair and back, wondering what he would say. How would they ever be casual after this act of total intimacy? She would forever view him, whether he sat at a table or rode a horse, in this fashion. Straining and gentle, carnal and slightly stewed, pure man, fairly itching to take her. She was running her hands down muscled arms when she heard the first snore. With a push he rolled on his back, eyes closed, mouth open. It would have been easy to shout at him. Wake him up and explain to the lout he was climbing in her bed, loving her and in a wink of an eye sound asleep. But all Gert could do was push a black lock of hair from his face and rub the back of her hand the length of the whiskers on his cheek. In a blustery slapping of lips, he pulled her down on his shoulder, still snoring. She landed on his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart. Gert’s eyes closed immediately.

Chapter Nine

“I can’t believe Gertrude’s slept this late, Melinda,” Elizabeth said as she helped a maid pack her trunk. “I’ll go in a moment.”

Elizabeth sent Melinda to finish packing. She walked down the busy hallway, nodding to other departing guests.

“Lady Elizabeth?”

She turned. “Yes, Benson?”

“Have you by any chance seen my master, The Duke of Wexford this morning?”

“Why, no, I haven’t,” Elizabeth replied. “We’re nearly ready to go. Is he packed?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” Benson said. “All done.”

“Maybe he took a last ride this morning. He dearly covets Morgan’s stables,” Elizabeth said with a smile. She laid her hand on the clearly agitated servant’s arm. “He’ll be by shortly, I’m sure.” She turned to leave but the servant remained. “Is there something else, Benson?”

The man’s eyes darted and he swallowed. “No, ma’am.”

Elizabeth tilted her head. “Are you sure?”

Benson stepped closer and whispered. “His grace’s bed was not slept in.”

“Oh, la, dee. Surely that has happened before, Benson,” Elizabeth said wryly.

The man shook his head. “No, ma’am, never.”

“I hardly believe that.”

“No, its true, ma’am.” Benson turned three shades of red. “No matter how late his grace comes home, well, he always sleeps in his own bed.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Not too worry, I’m sure. Your master is a man grown, is he not?”

Benson nodded and then turned to shuffle away. Strange, Elizabeth thought, but her concern at that moment was not whose bed Blake slept in. It could have been any number of women here for the weekend. No, not her concern. She turned the brass knob of Gertrude’s room and swept in. Odd, a shiver curled down her back as she did. “Gertrude,” Elizabeth called out in a singsong voice. “It’s getting late...” Elizabeth’s hand came to her mouth as she looked at the bed. Her eyes opened wide and she did what she rarely, if ever, did. She screamed.

Sanders jumped up, stark naked. He rubbed his eyes and ran a hand through hair that was standing on end. “Elizabeth? What are you doing in here?” he asked. He made a grab for a blanket but the thing would not give. He covered his manhood with his two hands.

Elizabeth’s eyes were as round as saucers. Her face was a pasty white color. “Dear God,” she said. “Pray Anthony didn’t hear me scream.”

“Elizabeth, I’m naked. Could you at least close the door?”

"I fear it would be worse if Anthony found me in here with the door closed, Blake," Elizabeth said unevenly. Her eyes swept past him to the bed.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," Gert said.

Sanders spun around and hunched down. "Miss Finch!" he shouted.

"Get your pants on, Sanders," she said. "Elizabeth doesn't need another view of your bottom."

"I'll be back in a half hour, Gertrude," Elizabeth said as she turned and lurched for the door. "I'll help you pack."

Sanders inched back to the bed and plopped down as the door closed. He leaned forward with his head in his hands. "Dear God, Gertrude. What have I done?"

Gert stood up with a stretch. What a beautiful morning, she thought, as she looked out the window. Sunny, bright and green landscape. She hummed and cocked her head right and left to the tune. Nothing, nothing could take away the sweet little contentment she felt. Happy with herself. Happy to be alive. No wonder Elizabeth trilled around la de deeing all the time. She *did this* with Anthony, Gert thought as she glanced at the bed and giggled at her thoughts. But there sat Blake. Bronze, long and lean and still naked. She walked around the bed to face him. The haunted, panicked look on his face was testament to different feelings than hers.

"Oh, don't spoil my day and mood with your looks. I'll be leaving tomorrow," Gert said.

"You can't leave now," Blake whispered.

But Gert was already pulling a trunk from the corner of a room. "We're all leaving, Blake. It's Monday. I have much to do yet at Elizabeth's house to get ready to sail."

* * * *

Gertrude was opening a trunk while wearing a white nightgown that Blake had, apparently, never removed. Many parts of the previous night were clear. Some were shrouded in a whiskey-induced mist. Although his mind was still foggy, he was cognizant enough to realize he had crawled in the bed of a virgin, under the protection of his best friend, and nearly raped her, while on the way to a tryst with another woman. He was as embarrassed and ashamed as he'd ever been.

It was no wonder she had cried last night. Blake had stared into her eyes, swimming with unshed tears and a feeling of unworthiness. Had she thought he wanted to go? Could he have? Certainly not when Blake had wrapped his arms around her and pulled her atop him. She had lifted her lashes and stared at him in wonder, her gaze traveling into his soul. Blake took a shaky breath as he realized he could have no more broken that connection than the physical one that they had. Whatever bond had been between them was stronger and more satisfying than anything he had ever experienced. Had she not felt it? In the depths he had reached as he stroked her, to their shells of skin that had touched with sparks and sweat. To her mind and to her heart. To the elusive place beyond the reaches of mere release that tied them, bound them together.

Blake knew he would have never appreciated Gertrude as a randy youth. Age had brought him appreciation for a woman with no coy looks or practiced seduction. Just complete and unfettered passion. A wrong turn at an incorrect portrait had spoiled him to any other woman.

But now, Blake's mind was a muddle, as the sunlight streamed in the windows. He needed to ask questions but was unsure of how to begin. The door opened a few inches and Blake struggled to pull the coverlet over himself. No one came in. Just a long arm stretched in to drop a pile of clean clothes. Benson.

"My valet surely has had a stroke by now. I've never ever not slept in my own bed."

Gertrude eyed him as she folded a gown. "Dynamite wouldn't have moved you. You were snoring so loud I thought the whole house would be awake."

"I do not snore," Blake said.

"Louder than a freight train coming by," she replied.

"I fell asleep then," Blake said and looked at her.

Gertrude smiled a soft smile. "Yes." She bustled around the room, gathering her things and stowing them away. She was staring into her trunk when she continued. "Afterwards, after ... after it was over you went out in an instant. On top of me."

Blake's eyes closed. He had bedded many women in his day. They always nodded off first. Then he would slink about and dress to return to his own bed. But this wasn't just any woman. This was Gertrude Finch. Anthony and Elizabeth's guest. A virgin.

"Miss Finch, I find again I must apolo..."

Gertrude straightened in a hurry. "Whatever you do or say, I don't care. But please, by God don't apologize. I have nothing to regret, nor would I want to, Sanders. Last night was beautiful and special. Don't dismiss it with an 'I'm sorry' as if you dropped a vase." Her head dropped. "Even if it was a common occurrence for you, something to forget about by tomorrow, don't cheapen my feelings with an apology. Please."

Gertrude's head was bowed and her hands folded at her waist. He was clearly out of his depths. There she stood begging him to let her hang on to her memories. She would not sully them with any regrets. And it had been special and wonderful. More satisfying than any in his life. He pictured her above him, staring, reaching to connect with him. Would there ever be a woman again to compare to the marvel he had just discovered? She would never know he would always be in her debt.

"I'll never be sorry it happened, Gertrude. It was wondrous."

She nodded and swiped away a tear. "I refuse to cry, Sanders." Gertrude said with a shaky smile.

Blake pulled a sheet around his waist and went to her. He touched her cheek with his hand. "Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

Gertrude shook her head and smiled as she looked up at him. "Not at all."

Blake took a deep breath and looked at her. She was truly beautiful. Smart. Lively and even if it pained him to admit it, good for his children. Honest. Passionate. They would pass along together admirably. And he must set this whole incident to rights immediately.

“We can be married quietly,” he said.

“Married? Who said anything about marriage?” Gertrude asked.

Blake trotted away to a stack of clean clothes near the door. He shrugged into his shirt. “There’s a small chapel on my grounds. It’s beautiful.”

“I’m sailing for America the day after tomorrow,” Gertrude said in a huff.

“We’ll send your uncle the announcement.”

“No need to send my uncle an announcement. I’ll be seeing him in a month.” She reached up and straightened his cravat. “I hope Benson’s a lifetime retainer. You never look this sloppy when he’s around.” She touched his cheek shyly. “Sloppy, but handsome to a fault.”

A commotion outside the door brought their heads around. Blake could hear Anthony shouting and Elizabeth’s voice begging for quiet. Blake opened the door. “No need to make such a fuss in the hallway, Burroughs. Just knock.”

Gertrude hurried to pull on her flannel robe. “I’m nearly done packing, Elizabeth,” she said.

Anthony flew through the door and punched Blake in the nose. “I should call you out. But Elizabeth won’t let me so I’ll satisfy myself by beating the hell out of you. Stand up, Sanders.”

Blake steadied himself against the bed and tried to catch the trickle of blood running out of his nose. “Do you really want to shoot your best friend? The father of your godson?”

Elizabeth closed the door and begged for quiet. “Please. Lower your voices.”

Anthony was shaking and red-faced. “I told you, by God,” he hissed. “I warned you not to climb under Gertrude’s skirts and send her merrily away at the docks.” Anthony picked up Blake by the shirt. “You deserve no less than a gun at dawn.”

“Miss Finch and I will be married as soon as my divorce is final. I’ve already told her, Burroughs.”

Tony’s shoulders dropped. “When will that be?”

“I won’t marry you, Sanders,” Gertrude said. “I sail day after tomorrow. My plans have not changed. Elizabeth, did I bring my white shawl here or did I leave it at your house?”

“Miss Finch,” Blake shouted.

“Cousin Gertrude,” Anthony said in shock.

“Gert,” Elizabeth whispered. “You must.”

Gertrude continued folding clothes. “I find it interesting that the man I found naked in my bed continues to address me as Miss Finch.” She looked away. “I’m not marrying him.”

Tony blustered. “As your guardian I must insist.” He glanced at the bed. “The deed has been done.”

“Like closing the stable door once the horse is out, isn’t it Anthony? I intend to sail as scheduled. There will be no further discussion,” Gertrude said. “Out with you all. I have to get dressed.”

Elizabeth tugged Anthony out of the room. Blake stood in amazement.

“Madam, we must marry. It is my duty as a gentleman and a noble. Things may be awkward for a while I grant you. But we must marry.”

“You think I’ll marry you and watch you hurry away to find a mistress. Sorry, Sanders, you’re wrong,” Gertrude said.

“I ... I won’t have a mistress,” Blake said.

“Oh, really. I thought it a requirement of every English lord. And you,” Gertrude said and poked him in the chest, “have repeated time and again your commitment to the English aristocracy.”

“Anthony doesn’t have a mistress. I won’t either. This time.”

“That’s not the only reason I won’t marry you.” Gertrude said in a huff. “You are arrogant and high handed. You live in England. I’m an American. I’ll not give up everything I love, everything I cherish, for a man who not only doesn’t love me but declared me his duty.”

Blake stared at her as she ranted. She stepped close and smiled. “I want a man who will walk the wilds of the west or climb a mountain. Or eat over an open fire. I want a man who sets his own destiny no matter how trivial those dreams may appear to you. I want a man who loves me enough to meet me halfway. The sex was incredible, beyond my wildest dreams, Blake. But it’s not enough.” She dropped her head. “I’m a hopeless romantic, Sanders.”

Blake was stunned into silence and allowed himself to be escorted out of her room. He stared blankly as the door closed behind him. The Duke of Wexford had been summarily dismissed.

* * * *

Gert took a long ride the morning of her departure from Anthony and Elizabeth’s, fearing Sanders would arrive and her determination would wilt or desert her. Their intimacy had somehow dissolved Blake’s harsh edges. Or perhaps she just viewed him in a softer light. Their arguments, as she recalled them now, seemed closer to a spirited debate. Those realizations only served to propel her determination to sail for home. She may in fact, be falling a tiny bit in love with Sanders. What a lesson in heartbreak that would turn out to be, Gert knew. There was without a doubt, a physical attraction. What could be worse, Gert wondered, than allowing that attraction to grow into anything more, one-sided as it would no doubt be.

“Won’t you please reconsider, Gertrude?” Elizabeth begged even as the servants strapped her luggage to the carriage.

Elizabeth had asked this same question many times over the last two days. On their ride to Elizabeth’s home, while Gert packed her trunk and even now as she prepared to leave. Each time Gert had responded the same. She apologized to Elizabeth for leaving Melinda’s come-out before its completion and had tried unsuccessfully to return the wardrobe to Anthony. Both were deaf to her words. Gert stepped up into the Burroughs’ carriage. Anthony was mounted waiting for the women to climb in.

“No, Elizabeth,” Gert repeated again.

“What if there is a child, Gertrude?”

The thought had never occurred to her until Elizabeth had brought it up the day before. What a ninny I am, Gert thought. Encouraging women to be independent only to possibly tie herself to a man an ocean away. The thought had made her last goodbyes to Blake’s children bittersweet.

“I will cross that bridge if and when I come to it,” Gert said.

Elizabeth gave up her quest and fell silent beside Gert on the ride to the docks. Tony rode alongside the carriage a grim look on his face. He blamed himself, Gert knew. And she had time and again absolved him of any wrongdoing. She told Elizabeth and Tony both that Blake had, yes, crawled into her bed, unannounced, but that she had held him there. And she had no regrets. They simply refused to believe her.

At the dock, Gert kissed Elizabeth while they both cried and hugged, promising each other a trip someday to meet again. If nothing else they would remain close through letters. Gert kissed Anthony’s cheek and thanked him.

Tony pulled her close and whispered hoarsely. “If you need anything. Money, a home, anything. You need do nothing more than ask.”

Gert kissed him again. “I know. And I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. But I’ll be fine, Anthony.”

She turned to the gangplank while her trunks were carried up to the ship. Blake Sanders stood there. Gert turned a brave face. “Sanders. You needn’t have made the trip.” Blake walked to her and Gert could see he was pale. His eyes darted and he reached for her hand.

“Gertrude.”

She struggled to meet his eye and keep her lip from trembling. “Yes?”

Blake looked over her shoulder, out to the sea anywhere but her face. “I don’t feel there is anyway for me to convince you to stay.”

“You can’t. My mind is made up.” She watched as he began to speak only to stop abruptly and stare into her eyes.

“I can hardly resign myself to never seeing you again. I have tried. But I fear this ocean and our different lives will be between us forever,” Blake faltered. “If there is anything you ever need...”

Gert nodded as tears spilled down her face.

“You vex me greatly in this, Gertrude.”

Gert smiled. “And you vex me as well. We’ll have memories, though, Blake. And they won’t talk back.”

Blake rubbed her hand softly. “I fear I will miss the sound of your voice even as you chastise me as you were wont to do often.”

“And I will miss the look of shock on your face when you caught me doing something sincerely American,” Gert said and smiled. She lifted her hand to his face. “Know this. I will never ever forget you. Even when my memory dims.”

Gert turned from Blake, walked the gangplank and never looked back. She felt as if she held up well to the emotional scene but she was terrified if she took one more look at his face she would drop her bag in the bay and race to his arms. Instead, she had stood on deck and watched England fade from view. Nodding to other passengers and generally acting the part of the spinster escort. She smiled rigidly and made polite conversation.

Gert plopped on her bed in her cabin. I am a grown woman. I chose to engage in sex. I refuse to be a ninny about it all now. Her hand wandered to her stomach and she wondered if even now Blake’s child was growing there. She forced a smile to her lips envisioning her days and work ahead. It was easy and true to admit the longing she had for home. The ranch. The rally to vote. Gert turned her head to the ocean view out the small portal. Maybe she would take some time off from traveling and speech making. A good couple of months with horses and sunsets would revive her spirits as they always had.

Darkness had descended on the sea. Her cabin now, had a strange glow of twilight. Soft shadows bathed in gold tones. As if the moonlight could roll back time, Gert inhaled deeply and pictured Blake atop her, loving her. Tears came then and she dropped to the pillow. Harsh tortured cries of a mind setting the right path and the soul and body refusing to be led.

“Why, God? Why him? Why Sanders?” Gert cried aloud.

“Miss Finch? Are you all right?”

“Who’s there?” she shouted. From the corner shadows of her cabin, she saw a tall thin figure emerge. “It’s me, Miss Finch. William. William Sanders. Why are you crying?”

“William! What are you doing here?” she shouted.

He sat down across from Gertrude. “I want to see America, Miss Finch, before father sets me to running the estate.”

“But, William. Your parents are sick with worry, I am sure,” Gert said.

“I left them a note. After what Melinda said about father making her marry that viscount, I knew he’d never let me make a trip.”

“William. Your father agreed to allow Melinda to wait.”

The boy’s face lifted in astonishment. “He did?”

Gert nodded. She had been amazed as well at Sanders’ change of heart. She had sorely misjudged him on their first meeting. Blake’s talk with Melinda had proven that.

“I’ve made a muck of things now. Haven’t I?”

“Well, there’s nothing to be done now. When we arrive in New York, I’ll arrange passage for you back,” Gert said.

“But Miss Finch, if I’ve gone that far, I truly want to see more of your country,” William said.

“We will see. I imagine your father’s on his way to the States this very minute.”

William shook his head. “No. He will send someone for me. I don’t know who, but he’ll not make this trip no matter how angry he is.”

“I don’t believe that,” Gert replied.

“You don’t know him as well as I,” William said miserably. The two sat silently. “Miss Finch, when you first found me, what were you asking God about father for? You were crying.”

Gert blew out a breath. “That I’d never met the man,” she said.

“My mother used to cry when she didn’t think Melinda or I were about. I think father hurt her terribly. Did he hurt you?”

“It is adult business, William,” Gert replied.

“It has something to do with him kissing you all the time, doesn’t it?” William’s eyes opened wide. “My father didn’t use you ill, did he, Miss Finch?”

William’s tone begged for confirmation that his father was guiltless. “We are adults, William. It serves no purpose for you to speculate. Whatever happened between us is none of your affair.” William’s eyes narrowed and Gert knew he would believe what he wanted. “There is a saying in the States, William. ‘If you don’t like eggs, stay out of the henhouse.’”

* * * *

Blake stayed a week in London after Gertrude’s ship sailed but not at his town home where she and Anthony and Elizabeth had stayed for Melinda’s come-out. It held too many reminders of Gert. The sheets she had slept on and the plates she had eaten from were all there seemingly to remind him of the woman who had just sailed out of his life. He booked a hotel room. A change of scenery would be the thing to rally his spirits, he had told himself. Blake ate in the grand dining room and was nearly seduced by a young widow. But at the door of her suites, he begged off. Even the low cut of her gown, revealing an acre of bosom had not brought a twinge to his crotch.

* * * *

One evening as he walked home from White’s, he heard his name shouted from behind. It had been a week since Gertrude left and he now longed for home. Home and its duties. His estates’ needs would flush from his mind all other thoughts. It always had. He turned in the dark street to see Tony running to him.

“Burroughs? What are you doing here?” Blake called out.

Tony heaved a breath. “I’ve been looking for you since last week. No one’s seen you anywhere until I chanced to stop at White’s. Your staff only said you were staying in town. Where have you been?”

“Taking a much needed rest at the Savoy. I’m leaving for Wexford House tomorrow.” Anthony’s eyes

seemed wild. "What's the matter, Tony?"

"Let's talk inside," Anthony said as they entered the hotel.

Blake ushered Anthony to his suites and poured brandy. "You look like you need this, Burroughs. Elizabeth's alright, isn't she?"

"Fine."

Blake's spine tingled. "What is it then?"

"I don't know how to tell you, Blake," Anthony said.

Blake gulped and his face whitened. "The children. Are the children alright?"

Tony's head didn't move. "No."

Blake jumped from his seat and grabbed his friend by the arms. "What is it?"

"William."

"What's happened then? Did he fall riding? Is he sick? Tell me, man," Blake screamed.

"He's gone," Anthony replied.

Blake blinked. "What do you mean gone?"

Anthony pulled a letter from his pocket. "He's been gone for a week. We've been frantic, searching for you and for him. Benson found this in your rooms today. It had fallen behind the dresser."

Blake opened the letter and saw his son's writing. His hands shook and he roared.

Chapter Ten

Blake rode hell bent for leather with Anthony by his side. When Benson opened the door, Melinda threw herself in his arms.

"Daddy! What did the letter say? Uncle Anthony wouldn't let us open it."

When he untangled himself he saw the rest of his guests. All worried and grim faced. Elizabeth, Donald, Briggs, Mrs. Wickham. To the side stood Ann, a stout man and Lady Katherine.

His ex-wife came forward. "Tell us, Blake. Please," Ann begged.

“He’s safe. For now. Let me change and we’ll discuss it the library.” Blake eyed Ann and her tear-stained face. The stout man approached.

“I’m Angus McDonald. If it means you’re more comfortable and Ann can stay, I’ll leave. I’ll do what you ask, anything if it means relief for Ann and the rescue of your boy.”

Blake heard the soft brogue and met McDonald’s eye. The man didn’t waver an inch. “Stay. The children need their mother,” Blake said to Ann’s red face now buried in the burly man’s shoulder.

McDonald made one quick nod.

Blake returned to the library quickly. Every head turned and conversation stopped when he entered. “William is on a ship bound for America.”

There was silence and then a torrent of questions. Had he been kidnapped? What did the letter say? Was there a ransom note? Why America? Blake held his hand up for silence. “William is a stowaway. On Gertrude Finch’s ship.”

“My grandson does not need to be a stowaway. He could buy the damn boat if he wanted,” Lady Katherine said. “Oh, don’t look at me like that, Ann. I can swear like a docks man when riled.”

The only one in the room not talking and shouting questions was Melinda. She was stone-faced, rubbing her hands in her lap. Blake went to sit beside her. He picked up her hand, now trembling. “Tell me, Melinda. What do you know?”

Melinda’s eyes darted to all those around her. “It is my fault.” She burst into tears.

Ann sat on the other side of her daughter. “Why do you say that, dear?”

The girl struggled and whimpered. “I was so mad at you, Father, when you told me I had to marry the Crawford viscount.”

Blake met Ann’s eyes over Melinda’s head and saw the censure there. “I told you, Melinda. You needn’t hurry with a marriage,” he said.

“Before you talked to me that night when Miss Finch was there, I spoke to William,” Melinda said.

Ann brushed hair away from her daughter’s face. “What did you say?”

Melinda dropped her head. All was quiet in the room. Blake and Ann leaned close to hear her tortured, whispered words.

“William was so excited about the tales Miss Finch had told of the States. He told me that he was going to ask to visit there before going to the university,” Melinda began. “He was furious you made him come home the night of my come-out. He wanted to stay and listen to Gertrude and Fawcett.”

Blake waited. “Go on.”

Melinda stood and faced her parents. “I told him you would never let him.” She looked at Blake. “That you would never let your heir out of your sight and control. That ... that there was nary a prayer of you letting him see anything but what you wanted him to see.”

Blake looked past and through all in the room. He knew Melinda's predictions were true. He wouldn't have let William go and his son knew the truth with his sister's words. The only chance William had of fulfilling this dream was to escape. Exactly what he had done. He heard Lady Katherine's harrumph.

"I wouldn't have let him," Blake whispered.

"Treated your children and wife the same, Sanders. Prisoners to what you thought would bring you approval from the crowd of jackals in London," Lady Katherine said.

Blake looked at Ann. She did not speak. Her eyes dropped.

"Well no use squandering time over your bad habits and faults, Sanders. What will you do about William?" Lady Katherine said and arched a brow.

Ann turned to Elizabeth. "Will this woman, Gertrude Finch, watch out for William?" Ann asked.

Elizabeth nodded. "She'll be shocked, to be sure, to find him. But Gertrude will guard him as if he were her own. She's sensible and smart."

Anthony sat down beside Ann. "I wasn't sure I liked her when she first arrived. But she is loyal and true." Anthony covered Ann's hand. "She'll take care of William. No need to worry on that score."

"Was she the one that helped with Melinda's come-out, Mother?" Ann asked.

Lady Katherine nodded. "Did a fine job, too, for being an American. Cut Fitzmontique to the quick at the Smithly ball." The old woman chuckled. "Said she didn't dance with men who wore women's hair."

"I think I like her already," Ann replied and grinned shakily to Angus McDonald.

"Oh, you would like her, Mother," Melinda said. "She has odd ideas to be sure but she was kind to me, listening to me bemoan my problems. And then just as quickly told me to forget what society thinks and hold my head up."

Ann looked at her daughter. Her eyes dropped in worry. "You mean after ... after I went back to stay with Mother."

Melinda nodded. "I was feeling sorry for myself the day I met her at Elizabeth's. But she buoyed my spirits admirably and I invited her to dinner." Melinda laughed then and leaned forward to speak a confidence in a room full of people. "Father kissed her and she punched him in the nose. She marched into the house and drank a glass of whiskey." Melinda's eyes opened wide. "Oh, dear."

Ann's eyes revealed her shock. "Pardon?"

Elizabeth moved her skirts. "Kissed her again in the foyer of the London home. I thought poor Mrs. Wickham would have an apoplexy."

"No need to discuss this lout's poor behavior. He's lucky he still lives," Anthony said.

Ann looked at Blake. "What else?"

“This is of no consequence. I have no intentions of discussing this with any of you,” Blake said as he stood.

Ann looked at Elizabeth. “He kissed her in the foyer?”

“And here down by the lake. She was going to climb the ladder to see Donald’s tree house. We watched from the window as they argued. And then, he just kissed her,” Elizabeth explained with a shrug.

“Anthony. Come to my study, please,” Blake said stiffly and hurried from the room.

“Then he loves her,” Ann said softly.

Elizabeth nodded. “To be certain. And she him.”

Ann sat back in her chair, eyes wide. “Oh, my.”

* * * *

Anthony and McDonald stepped into Blake’s office. They seated themselves across from him.

“Who will you send to fetch William?” Anthony asked.

He eyed McDonald. “I don’t know. And I’m not sure I wish to discuss it with my wife’s future husband,” Blake said.

“Gave you leave to kick me out earlier, Sanders. But truth be known we’re in this together,” the Scotsman said.

“And how’s that,” Blake growled.

“He is your son and your responsibility, aye. But he’s Ann’s son too and I cannot abide her suffering. I will go for the lad if you wish,” McDonald said.

“I know a man in London. Completely trustworthy to fetch William. Would keep this quiet, Blake,” Anthony said.

“As if I care what anyone knows. He’s my son and I’ve driven him away. I deserve every censure I receive,” Blake said wearily.

“There’s no chance this American coerced the boy?” McDonald asked. “I know you would pay handsomely for his recovery.”

Blake stood and leaned over the desk in a fury. “Do not dare besmirch Miss Finch. She’s not but an innocent in this affair. Don’t ever imply otherwise.”

McDonald raised his brows and glanced at Anthony. Tony cocked his head and smiled. “Forgive me, Sanders. I know her not and should have never questioned your assessment,” McDonald stated.

“Damn right, McDonald.” Blake ran his fingers through his hair and dropped in his seat. “She’s a fine woman.”

“Smart, too. Dumped this dunderhead with no more than a by-your-leave even after he bedded her,” Anthony continued glibly.

McDonald covered his mouth with his hand.

“Burroughs. You insolent ass. Gertrude and my personal affairs are not to be bandied about,” Blake shouted. He turned to McDonald. “I’m asking you as a gentleman to not repeat this tale.” Blake’s shoulders dropped. “I would not want Melinda to know I used Miss Finch so poorly. She adores the woman.”

Anthony and McDonald left the room quietly. Worry over William filled his mind. Gertrude had told them of Indian tribes and bandits as well as the ever-wonderful sunsets. Should he send Anthony’s agent or allow McDonald to go? He had still not decided. Dinner was a somber affair. Blake had relented and allowed Melinda to ask her mother and McDonald to stay. He heard little of the conversation though. After dinner he found himself facing Angus McDonald.

“My Ann wishes to speak to you privately,” the man growled.

Blake raised his brows. “Oh?”

McDonald leaned close with a smile on his face for the guests around. “Dunna hurt that woman. It would worry me greatly to kill her children’s father.”

Blake threw the man a haughty glance. “Your burr reveals your distress, McDonald. But what do you think? I would strangle my children’s mother in the room next to where Melinda plays the pianoforte?”

McDonald’s eyes were like blue steel. “Nay, I don’t think you’d hurt her physically. But your words and actions have cut her to the bone in the past. I won’t have the woman I cherish above all things suffer from your arrogance.”

Blake knew the man meant every word. McDonald would kill him with those great burly hands of his if he distressed Ann in any way. He wasn’t afraid, but in an odd way admirable of the man to threaten a peer of the realm in his own home over the tender feelings of a woman.

“I will be charming to a fault,” Blake said.

“Good then. Just pretend my Ann is your own woman. The American. Be mindful of what you would want any man to say to her,” McDonald said, straightened his coat and turned to nod at Ann.

Blake felt the slight pressure of Ann’s hand on his arm and led her to the morning room. McDonald’s warning whirled in his head. Gertrude? His woman? The Scotsman must be mad indeed. Even after his offer of marriage, she had steadfastly refused to yield.

Ann smiled at him in a way he had not witnessed in years. Without scorn or worry or self-loathing. “Angus felt the need to speak to you. He is very protective of me.”

“As I can see. As much of an ass as I’ve been over the years, Ann,” Blake said. “I never really set out to hurt you.”

“I know, Blake. Nor I you,” Ann said.

“Our concern now must of course be William.”

“I agree. What are you thinking of doing?” Ann asked.

“Anthony has a man in London he would trust with Elizabeth’s life. I’ll either send him or let McDonald go. He offered you know,” Blake said.

“Blake.” Ann said and stepped to him. “I’ve made few requests of you over the years. But I will beg one now. I think you should go to the States to get William.”

“I’ve thought of it, Ann. But I can hardly leave the estate for three or more months.” Blake turned to the window. “Although it bothers me greatly to have William brought home by a stranger.”

“Angus is not a stranger to William,” Ann said softly.

“I know but somehow I feel that this mess is of my own doing rather than through any fault of Melinda’s. Although I feel I’d nearly strangle the boy for the worry he’s caused me. Maybe the time together would do William and I good.”

Ann’s eyes widened.

Blake waved his hand. “Yes, yes I know. I’ve been rather recalcitrant in the past to admit mistakes.”

“There are few guidelines for raising children, Blake. We do as our parents did, minus the mistakes hopefully.” Ann lifted her chin. “I think our children are turning out quite well for all the bother we’ve been to them.”

Blake smiled. “I suppose you’re right.”

“But, Blake, you’ve never been farther than London. How will you ever fare alone? Being a duke will count for naught in America,” Ann said.

“I am not completely useless, Ann. I imagine I’ll find my way to Miss Finch’s and be able to bring William home,” Blake replied.

“What will you say to her?” Ann said hands folded at her waist.

Blake turned from the window he’d been staring out of. “Say to whom?”

“Because we are no longer married, do not discount the seventeen years we were. I know you well, Blake Sanders. Miss Finch has set you in a tizzy. Why kissing the woman in front of everyone is so unlike you I can hardly imagine it. But Elizabeth tells me it’s true. As does Anthony and Melinda. And Mrs. Wickham and Benson. And even Donald,” Ann said with a wave of her hand.

“Must you recount my gross mortification with every witness to my folly?” Blake asked.

Ann stepped close to Blake. “Look me in the eye, Blake. Tell me you feel nothing for Miss Finch. You’ve lied to me many times over the years. Some I recognized. Some I chose to ignore. But in this I don’t believe you can hide your feelings.”

Blake stared out the window. He had been convincing himself all week with some limited success that Gertrude's leave taking was for the best by reliving their arguments and recounting her odd manner of dress and manners. He hardly wanted a wife. But then her stern protection of Melinda and how she had charmed William and Donald crept back through his mind. And the night of their lovemaking that haunted his thoughts every waking minute.

"I just don't understand myself. She drove me nearly mad with her dismissal of things I have believed in my whole life. She's an American, for God's sakes, Ann. She refused to ride sidesaddle. She wears the oddest clothes. And that accent of hers, dear Lord. As she prattles along endlessly over women's right to vote. But still, even with all of this..." Blake trailed away.

"You love her then," Ann said softly.

Blake turned dismissively. "Hardly love. One night hardly credits...."

Ann raised her brows.

"I suppose Elizabeth could not wait to apprise you of that unfortunate scene," Blake said.

"The picture Elizabeth painted was one I could hardly imagine. She was quite mortified actually to find you standing there with just your hands to, well..."

"I did ask Miss Finch to marry me," Blake said.

"I know," Ann admitted with a nod.

Blake plopped down in a chair. "She brushed me aside as if I were lint on her dress."

"Gertrude Finch hardly sounds the kind of woman to dismiss you out of hand. But knowing you as well as I do I can only imagine your choice of words," Ann said.

"It's not in me to wax poetically. I was willing to do the right thing. Do my duty. She's a stubborn, willful woman," Blake said.

Ann walked to the chair Blake was seated in and laid her hand on his shoulder. "Go to America. Fetch William home." She went to the door. With her hand on the knob, she turned. "And Blake. Don't be such a fool with Miss Finch as you were with me. It does the Duke of Wexford little credit to repeat his mistakes."

* * * *

Blake decided to take Ann's advice, forgo Tony's offer and go for William himself. His preparations for the trip to the States were made easier with Angus McDonald's help. Ann planned to marry below her status in society but well her equal in fortune. McDonald's ample wealth was apparently made shipping goods across the ocean. His fleet of ships attested to his success. Melinda had insisted on postponing her come-out. Although Blake knew she was disappointed, he could hardly say he was. It would ease his worries, an ocean away, about what mischief his beautiful daughter would get into. She and Donald would stay with their mother at McDonald's Scotland home.

Melinda was excited to make the trip after Ann told her stories of McDonald's family and the people she would meet. Society there offered many parties and entertainment that would keep a young, single

girl amused for months. McDonald eased his worries by declaring to guard Melinda with his life.

“Our rules aren’t as strict and silly as England’s, but a fool I’m not. Many young lads will take one look at the girl and be besotted from the start. I have a daughter one year younger than Melinda and it will take every bit of my time and energy to keep up with them. But do it, I will. My daughter Claire will benefit from Ann’s instruction as well. I want leave from you to do as I think proper for Melinda. I’ll guard her as if she were my own but I cannot do it if she appeals to you on a whim,” McDonald said as he drank whiskey with Anthony and Blake.

Blake studied McDonald. It irked him to no end to give up control of his children. The future of his family. But he knew the man’s requests were reasonable. Melinda could certainly make life miserable on occasion if she didn’t get her own way. He didn’t think McDonald would let a few tears or a pouting lip sway him to acquiesce.

“I’ll make Melinda aware that you are in charge while I’m gone. If the rules are set before she arrives I think things will be fine,” Blake said.

“Good. There’ll be no mischief on my watch,” McDonald replied.

“When do you leave, Blake?” Anthony asked.

“In two days.”

“I’m still willing to go, if you’ve changed your mind,” Anthony offered.

“And have you whine and worry about Elizabeth the whole time? I think not,” Blake replied.

“You’re set on taking the entourage as well, Angus has informed me,” Tony said.

“Hardly an entourage,” Blake said.

“I’ve been to the States. Tried to tell the man, I did, leave the trappings of England behind. Will make him stick out like a Scotsman in Paris,” Angus replied, flat lipped.

“I’m only taking Benson,” Blake added.

“And the carriage,” Tony said.

“How else will I get to Miss Finch’s?”

“I told you man, take the rails or stagecoach,” Angus replied shaking his head.

“Remarkable.” Tony stared at Blake, a finger on his lip. “A foray to the wilderness will include a groomsman, three footmen and a valet. In a shining black barouche with the Wexford seal certainly taunting every blackguard for miles. Have you updated your will?”

Blake did not smile. “Yes, as a matter of fact I have. But not for the reason you think. I will return carrying William by the scruff of his shirt in one piece, I assure you.”

“Ann is well provided for.” Angus said and leaned back in his chair. “I assume you took her portion out of your will.”

“No, I didn’t,” Blake said.

Anthony turned in his chair. “Surely your man of business advised you to settle any of Ann’s entitlements on the children since she is to marry.”

Blake tapped his cheek. “Truth be told I hadn’t thought of it.”

Anthony looked at him strangely and stood to refill his glass. He turned back clearly puzzled. “Granted I was goading you when I remarked on your will but since you’ve admitted you changed it and Ann’s portion wasn’t the cause, I am baffled.”

Blake straightened his pants and stared out the window. He mumbled words under his hand.

“Pardon, Blake,” Anthony said. “I can’t hear you.”

“Is it necessary for everyone, including my wife’s new husband to know of my folly?” Blake whined.

“I’ll leave, Sanders, if you have something to discuss with Burroughs,” McDonald said over his drink.

“No, no, McDonald. We still have things to confirm about the crossing.” Blake sat silent then. His brow lifted and he occasionally shook his head or nodded to himself. Waging a war of conscience in his mind. Tony should know. And if McDonald were his children’s guardian with Tony he should know as well. “I’ve included a clause to settle money on any heirs I am currently unaware of.”

Anthony Burroughs sat speechless. “Then you’re worried Gertrude is expecting your child,” he whispered.

Blake shrugged.

“‘Twas only one time, from what I understand,” McDonald said.

“Elizabeth said Gertrude told her you passed out cold afterwards,” Tony added and scowled. “I admit I still would like to kill you with my bare hands.”

“If each of you would check the date of my marriage and the date of my daughter’s birth, you would notice exactly nine months between the two events.”

McDonald pursed his lips and stared at his drink. Tony fidgeted and frowned.

“If there is any chance a son or daughter of mine was conceived I must ensure their well-being,” Blake added.

Tony’s head nodded with a snap. “Yes, considering their mother will be alone and defenseless. Unmarried and at the mercy of gossip and censure. Yes, quite the gentlemanly thing to do.”

McDonald raised red bushy brows. “Tis exactly this conversation I pray would never include Melinda or Claire’s name,” the Scotsman said weakly.

The thought of Melinda in this same situation made Blake’s stomach roll. “I did offer to marry Miss Finch,” Blake said.

“Maybe the answer will be different if there is a babe,” McDonald offered.

“I have no intentions of humiliating myself further by offering again,” Blake said.

Tony sat forward in his chair. “Loving a woman is no humiliation, Blake.” He waited for a reply. When none came he sat back. “Perhaps I’ve been mistaken. If you truly loved her you would ask with your dying breath and still pray for her response.”

“Love, love, you prattle on about. Love is messy and makes men act the fool. Like you, too, McDonald.” Blake said as he stood. “Whimpering and cowering to some skirt’s request. Makes men forget what their duty is.”

“Bugger England, then, I say,” Tony said.

“You are a perfect example. You would not besmirch our homeland otherwise,” Blake said.

“Ah, but what is country and duty without love? They are meaningless without it,” McDonald said.

“And even from the brawny Scotsman. You’ve both been addled,” Blake said.

“You mistake my meaning, Blake,” Tony said. “Your duty as you call it has been to marry, keep a mistress and worry prodigiously over the knot in your tie. You will die knowing nothing else.”

Blake blustered now, angry at his friend’s words. “This is twice now you have seen fit to reduce my existence to naught but a pile of nonsense.”

“Yes and what of it, Blake?” Tony shouted. “You still refuse to find anything more worthwhile than your bloody title. Take a chance, Blake. Take a chance that there is more for you. A woman you love and who loves you and might, just might, mean more to you than your horses and what the town gossips say. London and its worries will be but a speck in history when you rot in your grave.”

Blake’s mouth twitched as he watched Tony storm from the room shaking windows as he slammed the door. McDonald followed. Blake was shaken to the core. Anthony had known him his entire life. They had stood at each other’s wedding. Tony was godfather to his heir. The thought that the man closest to him his whole life thought so little of him left him rattled. When had things changed? Blake harrumphed. When Tony had grown up and left him behind unable to fathom life’s purpose? Most likely the day he met Elizabeth. And what of the chances Tony spoke of? The chance to find something that meant more. What if he gambled his heart on a woman and found she did not return his regard? What then?

His one night with Gertrude, even drunk, had frightened him sorely. Even now it was hard to admit to himself it had not been the vessel that haunted him and left him aching. Not the body that had received his. It had been the woman. Pure and simple. The whole woman, body, soul, heart and mind. But Gertrude had made clear she was not interested. Not in him. What if he laid his feelings, whatever they may be, out for her perusal? She would reject him as she had done time and again. But what of that chance Tony spoke of? What of the chance, however slim, that she would not rebuff him? What would lay ahead of him then?

An hour later, Blake rode to Tony’s home. He found his friend near his stables, mucking out stalls, of all things. “The smell from you will keep Elizabeth away for days.”

Tony turned around with a start. He leaned on the handle of the pitchfork he held. "When I get angry and say stupid things, the best remedy for me is work. An unpleasant chore preferably."

"I will remember that in the future," Blake replied as he ambled into the barn.

Tony ran his hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Blake. I spoke out of turn. As Elizabeth pointed out I am hardly the one to point fingers."

Blake shrugged and looked away. "I know not who I am, Tony. Other than my father's son. I've managed to bungle my last twenty years. I haven't a clue how to avoid past mistakes."

Tony sat down on baled hay. "Not true. You've been a good father to your children. I am fairly petrified I'll not do as well."

"I've been a fair father to the children, Tony." Blake heaved a sigh. "But for the wrong reasons. And as they grow older I hope they know how to be something other than my child."

"I would hate for us to part on bad terms. Especially with William's welfare on your mind. Do you accept my apology, Sanders?" Anthony asked.

"I do." Blake wandered the stable. Touching the soft nose of a mare and the cool leather of saddles. His back was to Tony when he asked, "The chance you spoke of. Is there any hope of a chance for me with Miss Finch?" Blake turned then to face his friend. "And is she the chance I should take?"

"Don't saddle me with that puzzle, Sanders." Tony picked up his discarded pitchfork and began to turn straw. "You'll figure it out on your own, I dare say."

"Keep your eye on things for me while I'm gone."

"I'll have your back, Sanders. Safe passage to you."

Chapter Eleven

Six weeks on a ship with William Sanders had proved trying. The young man had charmed the toughest sailor and succeeded in scaring Gert half to death. Climbing masts in bare feet and charging about the ship as if he was on a grand adventure. Of course the small amount of things he had packed, were ruined the first week. A cabin boy near his age gave him ragged shirts and tight pants. He wore them with pride. His skin had gone from sun red to golden brown. He answered only to Will.

The captain of the ship had been quite unhappy to discover the stowaway. William, Will now, had handed over a diamond stickpin and the man's mouth dropped. Typical male, Gert thought, one change of underclothes in his leather bag and a piece of jewelry that Gert was sure would pay his passage three times. She complained to him handing a piece of his inheritance away on a whim.

“Got it for my last birthday, Miss Finch. I didn’t mean to bring it. Must have been stuck in my bag.” Will grinned. “But I am most happy it was there.”

“Is there another cabin William can stay in, Captain?” Gert asked.

“We’re all full, Miss Finch. He either stays here or with the crew. There’s a spare cot in the hold,” the man said.

William’s eyes widened. “With the crew. Yes, sir.” But he sobered quickly enough. “I don’t like the idea of Miss Finch being alone though.”

The captain turned a stern face. “Are you implying, boy, an unescorted woman is unsafe on my ship?”

Gert knew Will was unaccustomed to but few telling him what to do or questioning his words. He surprised her with his response.

“No, I’m not, sir. But I’ll bloody the nose of any man who bothers her. Just want to be clear on that point,” Will said, stretching to his near six foot.

The captain’s look was astonishment. He chuckled and slapped Will on the back. “Come on then, son, I’ll show you where to bed. Now some of the crew are rough men, boy. Best not expect any special treatment. And I would respond with a yes sir or no sir regardless of who asks. You may be a duke’s son in England but if you’re staying with them the only rank that counts are years on the sea.”

William was smiling broadly as he hurried to gather his things.

Three weeks into their crossing they had run into a terrible storm. Gert had looked everywhere for William, swaying and bumping into walls as the ship pitched. She ran into a soaked, worried looking sailor and asked if he’d seen Will. “Yes,” the man had replied. “He’s on deck doing what he’s told.”

Gert could have fainted. William Sanders, the son of a duke, would have no idea what to do. He could be swept overboard. Gert paced her room and fell asleep before dawn as the sea smoothed. She came awake to a knock.

Gert pulled the door open. Will stood there. Bedraggled, tired and soaked. Grinning as if he’d just won a horse race. She wrapped her arms around him. “William, I was so worried. I didn’t know what to think.” He untangled himself from her embrace and Gert noticed the cabin boy, Bart, standing behind Will.

“I’m fine, Miss Finch. I’m sorry I worried you but the captain put Bart and I to a task.” William puffed up mightily. “Every able hand was needed last night.”

Gert heard the pride in his voice. Her lip trembled as it had been doing more often than not of late and tears filled her eyes. “If anything would have happened to you, Will, I could have never faced your father,” she said.

“I’m fine. The captain told us to go below deck and sleep. Bart and I are tired to the bone. I’ll check on you later,” Will said.

Gert plopped down wearily and pulled the chamber pot out from under her bunk. With little fanfare she threw up as she had been doing every morning for the last week. She was hardly sea sick, she knew. She

had sailed the whole way to England without even a flinch of nausea. And she felt fine otherwise. Gert prayed every night for her monthly to come. It did not. Plenty of time, she consoled herself. Just a touch of illness she'd picked up. That would explain it all. But what would explain the tightening of the skin across her belly? Or her enlarged and tender breasts? She was pregnant.

Gert was sure Will knew something was amiss. He had found her on deck, at the rail, tears falling hard and fast. Will had touched her arm and looked worried. The same worried expression she'd seen on his father. That had made her cry harder still.

"What is it, Miss Finch? Pray tell me," William had asked.

Before Gert could fathom her words and how silly they sounded she blurted out the cause of her tears. "That bird just swooped down from nowhere and plucked a fish from the ocean. Just killed it."

Will was confused. "'Twas just a fish, Miss Finch. The birds have to eat as well."

Gert blubbered and ran to her cabin.

She had become a crying, emotional wreck. One day determined to never allow Blake near her child. By evening, she was sure she would hurl herself in the ocean if she never saw him again. Gert tried to focus on the ranch. It would be her solace, her retreat and by the end of her trip she knew she must let Will escort her home. She was so exhausted that evening she had fallen asleep at the captain's table shortly after soup was served. Some days she barely got out of bed. And she must get William's oath to not reveal his connection to Blake. Uncle Fred would question Will when he found out her condition and surely Will would repeat the tales of her and Blake's kisses. Uncle Fred would board the next ship, shotgun in hand and shoot Blake through the heart. Gert burst into tears as the scenario played out in her head.

Gert asked William to come to her cabin one day out of the New York harbor. She paced the room, trying to come up with a way to explain it all to a fourteen year-old boy. Will watched her. "Ah, William, ah, I've decided you should go with me to my uncle's ranch."

Will jumped from his seat and whirled around. "How grand. A ranch."

"Now William..."

"Will, please."

"Will then. There is a reason I need escorted. Otherwise I'd put you on the next boat back to England," Gert said.

"What reason, Miss Finch?"

Gert held her hands at her stomach and willed herself not to itch the tightened skin. "I've been feeling poorly."

Will's face sobered and he ran to the door. "I'll get the ship's doctor, right away."

"Sit down," Gert screamed. Her moods swung from tears, to near hysteria to unholy, unaccountable wrath. "I'm sorry, Will. I didn't mean to shout."

Will sat. "Do you know what's the matter?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "You remember Lady Burroughs?"

"Uncle Anthony's wife? Of course. What about her?"

"She's been feeling poorly too."

Will smiled and blushed. "That's because she's going to have a baby, Miss Finch."

"Uh huh."

Will's head tilted and then his eyes widened. "Are you saying you're feeling poorly like Aunt Elizabeth?"

"Uh huh."

"But you're not married, Miss Finch," William whispered.

Gert closed her eyes. To hear it said so baldly undid her. "I know that."

Will sat at the small table in the cabin, drumming his fingers. He was nearly bursting with questions, Gert knew. She watched him, so like his father trying to work through to answers. She knew he had figured it all out when he faced her.

"Father," Will breathed.

Gert swallowed. "It is of great importance you do not reveal to my Uncle Fred whom you suspect."

Will's face was a hard mask. "Would he wish to kill the son of a bitch, too?"

"William, your language." Gert calmed herself and sat down. "Your father asked me to marry him. I said no."

"Why?"

"Your father doesn't love me. We're not suited," Gert replied.

"Suited enough, I'd say," William said.

"Be very careful, William. There are reasons and circumstances you don't understand. I'll not have you judge me or him."

"I'll not judge you. But my father, well," William trailed away.

"In any case, I will need your help. I'm not feeling well enough to make the journey alone. You will promise me not to tell anyone of this." William looked at her. "Promise me, William."

"I promise, Miss Finch. And I'll see you safely home," William turned his head. "But I'll never say I won't bloody Father's nose when I see him."

William trailed close to Gert from that moment on.

* * * *

Blake's trip with Benson across the Atlantic was calm. The seas were still and blue and McDonald had seen to their every need. Blake could barely drag himself to the cabin every night for watching the sunset and smelling the salt in the air. He had not traveled much as a youth and once married, confined himself to London's diversions. Benson insisted on being butler as well as valet and served tea in his cabin every day at three. The wiry man's pained confession that his much coveted tin of English cakes was near empty set a smile to Blake's face. Seemed silly to sit in the small but well-decorated cabin in the middle of the day to sip tea and crunch stale cookies with Benson standing rigidly near the door.

"We can forgo afternoon tea, my good man," Blake said magnanimously.

"Oh, but, Your Grace, I promised Mrs. Wickham and Briggs I would keep every thing the same for you," Benson said. "As you're accustomed to."

"Why's that?" Blake asked and sat back to stretch his legs.

"Well, well," Benson stuttered, "'tis commonly known you dislike change of any sort, sir. This trip alone must be greatly taxing to you as it is."

"Don't like change, Benson? I'm hardly rigid," Blake said with a smile.

Benson did not reply.

"Out with it man. Why do you say that? I give you leave to speak freely," Blake said.

"Well, Your Grace, your shirts have been made to the same specifications at the same tailor for as long as I've been with you. Nearly eighteen years now. Cook serves oatmeal every morning, lamb on Thursday, chicken on Wednesday and well you know the menu, sir. The duchess wanted to redecorate rooms but you shook your head that day. The concession being she would order new carpets and settees as long as they were exactly the same pattern and style as the worn ones. When Wilson, the old butler, took sick you pensioned him off but insisted he sit by the door if he could. He died there."

Blake tapped the table. "Hated the thought of coming home and not seeing his craggy old face."

Benson smiled half-heartedly. "So you see Briggs and Mrs. Wickham insisted I continue the traditions you're accustomed to."

Was he as set in his ways as Benson described? Of course. But then what explained the thrill he felt watching the sails rise? Or pictured the city, a new city that was his destination. Why did the dread he'd been feeling prior to sailing been replaced with anticipation? Why did the wind on his face make his heart skip as he trilled along merrily to the sailor's whistling tunes? Maybe it was time. Indeed, it was time to stretch his wings in this way. He was not even forty. Not too old to shed the cloistering baggage of peerage for the windswept cloak of wanderer. At least for the three months it would take to bring William home.

"Benson. Have you ever been on a trip like this?" Blake asked.

"No, sir," the valet replied.

“Neither have I. And I have a great desire to enjoy this trip. Even the difficult changes we may be forced to endure. I think we should set our caps to see as much as possible, do as much as possible before we lay for home again.” Blake looked at his servant’s shocked face. “Twill be quite a story to tell to your grandchildren, would it not?”

“I suppose so, sir,” Benson said.

“Come on then, man,” Blake said as he curled a hand around Benson’s neck. Blake pulled him to the small portal of his cabin. “Let the seas take us to explore.”

* * * *

A week later, Benson and Blake departed the ship at the busy New York harbor. There was a massive crush of bodies and the permeating odor of cooked cabbage. He looked back to the ship he’d arrived on and the stately picture it made even with its massive sails wound tight to their holdings. He would miss the smell of salt air and the brass fittings and the polished wood. His heart pounded and he realized it was from excitement. He had sailed the sea and arrived in an unknown land. Blake had Benson see to the unloading of the trunks while he made his way through the mass of humanity to the shipping office.

“My good man. I need to inquire about my horses and carriage. They were shipped on board the McDonald ship, Isabelle. They should have arrived a week ago,” Blake said to the harried clerk.

“The Isabelle ran into a storm at sea. She was damaged and off course. We had word today she docked in South Carolina.”

“South Carolina?” Blake asked.

“Yes, sir. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got much to get done.”

“How do I get word to my groomsmen? Will someone see to getting them here properly?” Blake continued.

“The Isabelle is severely damaged. I imagine they’ll be busy for now. The telegram said they’d arrive here inside the month.”

“But that’s three weeks!” Blake shouted.

The clerk lifted his hands and motioned to the man behind Blake to step forward. Blake was jostled aside into the blinding sun. He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked for Benson. The valet sat atop one of the trunks watching the coming and goings like a green boy.

“We’re in a bit of a mess, Benson,” Blake said as he approached.

The valet looked at Blake, startled, and then hurried to stand. “Why is that, Your Grace?”

“The Isabella was caught in a storm. The carriage and the groomsmen are in some town called South Carolina.”

“Where is that, Your Grace?”

“I confess I haven’t a clue. The shipping agent said it would be three weeks till the boat gets to New

York.” Blake shielded his eyes from the sun.

“What will we do, Your Grace?” Benson asked.

“Let us get a carriage for hire and find a hotel. I admit I’m famished.”

Benson hailed a small carriage. The driver and he talked. The valet turned and walked back to Blake smiling. “I’ll get the trunks, sir. He’ll take us to the finest hotel in town.”

Blake clapped Benson on the back. “There you see, old man. We will solve our problems one thing at a time.”

Benson heaved a trunk on his shoulder and Blake picked up his valise. They turned to the carriage only to see two young men climbing in.

“Hey, there,” Benson shouted. “That carriage is taken.”

Neither driver nor passengers wasted a glance back. Benson went in search of another carriage while Blake sat down on his trunks and surveyed the dock. Sailors, businessmen, families and loose women all merged together. Men hawked wares to travelers and mother’s wiped children’s runny noses. Dogs ran between legs, gowned women alit from ships while tall, hard looking men weaved among them, guns slung low on their hips. He recognized Italian and French and heard his mother English spoken with a wide variety of accents. Blake was fascinated with the scene before him. It was as if he had stepped into a canvas portrait mid-stroke and he wondered what tales each character would tell and what language he would hear their story in. His valet cleared his throat, a sheepish look on his face.

“Well, Benson. Have you secured a carriage?” Blake asked.

“In a manner of speaking, Your Grace.”

“Go on,” Blake said.

“I’ve been having a terrible time getting a driver’s attention. Just as I begin to guide one to where you sit, someone jumps aboard and they’re gone. But a Mr. Delassandro has graciously agreed to help us.”

Blake stood up. “Lead on, my good man.”

Blake and Benson’s six-block trip through the teeming city was of an hour duration. Blake was seated, as befitted his station Benson had assured him, on the bench of the hay wagon between Mr. and Mrs. Delassandro. The short, dark haired man clucked to his mules while his wife tried ineffectually to keep her five children from tying poor Benson to his seat. Six children, actually, Blake thought and smiled at the petite scarfed woman holding an infant. She smiled back as she opened her blouse and pulled out a huge tan breast. The infant sucked and calmed. Blake however did not. He looked everywhere but to his side until he felt the woman shift the child to her shoulder. He glanced to the child, now inches away, as the babe contentedly shoved a fist in his mouth.

Benson had a wild-eyed look as Blake produced a gold coin for the Delassandro’s troubles in front of the Astor Hotel. A doorman loaded their trunks on a dolly while Benson picked hay from his clothes. Blake approached the front desk after insisting to Benson he could handle the task.

“I’ll be needing two rooms, adjoining preferably for a few nights,” Blake said.

“Did you have a reservation, sir?”

Blake smiled. “No.”

“Mr. ah...” the desk clerk said then.

“Blake Sanders. The Duke of Wexford,” Blake said.

“Mr. Wexford...”

“That is my title, young man, not my name.”

“Mr. Sanders?” the young clerk queried.

Blake nodded.

“Mr. Sanders, I have only one room left. With the banking association meeting and Miss Hubley to appear on stage nearly everything in town is booked up,” the clerk said.

“Miss Hubley?” Blake asked.

The clerk leaned forward and smiled. “She is staying here as well. Her shows are sold out. There she comes right now.”

Blake turned to the tittering in the large, domed lobby. A woman in a black and white striped dress above daggered heels stood in the middle of the throng, a smoking stick in her hand. Her hat was nearly three feet across only accentuating the ungodly tight fit of her dress. A thin, furry black stole lay over her arms and she tilted her head becomingly as lights flashed and Blake smelled the aroma of sulfur. A growing crowd was milling about and pushing to get closer. Blake was watching the sway of her hips when he saw Benson caught up in the ever-swelling mob.

“Your Grace,” Benson cried pitifully.

Blake turned to the clerk. “We’ll take that room.”

The desk clerk set the bellboys to his trunks and Blake made his way through the throng. He nearly had his hand on Benson’s elbow when a great oaf of a man in rough clothes, a look of longing in his eye, lurched forward, plunging Benson to within inches of Miss Hubley. The valet straightened to his full five foot and was eye level with a massive set of breasts, a hair’s breadth away from his nose. Blake caught Benson’s arm and dragged him back through the crowd. The man was shaking and clutched Blake’s sleeves.

“Dear God, sir,” Benson said as he clung to Blake’s sleeve.

“I’ve secured us a room, Benson. They’ve already taken our trunks. Let’s get out of this mayhem,” Blake said and guided his valet toward the stairs.

Blake rang for dinner for Benson as the valet wrung his hands. There was but one bed in the small room.

“I’ll ask for extra blankets and sleep on the floor, Your Grace.”

“Eat your dinner and lie down, Benson. I’m going to the dining rooms. We’ll worry about the sleeping arrangements later,” Blake said, surprised at his own words. The man sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed and jumped with a start when a waiter knocked with his tray. Blake worried his valet would never leave the room after the day’s events.

Blake was seated at the one small table still available near the entrance of the dining rooms. A far cry from his reserved private space at his club in London. But it did allow him to see and take in all around in the vast room. Blake watched a short, well-dressed man rise to leave. The man’s companion was tall and large-built, exuding confidence. The tall man’s tie was a black string affair with a large silver medallion holding it closed at his neck. He placed a black hat, not unlike the one Gertrude had worn at the Morgan’s country estate, on his head. As they passed Blake’s table, he heard the short man remark to the other, “You already own the largest spread in Montana. With our help you’ll be its first governor.”

The wealthy and powerful mingled in this room. No defining lines as to style. A political position such as governor to a territory apparently in the grasp of a man who wore a bit of string around his neck.

Blake watched the maitre d’ fill the table as quickly as the linen was replaced. Blake had ordered the house specialty on the waiter’s recommendation. He was enjoying a rare steak, duchess potatoes and stewed tomatoes when quiet humming and nods from the rest of the patrons to some activity at the door drew his attention.

“I’m terribly sorry, Miss Hubley. Had I known you were dining with us this evening, I would have....” the maitre d’ said miserably.

“I had no idea I’d be dining now. Don’t concern yourself. I’ll have supper in my suite.”

Miss Hubley wore a burgundy velvet dress that reminded Blake of a wine decanter she’d been poured into. Curvaceous and brimming to overflow. Not a man in the dining room was paying attention to anything but this sleek woman. Blake rose.

“I’ll be finishing soon. Miss Hubley can take my table,” Blake offered.

The stunning brunette turned her head Blake’s way. “An Englishman. No one can fault your manners or that intriguing accent of yours. But I couldn’t interrupt, sir. Thank you.”

Blake summoned the charm that many a conquest had taught him. “But I insist. Please join me,” Blake said with a sweep of his arm.

Miss Hubley tilted her head and smiled. She turned to her entourage and spoke. Blake assisted her into the seat across from him and waiters hurried to do her bidding.

“Thank you ... ah,” Miss Hubley inquired.

“Blake Sanders, madam. The Duke of Wexford at your service.”

Miss Hubley pursed her lips coquettishly. “I imagine there are many women in England at your service, Mr. Sanders. Women there, I’m sure, scurry to any request you might have.”

“Hardly. But I’m sure men in the States, or any you meet I dare say, would be thrilled to fulfill yours,” Blake said with a practiced grin.

She laughed softly and then raised penciled brows. "But none I'd care to see more than once."

Blake smiled. "That explains the 'Miss' I suppose."

Miss Hubley nodded in response as her dinner was served.

"No husband then to handle your business affairs?" Blake asked.

"I've no need of a husband to handle my business affairs. I employ some of the best attorneys to explain the finer nuances of contracts but I've built my own empire and have no intentions of turning its direction over to a man," Miss Hubley answered.

The woman seated across from Blake was breathtaking. Oddly, he felt no need to figure a way into her bed. But she was another American curiosity, so like Gertrude and he was interested all the same.

"Do all American women feel as you?" Blake asked.

"I'm very lucky. Financially I've no need of a man. Not all American women are so fortunate. But if my mother and sisters are any testament, we all have a stubborn streak a mile wide," Miss Hubley said. "What brings you to the States, Mr. Sanders? A stubborn American woman?"

Blake's face colored. "Hardly, Miss Hubley. Proper English gentleman don't chase woman across an ocean. My son, William, though, decided to do some exploring without my permission and stowed away on a ship bound for here."

Miss Hubley laughed aloud. "I like the boy already. Do you have any idea where to look for him?"

"Yes. On a ranch near Chicago," Blake replied.

"How did you know where he went? Did he leave a note? You must be terribly worried."

Blake sipped his coffee and pushed his chair back to cross his legs. "William boarded the ship my neighbor's houseguest was sailing on. They are well acquainted and I'm sure William has been well cared for."

Miss Hubley looked up from her wine she was sipping. "What is her name?"

"Whose name?" Blake asked.

"The house guest. It is a woman, isn't it? Men in my experience rarely blush unless a woman is involved," Miss Hubley said and met his eye, unwavering.

Blake looked at his hand holding the delicate china of the cup. "Miss Finch. Miss Gertrude Finch."

Was he that clear even to a stranger? Were his thoughts surrounding Gertrude so obvious? He had been thinking of her. On the way across the ocean. At the dock where he had first seen her beloved home. While shaving. While eating. While riding with the Delassandro's. Nearly every waking minute. Could this be why he had no interest in bedding the stunning woman across from him? Not that he hadn't taken a subtle but thorough perusal of the magnificent body at his table. He had. But the breasts, tiny waist and lush mouth just feet away did not elicit the same response as the ever-present picture of Gert that swam

through his head.

Suddenly he felt the need to exit the room. Allow his mind to concentrate on the night of he and Gertrude's love making. Away from Miss Hubley and her insightful questions. Away from this gilded dining room that did not hold Gertrude

"Please excuse me, Miss Hubley. Enjoy your dinner," Blake said as he stood.

She nodded her thanks and touched his hand as he walked by.

"Miss Finch must be quite the woman to make a proper English lord leave his home and pursue her across an ocean," Miss Hubley said.

Blake hurried from the dining room and the hotel as well. He stood under the canvas canopy, hands in his pockets. He was, by God, on this trip to rescue William. But if he were honest with himself, he would admit the sight of Gertrude's face was the reason he'd not sent McDonald or Anthony's man. There was a place, deep within himself twisting and contorting for want of the sight of her. Like a man who craves drink or snuff or even opium, hapless and helpless till the glass is refilled. Blake imagined her laughing and shouting and with tears pouring from her face as he'd seen at their parting. No vision, regardless of the pain it invoked, dimmed the ever present longing to see her in the flesh. To let her merriment and arguments surround him. There would be no peace for him he supposed until she stood within his grasp. Till he smelled the mist of lemon that surrounded her.

But would the mere sight of her be enough? Blake shook his head and mumbled to himself. *It would never be enough.* It would be the supreme torture in actuality. Like a starving man staring at a loaf of bread through a window, its aroma seeping past him. Living in a self-induced prison able to see and not touch or taste. Blake slunk back through the lobby and up the staircase to his room. He would learn to live without her. He must.

Chapter Twelve

Nothing in Gert's memory compared to the vision, now forcing tears to her eyes, of home. The ranch. She let herself view each detail without hurry. Men milling about. The sound of Cookie's clang on the metal calling them to their meal. The neighing and pawing of the horses in their corral. William's face was squeezed next to hers, both looking out the small window. This last leg of their journey had seemed never ending. Gert was longing for home and William had been curious and impatient to arrive. Uncle Fred hobbled onto the porch, a hand shading his eyes pointing at the approaching stagecoach.

Gert nearly threw herself out the door and ran to the comfort of Uncle Fred's arms.

"There, there, Missy. No crying to see this worthless uncle of yours," Fred Billings said as he wrapped his arms around his niece.

Gert smiled and her lip trembled. Uncle Fred's clear blue eyes were misted as well.

“I missed you something fierce, too. Now come on in outa the sun. Pokey’ll see to your bag and all. Cookie just put dinner on the table. Come on. The boys are near dying to hear stories,” Uncle Fred said as he turned his head to a cowboy and nodded at her bags, now lying behind the stagecoach. Fred spotted the next Duke of Wexford. “Who’s that skinny drink of moonshine?”

William stood at the bottom of the porch steps. “William Sanders, sir. But Will will do fine.”

Eight men, all dear to Gert in their dirt and mud, stared at William. Eight confused expressions on their faces. Clem leaned forward as if narrowing the distance would make William’s words more distinct.

“Sure talks funny,” Clem said. A spark of recognition lit his face. “This here boy’s from England.”

“Yes, he is. He’ll be staying with us awhile,” Gert said. “Let us wash our hands and we’ll tell you the whole thing over dinner.”

Gert led William into the house and her shoulders dropped as if the weight of her problems had suddenly lifted. The parlor held the same flowered sofa and chair Gert and Aunt Mavis had bought years ago. The mantel still held the blue pitcher and Mavis’s precious candlesticks. The staircase still glowed with layers of beeswax polish and the huge kitchen’s fragrant smells drew her. Seemed like a lifetime since she’d been here. But yet as though she had never left. It was good to be home.

* * * *

Cookie squeezed William between Clyde, Clem’s brother, and Slim. Gert sat at the head of the table with Uncle Fred at the other end. Uncle Fred said the blessing and the procession of bowls and platters made their way from hand to hand. Plates, piled high, now sat in front of each man. Cookie passed hot biscuits from behind and sat down. The meal was eaten in silence. These men, Gert knew, were hungry. Conversation was unexpected. Food, the filling of empty bellies, was the main concern. Gert picked at her meal and pushed food around on her plate. Cookie’s meals were always tempting but combined with the four-hour ride in a stagecoach and the eventual need to confess to Uncle Fred, left her with no appetite.

“Sumpun amatter, missy?” Cookie asked Gert.

“No, it’s delicious. But that ride in the stagecoach seems to have upset my stomach,” Gert replied.

“Hell, I seen you ride a bucking bronco for hours and you ate your fill then,” Slim said.

The men at the table laughed and hee-hawed. Gert shrugged her shoulders and forced down a biscuit. William was staring at her. She told them then of her trip across the ocean. Of the fine horses she had ridden, and her new wardrobe. Of the balls and formal dinners and of her hosts’ best friend and his family. And of how William had come to eat at their table. They sat back and stared at William when they realized he was the son of a duke and set to inherit a great estate.

“Don’t want nothin’ to do with them grand houses and such, boy. Mebbe your Pa will let me be his son,” Pokey said, laughing.

“No, sir. I love my home. But my father,” William threw Gert a glance, “my father would have never let me travel this far I’m sure.”

“Set in his ways, huh?” Uncle Fred said.

“Whad yer Ma goin’ asay?” Cookie asked. “I’ll be betting her and yer Pa’s havin’ a pickle of a fight about now.”

William looked at his plate. “My mother and father don’t reside together.”

“That will have no bearing on how worried your mother or father are,” Gert said and eyed William over her coffee cup.

Slim slapped William on the back. “So ya be wantin’ to break some broncos. Bell rings at four-o’clock. I’ll find ya a job, I spect.”

William’s eyes glowed. “Thank you, sir.”

Uncle Fred looked up. “Slim here’s the foreman. If you want to see the workins’ of a real honest to goodness ranch, he’s your man. We don’t abide slackers. Do your job, mind yer own business, and I’ll be guessing,” Uncle Fred continued with a smile, “you’ll have the time of yer life.”

Gert watched William. He could barely sit still. But she was sure he was as tired as she. “I’ll make up one of the beds upstairs for you, William.” His face fell.

“I stayed with the sailor’s below deck on the ship, Miss Finch.” He turned pleading eyes to Slim and Uncle Fred.

“We got a spare bunk, Gert. Let the boy stay with us,” Slim said.

Gert tilted her head. She knew what sort of talk went on in the bunkhouse. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Uncle Fred stared at her from across the table. “Ah, hell, Gert. He’d be missing half the fun. You know that. Wouldn’t be the first youngin’ guided into manhood from there.”

The men snickered. William pleaded, “Please, Miss Finch.”

“Your father would die if he heard you’d been bunking with this crew,” Gert said.

Uncle Fred narrowed his eyes. “England make you better than us, Missy?”

“No, no,” Gert said. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“What it sounded like,” Clem added.

“William’s been raised differently. Very formal,” Gert said, now embarrassed.

“Boy’s a boy, Gert,” Pokey said.

Gert tapped the table, refusing to imagine Blake’s reaction to his son’s companions. But his son’s eyes now fairly begging to stay with the hands reminded her of his father. “Alright. But none of your crazy stories meant to scare a boy half to death. And not a word about the Golden Slipper.”

The men nodded solemnly except for a few sly smirks.

“I can take care of myself, Miss Finch,” William replied obviously wondering what he’d be missing.

“You’re a young man, William. And still need guidance. For now I’ll be the one deciding of what nature,” Gert said.

William blew a breath. “I got you here just fine, Miss Finch. Even with you sick half the....” William trailed off and dropped his shoulders.

Eight heads snapped Gert’s way.

Uncle Fred stared hard at her even as he spoke to William and the hands. “Mind your manners with Gert, Will. And you boys keep the stories clean.”

“Feelin’ poorly, Miss Gert?” Luke Matson asked.

Luke Matson was a tall, rangy cowboy who said little. He was blond and suntanned and one of Uncle Fred’s best hands. Gert had always felt he was interested in her. She had given him no encouragement thus far. Luke was kind, handsome and a hard worker but Gert had never thought much of men in that vein till lately.

“I think all the traveling wore me down,” Gert said.

Luke nodded and sipped his coffee. The others stared at her quizzically. Cookie began to clear dishes and the men began to file out of the kitchen. They nodded and told her they were glad she was home and had William firmly entrenched among them. She was left alone at the table with Uncle Fred.

“I think I’ll put my things away,” Gert said as she pushed back her chair.

“Pokey already carried ‘em up,” Uncle Fred said.

Gert excused herself and went upstairs. She unpacked and sat on the edge of the bed. Thinking of how she would tell Uncle Fred. He was the closest thing she’d ever had to a father. She knew he already suspected something. He wouldn’t push her but Gert knew it best to be told sooner rather than later. Where was the resolve she’d carried as a shield all these years? She was never one to fret. Always solving. Women’s plights. Hand’s disputes. Even her cousin’s worry about crossing the ocean. Gert had said without hesitation that day that she would escort the young girl. Never been one to sit and watch and wait and worry. And here now, she sat twisting her quilt in her hands.

* * * *

Uncle Fred sat in the parlor, sipping whiskey and reading a newspaper Gert was sure was a week old. He didn’t hear her come in. The craggy, weather-beaten face was a balm to her soul. Fred Billings had built a fine horse ranch with his own two hands and the loving help of his wife Mavis. Skinny as a rail regardless of how much he ate, with a huge handle bar, gray mustache, completely covering his mouth. His hair was thinning, Gert noticed. She realized she rarely saw him without a hat. His opinion of her, she supposed, mattered more than anyone else’s. He looked up at her and smiled, lay down the paper and curled his hand to her to sit down. Fred watched her settle into the chair and sat in silence.

“Uncle Fred. There’s something I have to discuss with you,” Gert said and swallowed.

“I kinda figured.”

Her uncle would not prompt or push. Just settle himself to wait until she gathered the courage to talk. Gert wrung her hands. “I don’t know where to begin,” Gert said.

“The beginning, I spect.”

Gert nodded and wobbled a smile. She told a long, rambling story about Anthony and Elizabeth and the Sanders family. “And so I really enjoyed my time spent with them,” Gert concluded.

Fred nodded. “Uh huh.”

“The fact of the matter....” Gert trailed off. She sat silently and stared out the window. The fact of the matter was she carried a child whose father she loved and would probably never see again. She did love Blake. An ocean apart and further still in ideas and upbringing. It was the only explanation for the vast emptiness she felt. Her home and family had filled a longing in her, yes, but had left her heart void. Was the only reasonable explanation for the odd pining she felt. And for the vision of Blake’s face that plagued her mind from morning till night. That vision, ever etched in her brain of Blake above her in the misty moonlight. Gert’s fingers touched her stomach. The night they conceived this child.

“Why ya feeling poorly, Missy? I haven’t known you to be sick a day in your life,” Uncle Fred asked softly.

Gert jumped from her thoughts to the worried face of her uncle. Her eyes filled with tears. “I’m pregnant.” Uncle Fred’s bushy brows lifted and one finger tapped a beat on his lips. “Uncle Fred,” Gert wailed and dissolved into tears.

Fred sat down beside her and held her. “Now, now, Missy. Uncle Fred won’t let anything bad happen.” Gert nodded on his shoulder. “I’m a guessing you didn’t get yourself hitched over in England.” Fred lifted her shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. “Me and the boys will take care of you and the baby, Gert. Don’t you worry about nothing.”

Gert sobbed harder now. “I know, Uncle Fred. But ... but I’m so well,” Gert swallowed, “ashamed.”

Fred picked up Gert’s hand and held it tightly in his. “You think you’re the first girl ever had these troubles?”

“That’s the problem. I’m no girl. I should have known better,” Gert said.

“The daddy’s the one should a known better,” Fred said. “Who is he?”

Gert shook her head slowly. “I won’t say.”

“No good son of a bitch. I’d like to kill him with my bare hands,” Fred hissed. “Or turn him over to White Cloud. He’s got ways of making the hardest men beg for their lives.”

“This is why I can’t tell you. I don’t want anyone hurt.”

“Why don’t you let me decide, Gert?” Uncle Fred said and stood to run his hands through his hair. “He don’t deserve your shielding him.”

“He asked me to marry him,” Gert whispered.

Fred spun around. “Why didn’t ya?”

Gert’s lip trembled wildly. “He doesn’t love me, Uncle Fred.”

“Must be stupid. Not to love a beautiful, wonderful girl like you.” Fred lifted Gert’s chin with his finger. “And you love him something awful?”

Gert shrugged.

“Dang fool.”

Gert composed herself and straightened in her seat. “What will we tell the hands?”

“Don’t spose there’s much use telling them anything but the truth. Not a man here, jack won’t want to haul off and kill the bastard,” Fred replied.

“I know,” Gert said.

“Ya know, Missy, Luke Matson would marry you in a heartbeat. Boy’s not said a word since you left. Knowing him like I do, he’d take that baby of yours like it was his.”

“But I don’t love him, Uncle Fred,” Gert whispered.

“I know but it’d be a mite easier for you with a husband. If ya married him, I’d give him the ranch to run when I died. You’d always have a home, missy,” Fred said.

Gert shrugged. “I don’t know what to think, Uncle Fred.”

“Well, nothin’ has to be done right now. You take your time. Couple a weeks home may set ya ta thinking differently.”

Gert stayed in bed all of the next morning. She felt terrible. Cookie and Uncle Fred brought her soup and fussed. By mid-afternoon she felt better and dressed and walked down to the corral. William was leaning idly on the fence watching the men break horses in a pair of denims and a plaid shirt. She knew immediately the hands knew her troubles. They brought a bench round and insisted she sit in the shade of the tree. Cookie made lemonade and carried it to her. Clem brought a log for her to rest her legs on. They all, every one looked at her and dropped their eyes as they spoke while telling her how pretty she looked and glad they were to have her home. She could only nod for fear of crying.

Luke Matson dropped to one knee beside her. “If you need anything, Miss Gert. Anything at all. Just ask.”

The tall cowboy left her then in her misery.

* * * *

Later in the day, Uncle Fred put a hand on William’s shoulder. “Ya must be plum tuckered out. Ya did fine today, Will.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The two were silent while William stowed away tack in the cool barn.

“I spect you know why Gert is feeling poorly?” Uncle Fred asked.

William dropped his head. “Yes, I do, sir.”

“I’m thinking I owe you a debt of gratitude for getting my Gert home. Lotta responsibility for a boy as young as you,” Uncle Fred said as he stuck a blade of straw between his teeth.

“I’d do anything for Miss Finch. She need do no more than ask,” William said softly.

“She has that effect on most men folk.” Fred looked at William from the corner of his eye. “‘Cepting a course the one who got her in this fix in the first place.”

William’s face was a mask of confusion and worry. “I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Wouldn’t know or won’t say?” Uncle Fred said.

William stuttered and mumbled. Finally he looked Fred in the face. “I don’t know anything about it.”

“Uh huh.” Fred watched Will hurry away.

* * * *

Blake had decided to not wait a month for the coach. Was nearly June already and

his carriage may not arrive in New York until July. The morning after his dinner with Miss Hubley he hailed a coach to take him to Grand Central Station to purchase train tickets. During the days before their departure, Blake wandered New York. The vast financial district and the shops selling everything from saddles to gowns. Theatres and eateries amidst a mass of humanity. In that respect it was like London. People everywhere. But Blake admitted this was different. A different feeling or energy as if at any given moment something miraculous may happen. Although some dressed fashionably and there was a mass of poor, Blake would not venture a guess who would serve him his evening meal at the Ritz or who would sit at the table beside him.

Blake roamed the streets of New York, staring into the faces of the strangers he passed. This mass of descendants from murderers and the insane had somehow congealed with immigrants, creating a new breed on this earth. One might see failures; Blake was sure, as he peered down a street with laundry hanging from tiers of balconies. But disappointments did not seem to stop them. No twist of fate seemed to tamper the enthusiasm he felt all around him. Bobbing heads and shouts to children and men boldly pinching blushing young girls. This crush of people, some descended from royalty, some running shy of the law, were living and hoping and setting their own destiny. Something he would never do.

Blake had heard the wilds of this land were as beautiful and plentiful as any on the earth. He wanted to see it. With his eyes see the inspiration and promise it certainly took to leave a life behind to make a new one all of their own. He envied them. These wanderers and ranchers and clerks. His life, his home in London was steady from centuries of routine. Blake lived in comfort, wanting for naught. Money, prestige, a grand table, fashionable clothes were at his disposal and would be guarded for his children

and their heirs. But what the throng surrounding him had, Blake decided that he never would, was that success or failure lay within their own will.

Gertrude was never far from his thoughts and seeing this city made him miss her more. She was American to the core. Like so many here, she was independent and forthright. But cloaked with a softness that drifted to those lacking. No wonder she viewed his servants and his children with the same eye. To her they were infinitely equal. Each capable of great heights and withering failures, regardless of the sphere from which they'd been born.

Benson, however, had refused to enter the dining rooms at the hotel. His station in Blake's household would not allow it, he had said. The valet acquiesced finally to eat breakfast with Blake on the morning they were to depart New York City. Benson sat nervously and adjusted his jacket.

"Eat your eggs, Benson. Will be a long train ride," Blake said. He pulled a map from his jacket. "Let me show you where we're going."

Benson followed Blake's finger to the city of Philadelphia. "And where is this Chicago, sir? Where we'll find William."

Benson's eyes widened as he trailed Blake's finger along the creased paper.

"Now don't worry, Benson. We'll be fine. Two grown men we are, certainly capable of making this trip," Blake said.

"I fear, sir, I have nothing to recommend for this venture. I've spent my life making sure your cravat is tied correctly and there is no lint on your pants. I'll be of no use," Benson added.

Blake quoted a dapper man he'd heard on the streets that day. "Hells bells, Benson. You have as fine a taste as any gentleman with impeccable manners as well. Who's to say you aren't just as savvy or adventuresome as any man in this room?"

Benson looked around the now crowded dining room. He sat straighter. He held his head high. "That man by the window, sir." Benson nodded and Blake followed. "His jacket is without question the most garish spectacle I've ever beheld."

"There's the spirit, old chap. We're British, by God. Fought off Romans and Turks. We can make our way to Chicago. William did at fourteen," Blake said bravely. He refused to think about his deepest fears. That William and Gert had been set upon by natives or henchmen. That he may never see them again.

"I've sent word to the groomsmen to stay in South Carolina and board the next boat back home. I've bought you a money belt. I have one as well." Blake laid a stack of crisp bills and coins on the table.

Benson stared. "I've no need of money, sir. I'll be with you."

"Yes, of course, you'll be with me. But what if by chance we were separated. I'll not countenance you here with no resources," Blake said.

Benson's shoulders dropped and he deftly covered the bills with his hands.

"I've split the money I deemed necessary for this trip, so that if one pouch were lost or stolen we'd have

the other's share to rely on," Blake said.

Benson sat up straight. "Quite clever of you, sir."

* * * *

The two-day train ride from New York to Philadelphia was dreadful. There were no first class accommodations. Blake and Benson sat rigidly while babes wailed and children ran in the aisle. The noise was deafening combined with the roar of the train. The dust and dirt flew in the open windows on great gusts of wind. A fight broke out on the crowded train till a tall mustached man in a long tan coat, physically pulled the two men apart. He motioned to Blake to hold one man while a young man in a vest and a flat cap held the other. The marshal, the tall man had declared himself, pulled the warring men's head inches from each other. He growled in their ears. When the lawman let the men loose they shrugged and blustered but seated themselves a train car apart.

"Well done, Your Grace," Benson said.

"I hardly had anything to do with it, Benson. The constable, the one in the long coat stopped it," Blake said as he straightened his jacket.

Benson leaned forward to stare around heads seated beyond him. "Although the man's dress is quite unusual, I find it correct all the same. The jaunty hat, sir. The long coat and vest. Yes, even though it's unusual I find it remarkably clever."

Benson was absorbed most of the trip in what everyone was wearing. He commented on the lack of bustles and the drab dresses the women wore. They were a sturdy bunch all in all, Benson mentioned earlier, and he imagined their clothes were appropriate for what ever they did.

Blake was less captivated by what his fellow riders wore than the snippets of conversation he was able to pick up. 'Going to Cousin Erudis farm.' 'How about them stage coach bandits?' 'Got me two hundred acres in Iowa.' 'My brother's panning for gold in Alaska.' Listening occupied his time while trying to keep bugs from flying up his nose. His greatest disappointment was that the train traveled far too fast to really see anything of the countryside. Blake stared at his map. Pennsylvania.

Benson and Blake pulled in to the Philadelphia station, tired, sore, and dirty. As the door opened the two men nearly threw themselves out. A ragged young boy offered to see to their trunks. Blake went into the sunlight to find a carriage to the nearest hotel and a bath. A short time later, Benson hailed him, waving wildly through the crowd and dragging a uniformed man along.

"Your Grace, we've been robbed!" Benson shouted.

"What?" Blake replied, wide-eyed.

The policeman nodded grimly. "Young punks prey on new arrivals. You're welcome to fill out a complaint at the station but I'd be guessing your things and your trunks have already been sold."

"Our clothes," Benson said.

"We'll buy new," Blake replied.

"Oh dear, sir. Your tailor's in London."

Blake nodded to the departing officer. "I'm sure someone in this city knows how to make a shirt."

"Yes, Your Grace," Benson said, "I suppose they do. But I'll never find fabric here as fine."

Blake patted the man's back and guided him to the coach, assuring him he would find something suitable. The coachman took them to a hotel, not as elegant as the Savoy, but in the middle of many busy shops. Without luggage, Blake bathed with Benson's help and pulled on his travel worn clothes. Blake waited in the smoking room while Benson bathed and the two of them set out on the street.

"Do you ride, Benson?" Blake asked.

"Sir?"

"Horses, Benson. Do you ride?"

"A bit when I was young, Your Grace. I was the all-about-boy when your father was duke. Sometimes I helped the groomsmen," Benson said.

"I've been thinking I hate to embark on another train," Blake said as he looked up and down the busy street.

"I quite agree, sir. I feared we'd never arrive," Benson said.

"What do say then, I purchase horses and we make the rest of the trip on horseback?" Blake said. The valet's look of utter despair and fear was comical. "Never mind, Benson. I'll see to train tickets tomorrow."

Blake turned to the shops and Benson hurried to catch up. "Whatever you think is best, Your Grace," Benson said.

Blake stood hands on his hips on the busy sidewalk. "It's just that I imagine this will be my only trip here and on the train I see little of the countryside."

Benson cocked his head and looked at his master from under his brows. "Would be quite the story for our grandchildren, Your Grace." Sanders stared at him. "The Duke of Wexford and his valet traveling on horseback through the wilderness, sir." Benson smiled. "We're on an adventure, are we not?"

Blake rubbed his hands together. "Precisely, Benson. And I admit, one of the few skills I'm sure of is riding."

"And a fine seat you keep. Indeed, sir."

Blake found a men's shop with clothing hanging in the gold edged window. He and Benson entered and found it not unlike what they were accustomed to in London. In fact better. Ready-made clothes hung on racks and fine lawn shirts lay in neat piles. It would be only a matter of finding the closest size and allowing the short man sporting a measuring cloth around his neck to make adjustments. Blake tried to convince Benson to choose what he needed. The valet would have none of it. Bowing gracefully and assuring Blake he would find a less decorous establishment for his own clothes. Blake harrumphed and imagined Benson meant expensive, not decorous. The valet guarded the money around his waist like a sentry.

Blake was in his hotel stretched out on the bed when he heard rattling from the adjoining room. He knocked.

“Benson. Whatever took you so long?” Blake said as Benson opened the door. A stack of brown paper wrapped packages lay on the bed. “I’d like to go purchase some mounts before sunset.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Terribly sorry. I’ll be changed in a thrice.”

To Blake’s shock the valet slammed the door in his face in a hurry. Blake’s new clothes arrived and he changed while waiting for Benson. The black cutaway coat would be perfect for riding, Blake thought. He struggled to tie his red silk tie in a four in hand as the tailor had shown him. No cravat. The matching pants were rich fabric and heavy enough to take days in a saddle.

The man who emerged from his valet’s room was unlike any Blake had ever seen. Black boots with lethal pointy toes and heels covered his feet. Navy blue pants met a wildly plaid shirt with a black leather vest atop it. On Benson’s head, Blake was sure he recognized him now; the valet wore a tall white hat with a large crown. A white stovepipe without the flat top. A shoestring tie hung around his neck. Blake bit his cheeks.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Your Grace. Had a terrible time with these pants. Levi’s they’re called.”

“Set for riding, are we, Benson?” Blake asked with a wry smile.

“Yes, Your Grace. The man at Woolworth’s assured me this is just the thing for a trip of this nature.”

“As I’ve said before, you have an uncanny eye for fashion,” Blake added.

* * * *

Gert and William sat on the stonewall fencing in a small garden in the back of the house. The stars shone brightly, the air was cool and humid and Gert heard the low hum of crickets and the howl of a distant animal. Summer had come in with a heavy hand mid June.

“Who do you think your father will send for you, William?” Gert asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe his man of business from London.”

“Could be soon. It’s been six weeks since we got here.” She felt William’s shrug. “Seems like you’ve been enjoying yourself here.”

“I have been having a grand time,” William said quietly.

“But?”

“I miss home, Miss Finch. I miss my mother and sister and brother.”

“I would have been surprised if you didn’t, William. For all the formality, I think your family is very close,” Gert said. “I’m sure they miss you as well. All of them.”

They sat in companionable silence and Gert was nearly ready to get her weary bones in bed when

William spoke.

“I don’t know what to make of things, Miss Finch.”

Gert settled back on the cold stone. “What do you mean, William?”

“Father had mistresses, all of my friends’ fathers have mistresses. But now I wonder.” William paused. “Any of those women could have been Melinda. I hate to think about that. But they may not have been from good families, I suppose. Maybe don’t know any better or like what they do.” William was silent sorting out his thoughts. “And then there’s you, Miss Finch. You do come from a fine family. Mr. Billings and all the hands are honorable men.”

Gert sighed. “Ah, William. I don’t know how to explain all of this to you. Many of those women, mistresses, have no other way to support themselves. Some I imagine want to do it. Although I find it hard to understand. But yet there are circumstances beyond the control of women that drive them to do things they may not want. I pray Melinda would never face those decisions. And although I may be drawing a fine line, I would never, even in my current predicament call myself a mistress.”

“It’s father’s fault. I know that,” William said.

Gert stared up at the stars. “I can not find it in myself to find fault with what happened, William. I may have been weak but not guilty.”

“What do you mean weak, Miss Finch? You are a very strong person. You stood up to father on many occasions. And all the men here think you are generous and kind,” William said. “Those are not weaknesses, are they?”

“I’ve been stewing over all of this since I came home, William. And the only explanation I can give is that there is a pull beyond what I understand between your father and I. Something past my ability to sort out and name. But for all that, I won’t deny its existence. Unfortunately, he has his own obligations and I for the most part can’t bear to be in the same room with him.”

“What does father say?” William asked.

“He asked me to marry him, William. Your father was honorable to the end. But he doesn’t love me and I could not bear ending up like well, like....” Gert trailed away.

“Like my mother,” William finished.

Gert nodded in the darkness. “Nor could I give up my home here.”

“And father would never leave England.”

“So, all in all, I will raise a child, maybe even marry Luke Matson.”

“I heard the men talking. He wants to marry you, I think,” William said.

“I’ve made no decision just yet.”

William rose to leave and turned to Gert. “I’ll escort you to the house, Miss Finch.”

Gert smiled. "Thank you. I'll be fine."

Although she would miss William desperately, one part of her could hardly wait till he left. He reminded her so much of his father. His voice, although cracking on occasion was settling in to a baritone so like Blake. His manners were fine and he was well liked by the men. She knew the hands had taken William to the Golden Slipper. She heard their whispers and knew they were in no need of supplies as Slim had said. So William had of course seen the dancing girls and a fight. Sipped a sarsaparilla while Clem lost a week's wages at a poker table. Gert purposefully rang the bell at daybreak, through the window of the bunkhouse the next morning. She remained deaf to their moans.

Gert received a letter from Esmerelda Bunchley, one of her traveling companions for the cause. The woman wondered when and where she would rejoin her sisters. They needed her voice. Needed her savvy. The cause would benefit greatly by Gert's quick return.

Gert blew a wry breath, as she sat in the parlor that morning and read the letter. They would not need her ballooning stomach to teach young woman independence. Gert calculated she was almost three months gone and her dresses didn't fit any longer. Her feet swelled and ached in the humid summer air. She alternately cried and screamed and knew she was driving Uncle Fred and the rest near crazy. But then Clem and Clyde built a cradle and Cookie's sister sent a crate of infant's clothes. And William, God bless him, stayed silent but insisted she hold his arm on the walk from the porch to the corral.

Gert railed against God at her troubles for one brief shining moment of joy. Then fell to her knees and thanked the same God for the wisps of movement in her belly. She sat back, pen in hand from writing Esmerelda, to let her mind conjure up the face of Blake Sanders. Her son or daughter would be the child of a titled family and the most rigid, unbending man in that kingdom. Would he be broad shouldered like William or a lovely girl like Melinda? They would be neither. This child would grow up on a ranch in the States and learn to love this raw land. She would not imagine and plan a life as Blake had done, but allow this child the freedom to choose. Gert would stand at the dock with this nameless faceless child when he or she was eighteen. She would pack him off on a ship to England to find his or her other family. And Gert would cry and be alone till she died.

Gert wrote Esmerelda that she would continue writing some of their literature and speeches as she had done before her travels to England. But she would no longer be able to travel. Physically, she would be unable to do it, but she also found her heart was not in it. Her own problems and fears seemed to overshadow any other concerns she might feel. Raising this child alone would be enough. She sanded the letter, addressed it and propped it against the oil lamp.

Gert still considered Luke Matson. She would need do no more than tell Uncle Fred and Luke would take her hand. But her heart was not ready. One thing at time, Gert, she said to herself. Have this child, start contributing to the ranch and to the cause again and maybe, just maybe she would be ready to consider marrying Luke Matson. Maybe not.

Chapter Thirteen

Blake followed his map as they left Philadelphia but soon found himself wandering through hills to see the

view from the other side. Adjusting to a western saddle was more difficult than Blake had imagined. After two nights spent under a tree, Blake knew they'd made the trip unprepared. His box of matches from the hotel had run out without ever having a proper fire. Although Benson had managed to set a small dead tree aflame. The valet beat it out with Blake's new coat. Blake's shirt was dirty and he had only one more in that unique leather contraption that sat across the rump of his horse. The July sun beat down on them as they rode and his face was burnt and itched as much as it hurt. What he would have done for a good English fog. Their dinner that night had consisted of chocolate bars Benson had purchased. And water from a canteen. That had run dry when Benson tried to wash Blake's shirt. He had stood bare-chested and starved while Benson had scrubbed his white lawn shirt with pilfered hotel soap and the last of their water.

Benson's clothing purchases seemed more suited. His face was still white as the cliffs of Dover under his hat and his unsightly, yellow gloves kept his hands unmarked. The blisters on Blake's hands were breaking and filled with dirt. The wool pants, Blake had admired so when he first wore them were hot, itchy and giving him a rash of unheralded proportions. He was without question more physically miserable than he'd ever been in his life. But each ache from his rump or rub on the tender skin of his hands and bottom was reduced to a nuisance as he viewed a vista from the top of mountain. Or a vast valley blooming with wildflowers as deer scampered by. The sky's brilliant blue in the morning or deep reds and oranges at twilight made Blake forget his discomfort. The air was clean and warm in the morning, sultry by mid-day and held no stale stench of smoke or packed bodies. He refused to give into the wish that loomed in his heart at the crest of each new vision this land held. The fervent wish that Gertrude were beside him.

A farm came into view and Blake praised God above. They were out of all but tealeaves. A man pushing a plow behind oxen stood straight as they came into view. The man tipped back his hat and raised a shotgun level with Blake's chest.

Blake raised his hands. "No need for that, sir. My companion and I need to buy supplies. I was wondering how close we are to a town called Somerset and if you would be so kind as to allow us water."

"Where you from?" the farmer asked.

"London," Benson replied regally. He turned to Blake. "Somerset, you say, Your Grace. I have family in Somerset."

Blake shook his head. "Not the same. But I've found many towns on this map with names of English villages or Lords."

"Really, Your Grace. Quite the thing." Benson smiled and sat up straighter. "These folk must be more British than we thought. Notwithstanding their odd manner of dress."

"I find it interesting as well, Benson." Blake replied as he unfolded the map. The sound of a voice clearing brought Blake's head around. "Terribly sorry, chap. We've been lost in our own conversation. Do you have a well of sorts, that we might have a drink?"

The farmer looked from the one to the other and shook his head. "There's a creek right beyond them trees where we fetch our water." He looked up at the two men and unhitched himself from his harness. "Come on. I'll show you. Nearing time for the noonday meal."

Benson slapped his lips and Blake's stomach growled. They followed the man walking.

The farmer stopped them as they began across the field. "If'n ya don't mind, I just plowed this for fall crops. Walk your horses between the rows."

Blake looked around at the freshly turned soil. "Right. Yes, of course. We'll follow this row and meet you there." The farmer nodded, shook his head and lifted a booted foot over plowed ground.

Benson and Blake trotted along at a straight line and turned their mounts to the man disappearing through a line of trees. They emerged to a sparkling creek, running crisp over rocks. Blake heard birds chirping and saw the sun glinting off of a damp moss covered ledge. It was a spectacular sight. No one had forced this flow of water to one field or another. The water was so clear; Blake could see fish swimming in schools. He lifted his head and saw the headwater creeping between the hills, bumping and flowing to where he stood and beyond. He realized then they had been riding parallel to the creek for most of the morning. Blake bent to scoop water with his hand.

"Not there, fella. The cows drink there and leave their waste. Up here." The farmer motioned for them to join him and Blake turned to Benson as the valet lifted his pointy boot from a steaming pile.

They let the horses drink their fill and walked to the man now scooping water into a wooden bucket. "Go on. Get your drink here. I'm filling a bucket for us to wash in before Nell puts the food on the table."

Benson lifted his brows to Blake wondering as he was whether or not they'd receive an invitation to dine. "How many miles do you imagine lies between us and Somerset?" Blake asked.

"If you two were aiming for Somerset, well I don't rightly understand it. Somerset's in Pennsylvania, if my memory serves me," the farmer said and stood.

"Yes, it is in Pennsylvania." Blake turned and eyed the unkempt farmer. He hated to correct the man as to the location of his own home so settled on introducing himself. "Blake Sanders, sir," he said and bowed. "This is my valet, my ... my...." Blake stuttered as the farmer looked at him curiously. "This is Benson."

The farmer raised one brow. "One name. Kind a like an outlaw or gunslinger, huh?"

Benson bent at the waist. "Geoffrey Edmund Benson. Valet to the Duke of Wexford."

The farmer sat down the bucket and raised his hands to his hips. "Where's this Duke fellow? Hiding in the hills or something?"

"No, no, my good man. The Duke of Wexford and Blake Sanders are one and the same," Benson laughed cheerily.

The farmer eyed Blake. "You a duke, huh?"

"Yes, I am," Blake said and smiled.

The man pulled a worn felt hat from his head and scratched behind his ear. "Sposin' you can read, then?"

Benson smiled thinly as he responded for Blake. "Generally graduates of Oxford and peers of the realm can indeed read."

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Tom Biddle. My Nell is fixing stew and biscuits for dinner. Don't suppose you'd want to join me?"

Blake smiled broadly. "As you can see, I have no fixed engagements. Benson and I would love to join you and your wife."

As they approached the small cabin, a woman stepped out of the door. She was pregnant, far along, with a small child balanced on her hip. A curl of smoke rose from a chimney and a plot of ground held a variety of plants, not a weed marring their straight rows. Clothes hung from a rope, flapping and drying in the breeze.

"We got company, Nell," Tom Biddle said as he kissed his wife's cheek. "I told you, I'd help with the wash. Getting to be too much for you."

The woman nodded shyly to Blake and he followed the pair into the dim, cool dampness of the cabin. The aroma of food nearly fell him where he stood. Blake and Benson followed Tom as he motioned back outside. The farmer dumped the water he carried from the creek into a metal bowl. He wet his hands and face and reached to a ledge for soap. A thin rag hung on a nail and Tom wiped himself dry.

"Go on ahead, fellas. Clean up. I'll meet ya inside at the table."

Benson insisted Blake wash first and then stared grimly at the cloth he was to use to dry with. "Your scullery maids have finer rags than this, sir," Benson said and dabbed his face lightly.

"I imagine they do, Benson. But I'll eat that damned rag if I don't soon get inside to Mrs. Biddle's table."

Once all were seated, Tom and Nell Biddle dropped their head in prayer. Blake wanted to scream Amen. The wife ladled large portions of stew into chipped bowls and uncovered a platter heaped with steaming biscuits. A crock of butter and a jar of jam were the only other things on the table. No concoction his chef had ever graced the table with smelled as wonderful as the meal in front of him. Blake waited until his host began to eat and then concentrated intently on cleaning his bowl to reveal a pattern of roses in the crockery. One of Mrs. Biddle's biscuits sopped the gravy from the bottom and Blake licked his fingers clean, not knowing what to do without a starched napkin.

"My dear, that meal was delicious. I hope we didn't inconvenience you with our arrival," Blake said.

"I'm glad you liked it. We don't git many visitors. Tom and I are right happy for the company," Nell Biddle said shyly. She shoveled mashed potato from the stew into the infants' open mouth.

"I'd like to compensate you, regardless." Blake reached through the slit of his money belt and pulled out a bill. "Will this do?"

Tom Biddle scowled. "Them that I ask to eat at my table don't pay."

"But I insist, my good man. Certainly this money could be used to buy your wife some trinket or seed for your farm. I am amply able to share. As you have so kindly done," Blake said.

"Got me some of the finest farmland in Maryland. We do just fine here," Biddle said with a hitch to his shoulders.

Benson squinted. "Maryland, you say. Is that a town close by?"

"No. The state of Maryland. Closest town is Cumberland. Tried to tell you boys, Somerset was in Pennsylvania," Tom Biddle said and leaned back to rub his stomach.

Blake pulled the map from his pocket and spread it out on the table. His head shook as his finger found Cumberland. "I believe I've taken us quite out of our way, Benson. Terribly sorry."

"No apology necessary, Your Grace. You are still becoming adjusted to your new role. We will have small mishaps, I'm sure," Benson said smiling. "And another English name. After the Duke of Cumberland would be my guess."

Blake stared at his map and tried to decide where exactly they were in relationship to the city of Cumberland. Tom Biddle stood and pulled a stone from the wall. He lifted a worn leather case from within.

"Here's the map of my land from the surveyor," he said and spread out a large paper.

Blake pored over the two maps when he realized Tom Biddle stood expectantly to his side. The farmer held papers in his hand.

"I was wondering since you can read and all if you'd take a look at these?"

Blake nodded and took the papers. He studied them, wishing he had his quizzing glasses from his library. "This looks like a proposal to buy part of your property," Blake said.

"Water rights," Tom Biddle said. "My ciphering isn't too good and I wanted to make sure before I make my mark that I know what it all says."

Blake studied the papers and the maps laid out before him. "I believe this is a bill of sale for the creek and the property on both sides."

Tom Biddle's face went white. His wife came to his side. "Thank God I didn't sign this yet," he said.

"Glad to help, Mr. Biddle," Blake said. "I'd take this to a barrister. Let him make sure you get paid fairly each year for these water rights."

"Thank you, Mr. Sanders. I can't see how my dinner measures up to what you've done for us but you're welcome to stay til supper. Hardly seems payment enough though," Nell Biddle said.

Blake smiled. "Thank you but I wish to arrive in Cumberland by nightfall. We need to purchase supplies."

Nell Biddle packed a bag with beef jerky and biscuits while her husband brushed their horses. Benson and Blake mounted and tipped their hats.

"Sanders," Biddle called. "I'd see about trading for different horses in Cumberland. If'n your journey's as long as you say these aren't suited."

"Really," Blake said and patted the neck of his horse. "How so?"

“They’re bred for speed. You need something for the long haul just in case ya get off course again.”

Blake nodded and set out at a steady trot. The most amazing thing had just happened to the fifteenth Duke of Wexford. He had been paid for services rendered. Granted, not gold or notes, but he had received payment all the same. Beef stew and biscuits. Blake could not stop himself from preening. It was a heady feeling indeed to provide what someone else needed and be paid for those skills.

Cumberland, Maryland proved to be interesting. Not as sophisticated or glib as New York or Philadelphia. Fewer men in business suits, more in farm clothes and many with outfits similar to Benson. Most of the latter, less garish, Blake reflected as he leaned against the brass rail of a tavern called Madam Tilly’s. Men were gathered around tables, playing cards, others stood and conversed with the man next to them. Benson was off, scouting stables. Blake was convinced Tom Biddle was right. He had purchased their horses with an eye for horseflesh only considerate of the landscape of the next hunt. These rocky hills and rolling acres needed stamina from both horse and rider.

Blake had spent most of the day in a cluttered shop called Green’s General Store. What he had failed to consider at the beginning of the excursion was that America was vastly different than England. It was enormous. And there were few Inns to rely on at sunset. Granted when they’d stayed on the main roads, they passed taverns with rooms to rent, but so far Blake had been unable to confine himself to the wide dirt paths through the countryside.

Blake succumbed to the comfort of denim pants such as Benson wore, purchased from Mr. Green. The shopkeeper had advised him to take the pants to the Chinese laundry before he wore them. Blake’s three, new, white, cotton shirts were sturdy and collarless. An unlined jacket made of softened suede in camel completed his ensemble. A flat rimmed, low felt hat made by someone named Stetson was adorned with black braiding. But the *piece de resistance* was the gun belt that hung below his waistband. A Mr. Colt provided two six shooters, the shopkeeper had explained. Nothing like his hunting rifles back home. Blake supposed he’d best do some target practice. He and Benson may have to shoot their supper, although he was quite unsure what he would do if he actually hit something. Mr. Green insisted he buy a lethal looking knife with a leather scabbard. Blake’s concern wavered from cutting off his thumb to actually having to peel skin from a dead animal as Mr. Green had described. A very pregnant Mrs. Green had showed him how to roll his new blankets to fit behind his saddle. Blake filled one entire pocket of his saddlebag with matches.

All in all Blake felt more comfortable. His skin had tanned on his face and his behind was finally growing accustomed to the saddle. The fingers of black leather gloves spilled from his pocket. He had clung firmly to his low-heeled English boots, refusing to squash his toes into points. Blake did not stand out in the tavern he surveyed. He was dressed much the same as many of the men there. Blake sipped his drink and shuddered. He had yet to find a decent scotch whiskey.

The trip to the bathhouse had proved most interesting after Benson and he had purchased their new mounts. A large gray haired woman smoking a pipe wandered about the row of tubs handing out thin towels. Benson cowered and insisted the woman turn her head while he dried. For himself, Blake sat in the steaming water and wondered what Gertrude was doing. What would she think of his new clothes? What would she think of his decision to ride on horseback for the trip? He admitted to himself that William in all his youth was wiser. His son knew the world held more than London and society. And if that boy, right or wrong hadn’t snuck on Gertrude’s ship, Blake would have never seen the beauty of this wild country. Never have understood the appeal of this land and its people. Let alone feast his eyes on Gertrude Finch once more. He was indeed indebted to his heir.

* * * *

“So, Will. When do you suppose someone will be here to fetch you? Been nearly two months,” Uncle Fred said as he helped the boy handle a new colt.

“Can’t say, sir.” William turned to Fred, stricken. “If you think it’s best that I go, I shall do so.”

“No, boy,” Uncle Fred said. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.”

William rubbed the horse’s coat with a rag. “I’ve been thinking of going anyway. I miss my mother and sister and brother.”

“Spect you do, son. How bout your father? Miss him too?” Fred asked as he checked the hooves of the horse. Fred looked up from the corner of his eye to watch Will. “Maybe you argued with your father over this trip, Will, but that’s no reason to keep your feathers ruffled this long. You got to see your ranch in the end,” Fred continued as if unaware of the angry tilt of Will’s mouth. “I’m sure your father is a fine man and won’t be angry anymore. He’ll be wanting to see his eldest son”

“He is not a fine man.” Will brushed the colt as if hoping to leave it bald.

“Easy son,” Fred said as he laid his hand on Will’s, stilling the brush. “Why would you say your father’s not a fine man? Everything about you points otherwise.”

Will met Fred’s eyes. “There are things I am unable to divulge without breaking a confidence. I’m sure, though, my mother prays I’m nothing like my father.”

“Gert thinks the sun rises and sets on you, boy. She’s as good a judge of character as I know,” Fred said.

Will’s eyes dropped and his cheeks thinned. “Miss Finch is a fine woman. I hold her in high regard. But she is capable of making errors in judgment. Of that I’m quite sure.”

Fred nodded and left the corral. It was just as he suspected. William’s father was also the father of Gert’s baby. As much as he admired the boy he would find great satisfaction in beating the tar out of his pa.

* * * *

“I think a compass should be our next purchase, Your Grace,” Benson said as they wearily rode into the town of Cleveland, Ohio one hot August night.

“I imagine you’re right, Benson,” Blake said. “I can’t fathom how I got so far off of track. I fear Sir Anthony and Lady Anne were right. I have no idea how to do anything but be a duke.”

“Oh, but you’re quite mistaken, sir. The rabbit we roasted last night was a triumph. A delicacy.”

Blake raised his brows. He had shot the poor thing seven times before killing it. He gagged at the thought even now. Something much different about shooting a bird in the sky for the hounds to retrieve than killing a rabbit and taking the skin off while the animal was still warm. Thankfully Benson flirted in his youth with the old cook and had a vague recollection of how it was to be done.

“Let us to Cleveland to find a bed and a bath,” Blake said.

Blake lay on the worn bed in the small hotel. They watched their money prodigiously now. Blake could have gone to a bank and gotten a transfer of funds but he wasn't fond of the idea of carrying large amounts of cash. Two nights ago they'd come dangerously close to being killed. Ugly, filthy men had crept in to their camp in the dead of night and bound them back-to-back against a tree. Benson was convinced they were to die there in the wilderness. Blake consoled himself and kept fear at bay by envisioning Gertrude's face when he kissed her. Her shock under the tree by the lake. Her own innocent brand of sensuality on display that day in the foyer. And anticipation, Blake was sure, when he kissed her on the steps in his London home. There was some solace in knowing Gert was the last one he had kissed and made love to, if indeed these outlaws meant to end his life.

But to their good fortune, the men had drunk prodigious amounts of alcohol and fallen asleep around the campfire. Blake was able to reach his knife and cut the rope tying him and Benson together. Blake gathered their horses and belongings and slapped the rumps of the outlaws' mounts. He smiled as he recalled hissing to Benson to hurry. Blake asked Benson later what he'd been doing.

“Twenty years as a valet proved helpful in stealing those commoners boots as they snored. I threw them into the ravine we just passed,” Benson said haughtily.

Blake looked at his valet. “How many times have you removed my boots without my knowledge, Benson?”

“A good valet, sir, never reveals private matters concerning his employer,” Benson responded.

Blake's laughter rang out in the cool night.

* * * *

Gert received a letter from Elizabeth near the end of August. She had felt guilty not writing her cousin as she promised that morning at the docks. But Gert couldn't bring herself to ask what she wanted to know most. How was Blake? Was he still a pompous ass? Still the handsomest man in London? Who was his newest mistress? Gert turned at the desk in the sitting room and held Elizabeth's unopened letter. The fine cream-colored stationary held the words she feared or hoped for. Uncle Fred had been thrilled that morning when a neighbor dropped off the mail. He ran as fast as his bowlegs could take him, holding it out to her.

“Here's a letter, Gert. From your cousin in England,” Fred said and waved it in front of her nose as she stood on the lowest slat of the fence.

“What's the matter with you, Clem?” Gert shrieked from her post. “You've got that pony in a tizzy.”

Fred knew Clem didn't have the nearly broke horse so riled that he bucked. Just as he'd known yesterday Gert did like blackberry jam, was her favorite in fact, in contrast to what she'd shouted at Cookie. Knew the flowers Clyde had picked weren't meant for Gert's grave after a long lingering illness but rather to brighten her day. And knew that Gert's shouts and balling fits had every horse, dog and man scurrying away from her.

“Come on, Gert. It's hot out here. Take your letter and go on in the house,” Fred said and held the letter out to his niece.

Gert looked down at the letter. Her lip trembled and she bit it. "I don't want anything to remind me of that horrible country."

Uncle Fred stared at her.

"Fine," Gert cried. "Fine. I'll go sit and be useless." She grabbed the letter and marched to the house.

But now, as she sat at Aunt Mavis' desk, absently scratching her belly, tears rolled off her cheeks and landed on the letter. She was curious, though, of news about who would come for William. She read the first page. Elizabeth's baby had been born. A girl. Sarah Louise. Everyone was fine except for the husband. Apparently Tony had not laid the child in its cradle since the midwife had handed her to him. Sir Anthony Burroughs had met his match in the form of a tiny baby he could not bear to part from for more than a minute at a time. The thought of that father and his daughter made Gert think of her own child. No father would cuddle him or her or show him off as if he or she were the most precious thing in the world. They would have a mother, though, that would go to the ends of the earth for her child.

Ann Sanders McDonald had taken Melinda and Donald to Scotland where Melinda had managed to tempt every eligible man for miles. Ann had written Elizabeth that one dark haired chieftain had set Melinda's thoughts to marriage again. Donald ran constantly with boys his same age, swimming, fishing and growing like a weed. Gert's lip trembled. She laid the letter in her lap. That was the thing with children, she thought. They grow up. And they leave.

Gert pulled the second page from behind the first and continued. The paper shook wildly in her hand. Blake Sanders had set sail to America for William, two weeks after she did. Her trembling hand came to her mouth. He was coming here. But why hadn't he arrived? He was surely coming only to rescue his heir. But where was he? Gert's thoughts flew a thousand ways. He was dead on the side of the road. His carriage had careened from a mountainside. And it was certainly no less than he deserved. To allow her and his unborn child to sail across an ocean alone. Well, William had been there with her but Blake didn't know that. He didn't even know she was pregnant. Although he should have. He did ask her to marry him. But he didn't love her. Gert had herself in fury of tears, fears and accusations.

"William," Gert shrieked as she stuck her head out the window. "William!"

Chapter Fourteen

Blake had planned on traveling due west from Cleveland. Somehow he and Benson found themselves in southern Indiana. They had spent their last evening in a barn owned by a very pregnant woman. Mrs. Fletcher's husband had died a month prior and the woman was running the small farm alone. To Blake's regret, the Fletcher child had chosen that night to arrive in this world. Blake had ridden for a neighbor while Benson cooked and straightened the woman's home. A girl, certainly not much older than his Melinda came running down the porch steps of the home Blake was sent to.

"How close are the pains?" she asked as she waddled quickly to a cart and hitched a mule.

"I don't know for sure, miss." Blake looked at the girl, pregnant herself. "Isn't there someone else who could attend Mrs. Fletcher? Someone with, pray more experience."

"You and I is it, mister." The girl shouted yaw to the mule and set off at furious pace.

Blake hurried to his horse and followed. Dear God. Did the chit think he'd be helping with the birth? While Ann had delivered Melinda and William he was in his study, drinking brandy and choosing his children's school. He was in London during Donald's birth. But Tess Williams did not care. She shouted directions to Benson for water and boiled Blake's knife. She directed Blake to hold Mrs. Fletcher's back while the woman pushed the child from her body. The crying, shouting and sweating Mrs. Fletcher succeeded near midnight in giving birth. Benson had hurried from the house at the first scream. Tess Williams shoved the infant in Blake's arms, unceremoniously, while she attended Mrs. Fletcher.

Blake found himself seated in a rocker, slowly moving, watching the child in the moonlight from the bare window. He cooed when she fussed and wrapped the blanket tight around her small body. He could not remember, for his life, his children ever being this small. And poor Mrs. Fletcher, soon alone to raise this child. Blake swallowed. What if it were true? What if his deepest fear and surety was reality? Gertrude could be pregnant. With his son or daughter. Would someone hold her hand as he had done for Mrs. Fletcher? Would someone murmur reassuring words? Of course, Blake chastised himself. She would have Uncle Fred. But would he hold her and tell her she'd done fine? What if she and William had yet to arrive and were stranded? Who would hold his child in his first moments on earth?

Not too terribly long ago Blake was sure he had lived his life with no regrets. Lately, he wondered if any decision he'd ever made was right. So much he'd missed, so much he let willingly go unseen. He was very near as useless as Tony had described him. The child in his arms slept peacefully. Blake touched the small hand with his finger. The tiny fist opened and closed around it and her veined eyelids fluttered. Suddenly and with a desperation Blake had never known, he craved his children. Wanted to see Melinda's sweet, smiling face and hear her laughter. Touch William's shoulder and tell him how proud he was of his son. Wished he had climbed to see that damn tree house Donald loved. Blake's vision blurred until the tiny pink bundle in his arms was but a shadow.

And Blake knew without a doubt, at that moment and not before, what Ann, Tony, his servants and Lady Katherine had known all along. What Gertrude had seen in his children the first instant they'd met. No horse, home or club, no rule or shapely body held a candle to his sons and daughter. What had appeared as gold was not but a cheap imitation compared to the treasure God had foolishly bestowed upon him. He was glad then Ann was their mother. The dear Lord had been merciful indeed. While he roamed haunts, chasing pleasures, his wife had been raising those children. He no longer felt angry or cheated. But indebted rather, to a woman he'd not loved and treated poorly. Pray McDonald will make her happy.

And above all this, knowing all this, one face loomed before him. Unbeknownst to her, Gertrude had changed Blake's life. He had been lured here because of William's fascination with her heartfelt tales. Blake would have gone to his grave never seeing this land's bounty or the pride and resourcefulness of its people. Melinda would have been married to some young fob planning a life filled with women and titles while Blake's daughter stayed behind to raise her children. And Donald, he cringed to admit was a stranger.

Sometimes in the past, Blake had revealed something personal to someone. Most times to Tony. But he had no inclination to share his thoughts with his friend at this moment. There was only one person on this earth he'd admit his folly to. The same one he'd wronged and cursed. The tall, green-eyed woman not afraid for an instant of his displeasure. She'd curse him and tell him she'd known all along he was an ass.

Blake smiled at the thought of her censure. They would argue and trade barbs and he would kiss her.

* * * *

“What is it, Miss Finch?” William said as he ran in the house. “You’re as white as a ghost.”

“Your father is coming here to get you. He left England two weeks after us.”

William dropped in a chair. “Where is he then? Shouldn’t he have arrived by now?”

Gert’s lip trembled. “Yes. He should have.”

William’s eyes darted. “I am happy and frightened and angry he is coming.”

Gert stood and wandered about the room. Finally stopping to touch Aunt Mavis’ candlesticks, her back to the door. “I don’t know what to do, William. I don’t want him to know of my condition.”

Gert had as many mixed emotions as William. To see Blake again would ease a pain that lingered. But seeing his face, hearing his voice would be torture, knowing he was not the man for her. She had come to that conclusion painfully. Admitted to herself she’d succumbed to a physical attraction with a man intent on leading a merry life. One of wealth and indulgence and pleasures. A man wholly unable from centuries of tradition, to view a woman as anything but a necessity for heirs and gratification.

Gert had a good life here, on the ranch. One that allowed her views to be listened to, her opinions valued. Esmerelda had written and said the speech Gert composed brought a standing ovation from a crowd who had heard it. She had respect and a place in the order of things. Gert would not have love, not for every star she wished on. It was not meant to be. As she had told countless young women, find yourself, your values and talents and make a good life. Never wait on a man to fulfill your dreams. Much more difficult to live those words than to say them. Gert would never again scoff at a woman believing her prince or knight or pirate would solve all life’s woes.

“When your father finds out I’m expecting his child, I can’t imagine his reaction,” Gert said softly.

“I won’t let him hurt you. In any way, Miss Finch,” William replied.

“Neither will I,” a voice came from the door. Gert spun around to see Uncle Fred and all the hands.

“Don’t you worry none, Gert,” Cookie said.

“No duke is goin’ to bother you,” Clyde said. Clem nodded.

“I won’t let the bastard break your heart again,” Luke whispered.

* * * *

Benson and Blake plodded along north to Chicago. The trees were a magnificent combination of yellows, oranges and scarlet. They passed farms with baled hay heaped in mountains dotting the countryside. By sundown the air had a cool nip and the odor of turned earth and drying leaves. They had fallen into a comfortable routine. Benson tended the horses and started a fire while Blake hunted for their dinner. Some nights they didn’t eat well. The only thing Blake was positive of was that Benson would hand him a steaming cup of tea first thing. That morning they had come upon a small waterfall. The water

crashed over rocks and puddled in a lazy pool as clear as the sky. Blake could smell himself and was not passing up the opportunity to bathe. Benson gathered their dirty clothes and stripped to a pair of full-length red drawers and waded into the water to do the laundry. Blake, bare bottom naked, ran at the water full tilt. It was gloriously cold. He stood under the fall of water after scrubbing his body and hair.

Blake stood in the water waist deep and shaved away two days worth of stubble. He caught his reflection in the still water around him. Days back he had found a barber and was glad his collar-length curls were gone. Blake sported a tightly cropped haircut and if the ripples in his mirror didn't deceive him his skin had mellowed into a tan. There was not an ounce of fat on his chest or arms. The riding and lifting and walking and hunting had pushed the years on his body back to youth. He felt more fit than he had since he was a boy.

Blake peered at the water's image. Women in London would swoon at his new physique. Trim and now reasonably fast with his Colt. He pulled an imaginary gun from his naked hip in a draw. But London ladies would not appreciate his newly honed body or skill with a six-shooter. Proper English women would find nothing appealing about the tan color of his skin or the roughened calluses of his hands. To them he'd look like a savage or a servant. Maybe Gertrude would think he looked more American.

Blake waited, unsuccessfully, for his longing for Gertrude to lessen. Hoping, on some level, a dance hall girl would arouse his lust. In the past, a tempting view of a breast or a pale ankle would have been enough to drop his eyelids in want, bringing a twitch to his lips and a twinge to his crotch. Not so anymore. Barely clothed bar wenches, even on his lap as had happened in the last town they'd come to, did little for him. But every night, regardless of stones digging into his back while he slept, he awoke rock hard with Gertrude's face swimming before him. There was no one to discuss this strange change in his body with. He could hardly imagine what he'd say. *I'm limp as a dead daisy while conscious and stiff as a board while asleep.* And whom would he admit that bit of nonsense to. Not Tony for certain. His best friend would laugh and say he was in love.

Currently the cold water had him shriveled and wrinkled. Benson had strung the cord from his saddlebags and was draping their clean clothes over it for the sun to dry. Blake pulled on clean half drawers and stretched out on a flat rock to dry. His eyes opened to the blue sky as he lay there. He had the strangest feeling he and Benson weren't alone. Blake peered through trees and wandered around. Nothing. No one. He still could not shake the feeling. Their clothes dried quickly and soon Benson and he were saddled and riding north. Closer with each step of the horses' hooves to Gert and his son. Benson had taken to whistling a tune while they rode and Blake had to smile at his valet. The stiff, starched servant had changed. As he had, he supposed.

The beating of the sun's rays on his black hat and the steady clip of his mount's canter had nearly lulled him to sleep. Suddenly and to his and Benson's surprise, they were surrounded by red-skinned men wearing nothing but strips of hide to cover them. His horse ground to a halt in the closing circle. Benson's face was wide-eyed in fear. Their leader, Blake surmised by the number of colored feathers in his headdress, walked his spotted horse close to Blake.

The man grunted and signed.

Blake shook his head and lifted his shoulders hoping to indicate he hadn't a clue what the man said.

The leader turned and shouted gibberish. The other men laughed and raised their lances to the sky. Blake knew real fear at this moment. He'd listened to stories of the savages in the towns he passed through. From the look on Benson's face he remembered the tales as well. He'd never get the chance to tell Gertrude he loved her. Was the only explanation he'd been able to fathom for the strange things

happening to his mind and his body. He understood Tony's words now. He'd beg Gertrude's forgiveness with his dying breath. The words of the fierce warrior before him brought his head up.

"You pass through the land of the Cheyenne. You will die now."

A whimper escaped Benson's lips.

Blake was surprised to hear English, although stilted from the lips of savage before him. "We meant no harm," Blake said.

"Your bodies staked out in the sun will send a message to other wanderers."

Blake blew out a breath and dropped his shoulders thinking how close he'd come to his final destination. "Before you do, can you tell me how far away we are from Chicago?"

The warrior blinked and translated the words. Braves pulled their horses in tight. "Strange talk you have. What white city did you come from?"

"London, England." Blake's home. The one he'd never see again.

The chief's eyes widened and he spoke quickly to his band of men. "Why this Chicago?"

"My son's there. And a woman," Blake said.

"The woman's name. What is it?" the chief asked.

Blake toyed with the idea of not responding for fear of putting Gertrude and William in danger. But some part of him begged to hear her name said aloud. To go to his death with her name on his lips.

"Gertrude Finch," Blake said softly.

The chief's eyes widened and the braves' ponies danced and neighed as they clamored. The man held his hand up for silence. When the chief spoke, Blake could tell his men were angry. But the stiff command brooked no argument. Six braves jumped from their barebacked horses and pulled Blake and Benson from their mounts. Blake shouted to Benson his apology as a brave's fist plunged into his stomach. Blake's air left on a whoosh. He could not defend himself from the battering of punches as two men held his hands behind his back. All at once it was dark.

* * * *

Blake's eye opened slowly. He felt the plodding of his mount underneath him. He was not staked out to die in the prairie but trussed to his horse with ropes. He risked a look to his side. Benson was tied to his horse as well. There was nary a scratch on him.

"Your Grace," Benson whispered. "I feared you'd never wake up."

"We're not dead, are we?"

"No sir, were not. But I haven't a clue where they're taking us." Benson shouted to one of the sentries. "You there. My master needs water."

“Don’t get killed on my account, Benson.” But his valet valiantly would not shut his mouth. Finally the chief held his hand up and every horse behind him stopped. A path opened up to Blake and Benson.

“You’ve beaten the Duke of Wexford to a pulp. I demand you give him water,” Benson said.

The chief’s eyes opened wide. “You have nothing to bargain with.”

“I’m well aware of that but I still insist you give him something to drink. If you meant to kill us you would have done it two hours ago,” Benson shouted bravely.

The chief almost smiled and nodded to Blake. “True. But the death of this one belongs to my old friend.”

Benson bristled. “Friend? No friend of yours could possibly know my master.”

Blake’s mouth cracked as he spoke and he tasted blood. “Who? Who is your friend?”

“Your thirst for water will be nothing compared to what Hastings will do.”

“Hastings? The duke knows no one named Hastings,” Benson said.

Blake brought his bowed head up slowly. “How do I know this Hastings?”

The chief smiled maliciously. “He is father in his heart to Gertrude Finch.” The chief threw back his head and laughed. “It is his right to kill that man that left her.”

“Miss Finch?” Benson said. “Are we close to her ranch? Your Grace, we may be saved yet. But why would a relative of Miss Finch’s wish to kill you, sir?”

The chief smiled. “You will know soon enough, English.”

The braves undid their ropes and pulled Blake and Benson from their saddles. Blake landed on his butt with a thud. Until that moment it was the only part of his body not bruised. Dimly he heard Benson shouting at the departing Indians.

“Stand up, Your Grace. We must get to Miss Finch’s ranch.” Benson said as he pulled Blake to his feet. “We are going to continue in the direction the savages were taking us. Lean on me, sir.”

Blake had no choice. His legs were as mushy as cook’s pudding. He grimaced when he touched his hand to his jaw. It clicked as he closed his mouth. It was not broken as far as Blake could tell. Although his nose surely was. He tried to straighten and grimaced from a pain in his side.

“We’re not far, I imagine, Benson. I think that Indian wanted to make sure I met Miss Finch’s uncle,” Blake said.

“Do try and hurry sir. I have no inclination to run into another band of Indians. I thought we were done for back there, sir.” Benson said as he helped Blake along. “I admit I’ve been shaken to the core.”

“You did admirably, Benson.” The two of them trudged up a small grade. At the top they saw smoke coming from a house. A barn and corral to its side.

“Look, your grace. Civilization.”

Blake squinted his good eye. "I'm afraid, Benson, I must rest a moment. Let me sit. You go ahead."

"Are you sure, Your Grace?" Benson asked. Blake nodded. "I'll hurry then and try and bring back a conveyance."

Benson started out and Blake watched him. When the man was a hundred feet away he turned to give Blake a thumb up. Blake nodded and watched the expression on his valet's face change from encouragement to terror. Benson ran then, tripping and screaming towards the farm. Blake looked over his shoulder to see what had given Benson such a start. A long silent line of Indians stood on the ridge not thirty feet to his back. Not that there was a thing Blake could do about it. He didn't think he could stand, much less fight. Their chief in the middle looked at him smugly. If what Blake thought were true, his best chance of survival would be at an Indian village. Far away from Gertrude's relatives.

* * * *

William Sanders looked out on the range as the other hands were doing. White Cloud, Uncle Fred's Indian friend, stood on the ridge in a line. Then he noticed a man running willy nill, down the slope, falling and shouting for help. Fred Hastings stood beside Will.

"What's White Cloud up to now? He hasn't chased a settler for ten years," Fred said.

The prick of recognition came to Will in that instant. The cowboy running to him in a bright plaid shirt had an English accent and sounded suspiciously like his father's valet. The man was closer now and Will let out a held breath. "Dear God. That's Benson."

"You know him, son?" Fred asked.

"He's my father's valet." Will began walking to Benson.

"What's a valet, Will?" Clem asked from the crowd of work hands now following behind William as the screaming man tumbled over a rock.

"English gentlemen have a servant to see to their bath and getting them dressed everyday."

"Yer Daddy needs someone to pull his pants on him?" Cookie asked.

Will looked at Benson and saw the wild look in the valet's eyes. "Benson," Will shouted.

The man stopped. "Master William. Thank God." Benson ran then as fast as his legs would carry him. "Hurry. Your father's sitting not," Benson stopped to breathe. "Your father's sitting not twenty feet from those savages." Benson puffed a breath. "We must rescue him."

Fred Hastings lifted his brows. "White Cloud hasn't hurt a white man in ten years. Likes to scare 'em some on occasion."

Benson straightened and buttoned his leather vest. "I beg to differ, sir. That savage nearly beat The Duke of Wexford to death."

Uncle Fred's mouth ticked. "He talking about the same duke that's your daddy?"

“Yes, sir. He is,” Will replied.

“Please sir. Hurry. They’re almost upon him,” Benson pleaded.

The men looked where Benson was pointing to a man sitting, holding his knees. “Take a pony to him, Will. He looks plum tuckered out,” Fred said.

Will pulled himself up on a horse and strung a saddled mount behind him. He stopped to talk to Benson. “I’ll get him, Benson. Don’t worry.”

The valet grabbed Will’s leg. “I hardly recognized you, Master William. But you’ll save him, I know.”

Will nodded and set out at a trot.

Blake watched a lone rider approach with a horse in tow from his saddle. Blake drew a breath deep enough to double him over as he recognized the cowboy. “William,” he whispered. The boy sat the horse as if born to these western plains. Confident and dusty, with a wide leather covering over his legs. His heir had not only survived this wild country. He had thrived.

“Dear God, William. I am glad to see you,” Blake said as William came to a stop. His son threw one leg over the neck of the horse and slid down. Blake wanted desperately and, within the same thought, to hug him tightly and shout till the boy cowered. Blake swallowed. He settled to a fierce ache of pride for his first-born son.

William said nothing as he approached. Just stared hard at his father. “I am glad to see you unhurt.”

Blake blustered. Did the boy not notice the rearrangement of his face? “Is that all you can say, William? I’ve chased you for months. Your mother is worried sick and your sister. . . .” Blake didn’t complete his sentence before he found himself face down on the prairie. He shook his head and looked up to William.

“That’s for Miss Finch.” William unhooked the second horse’s reins and dropped them in the dirt beside his father. William mounted his own horse and rode away.

Blake stood slowly. He turned and gave the Indians a jaunty salute. He didn’t think he could get himself in the saddle. He would walk the short distance to his fate, he thought, as he looked up to scan the activity surrounding the house. The screen door slammed on the porch of the cabin and there stood his Gertrude.

“Master William. You planted your father a facer!” Benson said to William as the boy approached the growing crowd.

“Benson,” Gertrude shrieked from the porch.

The valet hurried to her but stopped mid-stride. “Miss Finch!” He stared at her belly.

Gertrude looked over Benson’s head and her hand covered her mouth for a brief instant. “Blake!” she shouted.

Blake stood still. His name on her lips was his undoing. His mind flashed scenes of his travels. He knew he’d crawl across this bloody country to hear her voice again. Then he noticed her hands clenching a round, protruding belly. He was certainly not going to blubber like a fishwife in front of her relatives and

his son. He hurried to her. His path was blocked by rough cowboys. "Stand aside," Blake shouted.

A tall blond cowboy stepped forward and tilted his hat far back on his head. "Not likely."

An older man elbowed his way through the men. "You and me is going to have a long talk."

Blake was at the end of his patience. He was not going to wait another second to touch Gertrude. He'd dreamed too long of this moment to be denied. He was not a duke for any small reason, either. "Not right this moment we're not." The men guffawed. "I'm going to talk to Miss Finch." The circle closed tightly.

Blake rarely raised his voice. It was unnecessary. But his temper had the best of him this time. He screamed his commands. "Get out of my way this instant. I've been traveling for months and it's unlikely I'll be leaving without speaking to her. If I have to fight every man to my last breath, I will." He turned his head slowly from one man to another. "Now get out of my way."

The old man stared hard at Blake Sanders and took one step back. The other men followed his lead.

"Well, done, sir," Benson called from the porch steps. "Well done, indeed."

Blake nodded to his valet and focused on the woman before him. Gert's eyes were shimmering with tears and Blake thought she was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Her lip trembled under one hand while the other clenched her stomach. His child grew there. Inside this stunning, smart woman capable of bringing a peer of the realm to his knees.

"I say, sir," Benson said from Blake's side. "Most proliferate country this America. Nearly every woman we've encountered is increasing."

"Fortunately this is the only one I'm responsible for," Blake said.

Benson's eyes widened. He looked from Gertrude back to his master and stumbled away. "Oh dear."

"I was so worried. Elizabeth wrote and said you left London months ago. I thought you were dead. I'm pregnant." Gertrude's lip trembled. "And I'm a wreck. I shout and cry and don't know what to do," she stammered and wept. "I was worried about you and me and about William." Her head sprang straight and she shouted. "And I came here all alone and you're never taking this baby, Blake Sanders. I hate you." She slapped him.

Blake touched his cheek and winced. He felt a loose tooth with his tongue. Gertrude huffed and turned to the house in a flurry, slamming the door on her way inside. Blake turned to the assembled behind him. The old man stepped forward and spoke.

"I was going to beat the tar out you." The old man said as he took off his hat and scratched his head. "But I'm thinking that won't be half the punishment my Gert'll give you." He laughed sharply. "Hell, ought to be fun to watch, too. Huh, boys?"

The men around him leaned back in unison and crossed their arms across their chests. One spit and then answered. "'Sposin' you're right, Fred. Might be fun at that."

"William. What have they done to Miss Finch?" Blake asked.

“What have we done to her? You’re the one’s gone and got her in this mess.” Two men, nearly identical, held the tall, blond cowboy back from charging Blake.

“If I may be so bold, sir,” Benson said hesitantly to him from the side.

“Speak your mind, Benson. You met Miss Finch in London. She’s a raving lunatic now. What is the matter with her?” Blake shouted.

“As I began a moment ago, sir. Miss Finch reminds me of my dear sister. Had ten children and drove her family near insane with her moods while she was expecting. Screaming, shouting, weeping at the strangest things. We shied away from Mildred nine months of the year, I dare say. And her husband, well. He never learned his lesson.” Benson sighed. “God rest his soul.”

Blake backed up. “She killed him?”

Benson shook his head. “Got thrown from a horse and broke his neck, sir. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t remember Lady Ann acting like this when she was having my heirs.”

Benson shrugged and looked away.

“Do you remember the duchess in such a state?” Blake asked.

“I dare say, Your Grace, not all women react to this condition in the same manner. Lady Ann did keep to her rooms though, if I remember correctly.” Benson swallowed. “I believe you spent most of that time in London, sir. The season at full swing, you know.”

Blake turned to look at the men. His introduction to Gertrude’s family and friends was not going well. Blake’s eyes met William’s in the crowd of men. The boy raced to the barn. “William.”

“Leave him be,” the old man said. He looked around at his men. “Back to work now. I’ll handle this from here.”

Blake stepped down from the porch step he stood on. “I would gather you are Mr. Hastings. Gertrude’s uncle.”

“And I spose you’re Blake Sanders? Will’s daddy and the man who ruined my Gert.” Fred stuck out his hand. “Been waiting a while to meet you.”

Blake shook Fred Hastings’ hand. As with regrets, guilt was an emotion Blake had little experience with. But now he struggled to look at the short gray haired man with bowlegs and a mustache that nearly covered his face.

“Come on in the kitchen, Sanders. You and I need to talk.”

Blake followed Fred Hastings to the kitchen. A large man in a huge apron held a cast iron skillet over Benson’s head.

“What’s going on, Cookie?” Fred asked.

“This here ferener is a planning on taking over my kitchen.”

“I have no intentions of taking over your kitchen, my good man. But I believe my master, the Duke of Wexford could use a spot of tea and I intend to brew it,” Benson bellowed his finish.

“Let the man make his tea, Cookie. Come on Sanders.”

Hastings led Blake into a small sitting area and motioned for him to sit down in a wing chair. Fred Hastings sat directly opposite of him in another. “I don’t mince words, Sanders. I’m goin’ to tell you straight out.”

The man’s hardened face reminded Blake of an image he’d seen on a Wanted poster outside the Cleveland sheriff’s office. Hasting’s lip twitched in a snarl as he spoke. “I’ve a mind to put a shotgun to yer and yer friend, Burroughs’ belly about now. My Gert was an innocent when she stepped on that boat in New York and I expected her to arrive back here the same way.”

“Yes, Mr. Hastings, I can understand that.”

“Well, she didn’t.” Hastings sat back in his chair. “Did you ask her to marry you?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what she told me. It was a puzzle to me especially after getting to know Will. He’s a fine young man. Hard to imagine him having a father lower than cow shit.”

“Miss Finch declined my protection,” Blake said. Benson arrived and sat a chipped cup holding his tea on the side table. The valet bowed as if he weren’t dressed in an orange plaid shirt and his face wasn’t covered in dirt. “Thank you, Benson.”

“Gert’s having a hard time with this child coming. Screaming and yelling and then crying to beat the band,” Hastings said, his forehead wrinkled in worry. “Sad part of it all is her loving you.”

Blake blinked. “She told me very plainly what she thought of me a moment ago. Love was not the word she used.”

“Ah hell, Sanders. Gert don’t know what she thinks right now.”

Blake smiled grimly. “She made it clear in London. She thinks very little of me.” Blake sat back and crossed his legs. “Knowing all I’ve realized on this trip, it is of little surprise.”

“You ain’t good enough for her, Sanders. I know that. Not with your title and your money and all.” Fred Hastings stood and poured himself a shot of whiskey. He stared out the window after throwing the drink back. “But I’m thinking she wants ya anyway, Sanders.”

“I have asked her to marry me. She refused.”

“Well, I’ve been trying to talk her into marrying Luke Matson,” Uncle Fred said as he turned. “The tall blond near ready to tear your head off. Spect I might’ve convinced her if you hadn’t wandered by.”

The idea of Gertrude marrying anyone but him made Blake’s hands ball into fists. It would not happen. Could not. He growled his response. “I will not stand for it.”

Fred's bushy brows rose. "Won't stand for it, huh? You don't know Gert as well as I thought then."

Blake stood and faced Gertrude's uncle. "And you sir, know nothing about me."

Fred crossed his arms over his chest. "I was going to have you bunk with the hands but I'm thinking you'd be dead by morning. You can sleep upstairs but if I catch your ass near Gert's room I'll hand ya over to my Indian friend myself."

It was on the tip of Blake's tongue to remind this man that he was in fact the Duke of Wexford. His ancestors had gone to their graves defending their honor and that of their women. The irony of this little man protecting Gert from a Wexford heir did not escape him.

"I would like to speak to Miss Finch, if I may," Blake said.

"I'll go an see what she says. Sometimes she naps in the afternoon." Fred went to the stairs. "But I'm thinking she's not sleeping now."

* * * *

Gert could no longer roll around on her bed. Tossing from one cheek and decision to another. Her middle held her firmly anchored on her back. She knew now, to say she missed Blake Sanders greatly fell short of the mark. A great big hole in her heart, covered with the excuse of pregnancy she'd tread on, was the only way to describe how she felt. An empty vast opening ignored, while she tiptoed across a weak bridge. As long as she looked straight ahead, not down, she had been able to forge ahead. That was no longer possible. The huge vacant space loomed before her, ahead of her and surrounded her. All because he'd arrived.

Gert slapped her clenched fists on the coverlet. Why did he have to be so damn handsome? She thought he was fairly gorgeous in London. But now in Levis and a black hat he took her breath away. Why did she want him so much? Gert had nearly talked herself into marrying Luke Matson. He was kind. He would defend her with his dying breath. He would be a good father as well. And he knew horses, knew the ranch and all its workings. Gert sighed. There lay the problem. That was all he knew or ever wanted to. A man couldn't be stupid, Gert conceded, to handle stock the way he did. But her attempts at conversation about politics or books left the man dumbfounded. His conclusion that books were for schools and no, he hadn't a favorite author and his firm belief that Congress referred to mating, left Gert with a bad taste in her mouth. What would they talk about in years to come? How would they argue if he hadn't an opinion? Her mind would turn to gravy from lack of use.

And then down the gentle slope of the field came Blake Sanders. Looking at her and fighting his way through Uncle Fred, William and the work hands to be near her. Looking every bit the rugged pirate or cowboy. Taking a moment to feast his eyes on her, Gert was convinced. With the tenderest caress from his eyes ever imaginable. Then she screamed and slapped him. Gert drifted off to sleep with Blake's face before her.

* * * *

While Gertrude slept, Blake went in search of William and found him inside the corral attempting to mount a pawing and neighing horse. Not one of the men watching William so much as a glanced to Blake. He swallowed his shout when the horse threw his son to the ground. The boy stood, dusted his hat on his leg and climbed aboard the crazed animal again. Blake didn't realize Fred Hastings stood beside him.

“Will knows what he’s doing. I wouldn’t let him break that mare if he didn’t.”

“He has grown up in your care, Mr. Hastings.” Blake turned to look at the wiry man. “I am in your debt.”

“He was a good boy when he got here, Sanders. Brought Gert home safe and sound. Might confused about becoming a man though.”

“He’s not had much to model himself by,” Blake admitted. Fred Hastings did not insult Blake with a denial. Just stared straight ahead.

“I’m thinking he’s about ready to go home. Misses his mother and all. When will you be takin’ him?” Fred asked.

Blake had pondered that subject while Benson tended to his cuts and bruises. “I’m going to have Benson escort him home shortly.” Or would William be leading the valet? Blake wondered.

“Where’s that leave you, Sanders?”

Blake faced the man. Gert’s father in his heart the chief had called him. “Your niece will be having my son or daughter. I have no intention of leaving her.”

“We’ll see what Gert has to say about that.”

Blake resurrected his ducal air. “It will make no matter Gertrude’s wishes in this. I will camp under the stars if need be. I am staying.”

“Staking your claim, huh?” Fred asked. Blake nodded. “For the child or for Gert?”

Blake smiled. “Both.”

“White Cloud give ya and yer man a scare today?” Hastings asked.

“To some degree,” Blake said dryly.

Hastings laughed. “Aw, come on. When I told him about Gert and you and to keep a look out for ya, he was mighty pissed off. White Cloud’s known her since she was a girl. I knew he wouldn’t kill ya. We’re friends. He’d save that for me. But you sure as hell didn’t know that. Ol’ Benson looked like he’d seen a ghost.”

“Benson was petrified and for good reason.”

“And you weren’t?” Fred said with a laugh.

Blake turned from watching Will to lean against the slat of the fence. “There are things in this life more frightening than dying. I assure you.” Like facing the fact he’d been a failure as a husband and father. Pleading with God for a second chance he did not deserve. Wondering if he was able to do better if his prayers were answered. But the most frightening thought of all was that of leaving Gert if he were denied.

Fred Hastings listened to Sanders confess more than he’d realized. When a man had regrets that made

death seem mild it was because he'd made a mountain of mistakes along the way. Hard for a man, any man to admit.

"Will's done with that pony. We don't need him no more this afternoon," Fred said.

* * * *

Blake found his son in the barn, rubbing polish on a saddle. "William."

William's head came up with a snap. "Everyone calls me Will now, sir."

Blake sat down on an overturned bucket. He had much to say but had no idea where to begin. He was glad the first words in his mind slipped from his mouth before he'd stopped them. "I'm proud of you." Will faced him in disbelief. "I was angry to be sure when I read the note you left, but I suppose I understand your reasoning now."

Will hung his head. "Miss Finch told me you allowed Melinda to wait to marry. If I'd talked to you about this trip instead of stowing away things might have been different."

"Perhaps," Blake replied. "Although I wished you would have come to me, I can't deny I've enjoyed this journey immensely."

"Really, Father? I was certain you'd be quite annoyed at having to leave town. With Melinda's come-out and the season just starting."

"Hmm," Blake murmured. The season. With any luck he wouldn't need to go to London till next year.

Will swallowed and his face lit with a blush. "How, how is mother?"

Blake nodded agreeably. "Fine. Your mother, sister and brother are staying at Mc Donald's home in Scotland while I'm abroad."

"They are?" Will asked.

"Yes. McDonald planned my passages on one of his ships. I should have heeded his advice on other matters as well."

Will's mouth dropped. "You spoke to him?"

"They dined with me while planning your rescue. I did, indeed speak to him but would have been far wiser to listen." Will's mouth had dropped further. "McDonald makes your mother very happy and worries prodigiously about her and her children." Blake waited for his son to comment. "Close your mouth, William. You're bound to swallow flies."

Will's eyes darted. "It's just I can barely believe you ate dinner with them."

Blake leaned back against the post behind him. "I don't suppose there is any way to explain this to you without admitting I was a terrible husband to your mother. She and you children were but one more heirloom in the Wexford collection." Blake looked straight and unwavering at William. "I have since discovered I was quite wrong."

The young man returned the stare with the same intensity. "What are we then, Father?"

Blake bit his lip to stop its trembling. Here before him was one of the moments he'd been dreading. Where the fear took his breath away and spurned the beat of his heart to racing. Was he too late to make amends? "You and your sister and brother are extraordinary. The depth of pride and love I feel for each of you is overwhelming. You are all a precious, unique gift I failed to accept. I am hoping to change that."

"We are all most fortunate to have you for our father," Will said.

Blake could do no more than nod. His composure returned with a deep breath. "I am hoping you will assist Benson back to London very shortly."

"You're not returning?"

"I would like to set things straight with Donald and Melinda, post haste. Your sister especially, but there is a matter of grave importance I must attend to here. I can not return until then."

"Miss Finch?" Will ventured.

Blake slapped his hands on his knees and stood. "Yes, William. Miss Finch. There is the delicate matter of convincing her to marry me and the upcoming birth of your brother or sister. I would very much like to be in attendance that day." Will stared at him. "I didn't tell you I helped a woman, a Mrs. Fletcher, deliver a daughter on my trip here. Was quite extraordinary. I have all intentions of being the first person my child sees in this world."

"You helped deliver a baby? Was there no midwife?"

"No. You see, just a neighbor. Tess was her name and expecting as well," Blake said. He continued then to tell William of everything he'd encountered. Of their lost luggage and carriage. Of Benson's wild manner of dress. Of the sores on his bottom from riding. Until Will howled with laughter.

A bell clanged and William stood. "Tis supper, Father. Would be rude to be late."

Blake chuckled as he followed his son, sorely concerned for his father's manners. When he stepped in the kitchen another fight brewed between the round cook and Benson. The cowboys milled around exchanging odds on who would win. Apparently all over where Blake was to be seated.

"Benson. No need to worry. I will be happy at any place," Blake said.

"But Your Grace," Benson wailed.

The kitchen quieted and Blake turned to the doorway. Gertrude stood there as if she were a deer caught in the full light of the moon. Looking pale and fragile still for her wide girth. He swept around the table and faced her to clip off a bow. "Allow me," Blake said as he escorted her the three feet to her chair. He heard sly comments and laughter from the men.

Will bristled, walked to Gert's chair and stood across from his father. "Miss Finch. I am glad to see you've joined us. You look lovely today." Will took one short step back and seated himself between Clyde and Clem.

Uncle Fred eyed the goings on and said a short prayer.

“Mr. Hastings. Tell me about the horse William broke today,” Blake said.

Uncle Fred looked up, clearly surprised at the question, and set his spoon in the bowl. “What do you want to know?”

“The markings, Father, indicate the sire or dame may have been a paint. A native American horse. She’ll be a fine mount,” William said and turned to Slim. “Wouldn’t you say so?” Will asked.

“I reckon,” Slim replied, his mouth full of food.

“I’m not so sure. Sometimes those ones never do take to the bit,” Fred replied.

The talk then was loud and raucous with each hand shouting his opinion. Benson and Cookie began to remove plates while the men sat back in their chairs still debating. Benson served Blake and William tea and they nodded their thanks.

“Oh, Miss Finch. I did forget to ask if you’d care for any.” Benson smiled broadly.

“Yes, I believe I will have tea, Benson. Thank you,” Gertrude replied.

Cookie’s hands flew to his hips. “Missy, you ain’t never wanted tea before or I’d a made it.”

“It just sounds good right now,” Gertrude said.

Cookie shook his head. “English nonsense. Aint’ nothin’ the matter with good old American coffee.”

“Speaking of England,” Luke Matson said as he stared at Blake. “When you going back? Will’s been missing his family.”

Silence reigned in the small kitchen. Blake leaned forward to fold his hands in front of him and stake his claim as Fred Hastings had mentioned. “Benson and William will travel soon to England.” Blake would make the cowboy lay down the gauntlet. Luke Matson did in the next instant.

“What about you?” the cowboy growled.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Blake’s eyes did not blink with his announcement. Just met Matson’s stare head on.

Clyde crossed his arms across his chest and shook his head. Clem whistled and leaned his chair back on two legs. Soon the table erupted in odds.

“Matson’s younger by ten years, I’d say. My two bucks are on him,” Clem said.

Pokey shook his head. “The Englander has longer arms. I match that money on reach.”

Gertrude’s hands hit the table with a thud and every head turned. “Stop it right now. I’m going to sit on the porch. I had better not hear one more word about betting.”

Blake grinned. His sassy Gertrude had stopped the chatter. What a duchess she would make.

Luke Matson leaned forward and whispered, "Will says you English boys duel about whose pants have a tighter crease. Didn't expect you to hide behind skirts."

Blake's grin dropped. "Those skirts belong to me. Make no mistake about it. I don't hide behind them. They're mine."

Luke Matson glared. "We'll see about that."

Chapter Sixteen

Gertrude was watching the sun set in a ball of orange fire from the rocker on the porch when Blake approached. "Gertrude. Are you up to taking a stroll?" he asked.

She nodded and stood to accept his hand. He tucked it in the crook of his arm and set a leisurely pace away from the house.

Finally he was close enough to Gertrude to smell the tantalizing scent of lemons. And he was randy as a bull. Hard as a rock as they strolled arm in arm. Her figure had changed. Her arms were still slender. Gertrude's face was the same other than an elusive quality he'd yet to name. But her breasts were larger. Blake groaned. Her stomach stuck out as if a massive pumpkin were under her skirts. She was magnificent.

"You told Luke Matson you're staying. Why?" she asked.

"Why did I tell him?" Blake countered.

Gertrude cocked her head. "No. Why are you staying?"

"You are expecting my child, Gertrude. There is unfinished business between us," Blake said finally.

"I told you before you needn't feel obligated." She turned her head to the prairie. "I was well aware of what I was doing. I accept the consequences."

"So will I," Blake said. He stole a look at Gertrude. Tears rolled down her face. "Why are you crying?"

"I won't let you take this baby from me," she said as she shook her hand free of his arm.

"Do you think so little of me that I would rip a child from its mother's arms? Have I been so cruel?" Blake asked.

"No," Gertrude said. "But I do know you are arrogant and high handed and used to getting your own way."

"True enough," Blake replied. She had made the comment as if he wasn't supposed to be. He was

actually feeling much better. More himself. The Duke of Wexford. After scares and births, near death and honor grudges he felt as if he were a young man again. Blake's talk with William had gone well. He told McDonald he'd not ask for Gertrude's hand again because his pride had been sorely wounded. But now, here, after all he'd faced with her beside him his confidence soared.

"Why did you come yourself for William?" she asked. "He was sure you would send someone else."

"William and I needed time to sort things out," Blake said. "And I very much wished to see you again."

"I can hardly believe that," she said.

Blake turned Gertrude to face him. He'd best proceed slowly in her state of mind yet he wished to make clear his feelings. "I have thought of you constantly since we parted at the dock. I kept thinking it would cease. But it hasn't." His eyes dropped to her lips. "I can not for my life forget how you felt in my arms. Or under me." Blake awkwardly bent over her stomach and touched his lips to hers.

* * * *

Gert's shoulders dropped with a sigh. He dropped his hand to her stomach and spread his long fingers wide. The kiss was tender and sweet. When she opened her eyes his lips were inches from hers and his eyes were still closed.

"We can be married here with your uncle and Will in attendance," Blake murmured as he stroked her cheek.

Gert stepped away from the circle of his arms and propped her fists on her missing waist. "What did you say?"

"You heard me, Gertrude. We will marry here before we return to London." Blake straightened his back. "You are the perfect duchess for me and I long to start afresh with our child."

Blake Sanders was still handsome, even more so in his American clothes. He still took her breath away when he kissed her. He was still a horse's ass. "I am not marrying you. I am not going to London. I have no intentions of playing second fiddle to any woman named Helena."

"I'll have no mistress, Gertrude. I have done a fair amount of thinking while being robbed, playing midwife and being beaten to death. I was wrong in my marriage. I told Ann as much. I never gave my union with her a real chance." Blake dropped his head with the confession. "Regardless of society's opinions I see now those accepted practices are wrong."

"It took you this long to figure this out?" Gert asked.

"Your lack of respect is astounding. Have you no understanding the crisis of conscience I've experienced to reach this conclusion?" Blake asked.

"Your son figured it all out at the ripe old age of fourteen."

Blake grabbed Gertrude's arms and pulled her as close as her stomach would allow, claiming her mouth with an intensity that shocked her. Her pirate had returned. Come back to claim her and drop her sensibilities like a coat she'd shrugged off. The smell of horse and leather met her nose. Demanding lips met her mouth. He angled his face to plunge deeper. Gert's fingers wandered soft fabric around arms too

wide to circle. This pirate was solid muscle from climbing masts and felling foes. Her pirate. Blake Sanders. She shuddered to realize the depths she'd missed this. How easy it would be to fall under his charms. Gert kicked at him awkwardly, desperate to put space between them.

Blake caught her leg and caressed the back of her thigh with his hand. "Have a care, Gertrude. My reactions are faster now than when we stood by the lake."

She stilled when he released her and bit out her reply. "Women all over London would thank me if I gelded you."

"Let us have no discussion in that vein, Gertrude," Blake said. "It is over and will not be repeated as I have said. 'Tis private, in any case."

"From what I've heard there's been nothing private about that," Gert said evenly as she dropped her eyes to the buttons of his pants, "in the last twenty years. Probably so common, London ladies sketch them from memory when they're done with their needlepoint."

"If they viewed them now, their paintings would make the lowliest whore blush," Blake shouted. "I have fought Indians, blackguards and delivered a child with a rod as stiff as board. I fear if your blow had landed it would have exploded in a thousand pieces like a vase that had been dropped to a tile floor."

Gert's eyes widened. "Oh."

Blake tilted his head and looked out over the range. "I've had no woman since you, Gertrude. Tavern wenches in lace and no bodice make me wilt briefly. Other than that I've had not a second's peace from my urgings."

Gert's thoughts passed her lips before she could stop them. "Sometimes a stallion must be put down if he's unable to well, find a mare."

"On occasion I believed a bullet to the head would be kinder than the torture I've endured," Blake stared at Gert intensely. "But, thankfully this old horse has found his mate."

Gert watched Blake retreat to the house as a shiver trailed down her arms. She could not decide what to do. She had a powerful hankering to beat him senseless. Or strip naked in front of him. For her life she could not decide which.

* * * *

Gert lay in bed and counted stars in the clear black sky. Blake Sanders was the most infuriating, confusing man she'd ever met. He calmly announced their marriage as if she hadn't refused him already. And in the next breath, told her he wouldn't have a mistress; contrary to everything she knew of his past. Through some miraculous crisis of consciousness the Duke of Wexford had concluded that he'd wronged Lady Ann and the habit of keeping a mistress was unacceptable. That in itself was shocking.

But what brought a little smile to her face was not Blake's change of heart. What forced her mouth from grin to frown and back was Blake's claim he'd been with no woman since her. And that he was highly uncomfortable. Serves him right, she thought to herself, with a tilt to her head. La de, as Elizabeth would say, and no bar girl hanging out of her dress had eased him. And even with a stomach that stuck out a yard, he'd kissed her. Passionately. Gert closed her eyes with a smile on her face.

* * * *

The following morning, she awoke to a beautiful fall day feeling better than she had in months. Gert dressed quickly determined to get caught up with all the chores she'd left behind when she went to London. A cup of tea in her hand she seated herself at the desk in Uncle Fred's small study. The stack of mail took Gert till noon to open. She opened the account books just as Blake found her.

"What are you doing? I've been wondering where you've been," Blake announced from the door.

Gert's fingertips were covered in ink and she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand as he spoke. "Catching up on correspondence and the books. Very little's been done since I left for England."

"You look tired. Have you eaten? Surely there's someone else that can see to this," Blake asked.

Gert shook her head and her unbound hair swayed. "No. Aunt Mavis taught me how to do it all before she died. Uncle Fred has a head for horses but not business."

Fred walked in and up to the desk. "Want to start fencing in the south range before winter, Gert. I'll need supplies."

"Not until I figure out all that you've spent since I've been gone. How much will you need?" Gert asked.

"Mr. Hastings. I fear you're overtaxing Miss Finch," Blake said.

Gert smiled up at them both. "Actually I feel better than I've felt in months. Good to be back in the saddle again."

Blake's mouth dropped. "You'll do no such thing. Riding these wild beasts in your fragile condition. I won't stand for it."

Fred turned to Blake exasperated. "She don't mean the saddle of a horse, ya nitwit. She means doling out the money two pennies at a time."

"If Aunt Mavis and I didn't dole out the money, we'd be living in a shack eating beans," Gert said. "What do you think you'll get for this new string of ponies?" she asked Uncle Fred.

* * * *

Blake watched their haggling in astonishment. Gertrude quoted bank accounts, mortgage payments and interest percentages. Fred shouted there'd be no bank accounts if they didn't start breaking more horses, competition was fierce he'd said. Ann Sanders had no idea if her new dress cost two pence or five hundred pounds. No lady he knew of did. Gertrude did not back down, not an inch. Conceding only to consider the expenditure after the sale of their latest stock. Fred harrumphed and growled but did not argue any longer.

Blake stood near shelves loaded with books. Gertrude had apparently forgotten his presence. Her head dropped back to her scribbling. "Seems you keep your uncle on a short leash."

Gertrude looked up and she smiled. "This ranch is profitable. I have no intentions of allowing all our hard work to be for nothing. Uncle Fred will get his supplies. But not without remembering who's in charge of the money."

“So this was merely negotiation?”

“I suppose so. We’ll come to an agreement. But my tight fist will make Uncle Fred get every penny those ponies are worth. He’ll be smug and smile and think he’s won when I draft a check for that fencing.”

Watching her smile in triumph was unsettling. His Gertrude was formidable. He may have been approaching her the wrong way all along. She was smart and capable of out-maneuvering her uncle. If he weren’t careful, she’d sidestep him as well.

“Your eyes look tired. And you must be hungry as well,” Blake said.

Gertrude sat back and stretched with a yawn. “I am tired and hungry. I have one more column to finish before I see what Cookie’s made up. I’ve come up with three different figures so far.”

Blake dropped his hands from across his chest and stepped forward. “Would you like me to take a crack at it?”

“Have you ever done this before?” she asked.

“My dear. I handle an estate ten times the size of this ranch. Wexford wealth is invested in a diversified manner,” Blake said stonily. “And after all, I am a graduate of Oxford. We can add.”

“Please do. My eyes are nearly crossed.” She stood and allowed Blake to sit at the desk. She sat down in the chair across the desk from him. When his hand moved down the column twice and he entered a figure she asked, “How are you diversified? I assume you mean your holdings?”

Blake looked up, clearly surprised with the question. “Traditionally, peers of the realm have maintained their monies in their estate only. I handled mine the same way much of my life. Friends of mine, acquaintances really, lost their family homes, as land played itself out and tenants moved to the cities for work. As a result of that I’ve invested in a wide range of companies. And the market as well.”

“From what Anthony says, anything other than traditional investments in estates is unacceptable.”

“You had this conversation with Tony?”

She shrugged. “I was curious. I didn’t understand how these huge mansions supported themselves. No one makes anything to sell as far as I could see. Excepting a fuss.”

Benson delivered a tray with small sandwiches. They ate in companionable silence. Gertrude licked her lips and pulled a tablet of paper from the corner of her desk to her lap. She tapped a pencil on her tongue and wrote.

“What are you busy with now?” he asked.

“I writing a speech,” she said. “The Suffragettes have been invited to speak at a large women’s club in Chicago.”

“A speech, you say,” he replied.

“Would you like to hear it?”

Blake listened to her fiery prose. He was not convinced, of course, but she made compelling arguments and he imagined the crowd would be on their feet, wild with excitement when delivered to sympathetic listeners.

“You’re quite passionate about this subject,” Blake said when Gertrude was done reading. “Your words are the better for it even being a well written piece. I wonder, though, if it will have the same impact when said by another.”

“I wonder as well,” Gert said with a sigh. “Maybe I’ll go to the Women’s Club myself.”

“Absolutely not,” Blake said before he could stop himself.

Gertrude leaned forward in her chair. “You have no say in the matter, Blake.”

“Yes, I do,” he said. “You’re carrying my child. I’ll not have you cavorting across the wilderness, exposed to danger and illness.”

“Cavorting across the wilderness?” Gert said with a laugh. “I’ve been traveling to Chicago since I was young girl. I think this has more to do with my politics than any thing else.”

“Your politics are your business, granted. But, you and my son or daughter are very much my domain. If you insist, I’ll accompany you,” Blake replied. He could not imagine for his life a less appealing plan but Gertrude sat back in her chair. “I’m sure there are others capable of delivering this speech.”

“Very capable,” Gertrude said.

“Well then, it is settled,” Blake replied. The room was silent, notwithstanding the jubilant victory cry in his head.

“We’ll be invited again, I imagine. I’ll plan on speaking next spring.”

* * * *

They continued their conversation well into the afternoon. Gertrude had moved to the small settee under the window to stretch out. As Blake finished rambling about one particular subject, he realized her eyes had closed. The sun glinted off of the curls in her hair. She had kicked off her shoes long ago. Her head tilted awkwardly and her mouth was open just a bit. Blake’s shoulders dropped as he looked at her. She was clever and bright. Her challenges to his opinions were well thought and Blake found himself reconsidering a few. They’d argued, discussed, agreed on some and differed on others. Blake tapped his finger to his mouth. He would never be bored. That was for certain.

Blake understood now what Tony had tried to tell him so many years ago. After Tony had married, he and Blake’s outings and long nights over brandy had diminished. Sir Anthony Burroughs had claimed his wife suited him fine for conversation. He claimed they sat up long hours, planning and discussing or just silent. Blake had not understood at the time. Now, Blake conceded, he wouldn’t miss the evenings at his clubs with his peers. They would be unnecessary except as an occasional diversion. The person he wanted to confide in, to convince or to debate with now slouched before him in slumber. Blake picked up a wool blanket from the back of the chair and draped it gently over Gertrude. He turned to the door and saw Fred. One finger came to his mouth, begging quiet.

“She’s an angel when she sleeps,” Fred whispered. “And a handful of sass when she’s not.”

The two men walked to the kitchen. Uncle Fred poured himself a cup of coffee and asked Blake if he’d join him. Blake readily agreed. There was more, much more to this woman than he’d imagined.

“None of the coffee. Thank you. But if you don’t mind I wish you’d tell me how Gertrude came to live here,” Blake asked.

Fred sat down and grimaced. “Gert never told ya, huh?” Blake shook his head. “My Mavis’s brother, the lying piece of shit that he was, lived in Ohio. Mavis tried to talk his wife Ethel into coming to live with us and bringing Gert along.”

Blake raised his brows in question.

“Yeah, I weren’t too happy about the notion of getting between a man and his wife but I went along with it for Gert’s sake. And it was Edgar that was Mavis’ blood kin. Ethel and Mavis wrote each other all time. Seems Edgar couldn’t keep his peter in his pants, no how. And cause it was usually his boss’ wife or daughter he’d diddle with, he didn’t keep a job too long neither. The last couple of times Ethel wrote she asked Mavis for money.” Fred lifted his eyes to Blake’s. “Seems they weren’t eating too good.”

“How old was Gertrude when this happened?”

“I’d be guessing eleven or so. Her ma, Ethel, died when she was twelve. Consumption got her. Mavis was in a fine fit when she got the letter from Gert saying her Ma died. She had me off buying train tickets to go fetch the girl when ole Edgar stopped by the ranch.”

Fred stood to refill his coffee. The water Blake heated for tea was boiling and he brewed the leaves while Fred continued.

“Put the girl down out of the wagon with a bundle of rags he called her clothes. Told Mavis he’d be back to get her when he struck it rich, out California way. Mavis said he’d just hawed at his nag and drove off. Leaving Gert in the middle of the yard balling her eyes out. Probably best all around I was in town that day. I’d a shot the son of a bitch.”

“Has Gertrude ever heard from him, the son of a bitch?” Blake asked.

“Not so much as a howdy-do in a letter. Nothing. That girl waited every night for her Pa to come. Mavis made up stories that he was busy making a new home for them. That he’d be back soon. My patience done expired with that nonsense. I sat Gert down one night and told her the truth. Mavis made me sleep in the barn for a week.”

“Was telling a young girl the facts the right thing to do? Looking back, would you do the same thing?” Blake asked.

Uncle Fred winced. “Can’t rightly say. I thought so for a long time. No use having this sweet thing sitting and watching and waiting for something that’d never happen.”

“What did you say?” Blake asked. He tried to imagine a dark haired twelve-year-old Gertrude hanging on every word her uncle said.

"I told her that her Pa was never coming back. When she was older, I told her that good men don't go around sleeping with somebody else's wife. Told her I never strayed from her Aunt Mavis and I never would." Fred leaned in to chuckle. "Didn't tell her Mavis would've killed me if I did."

"But you had second thoughts about what you'd told her later?" Blake asked. No wonder Gertrude adored this man. He'd fed her and clothed her and loved her enough to be honest. Even if he knew it would hurt.

"When Gert was older she decided men in general didn't treat women too good. Imagine cause how her ma ended up. That's what got her wrapped up in 'her cause.' Don't think the girl ever wanted to risk marrying someone like her daddy. So she troops around with the ugliest, fattest group of womenfolk you ever seen."

Blake chuckled as he recalled his similar words. "I described them the same way. Gertrude took none too kindly to it."

"They're a good bunch, I spect. Met 'em all a time or two. Mind ya, I think they're right most times," Fred said. He sat back and fingered the handle of his coffee cup. "My Gert's a beauty and she's had men come courting. Just seems scared to court back."

Other than being too poor to feed his family, Blake realized the similarities between himself and Gertrude's father. Sleeping with other woman, not realizing the cost to their families. Doing what they wanted, when they wanted whenever the mood struck them. Whether it be the call of California or town gossip, Edgar Finch and he had pleased themselves.

"This is why I'm thinking my Gert won't have nothing to do with you, even though she's carrying your child," Fred said and stared.

"I imagine you're right," Blake admitted. And knew he'd indeed need to curry this man's favor if he'd ever win Gertrude. "I've made many mistakes in my life. With my first wife and my children. I don't intend to repeat them." Blake stared at Fred.

"Convincing me don't matter a thimble full of booze to a drunk. It's Gert that'll make up her mind. Been doing it since she realized her pa weren't coming back. Read books, educating herself. Whatever she sets her mind to, she does."

"She is stubborn. Evidence enough with your argument this morning. Do you think you'll get your supplies for the fence?" Blake asked with a wry smile.

Fred scratched his head. "Hard to say. She's tightfisted all right but I spect that's cause of her upbringing too. But I don't argue too much. She's got us a tidy little sum in the bank."

Gert walked in yawning and stretching her arms. "What are you two talking about? What's for dinner?"

"Gotta ask Cookie," Uncle Fred said as he slammed his hat on his head and headed out the kitchen door.

"Your uncle says you have a real head for finance. I'm inclined to agree," Blake said.

Gertrude flitted her hands. "Yes, yes, I know. Women have no need to know of these matters. Uncle Fred's told me. But he also knows we wouldn't have a pot to boil water in if I didn't see to it."

“Typically women aren’t involved with business dealings. But it didn’t stop you and I think your family benefits greatly from it,” Blake said, watching her.

“I’ve met so many women in my travels that wished they had known. Down and out broke from some spendthrift father or husband. Don’t know they’re bankrupt till the sheriff calls.” Gertrude dropped her head. “I vowed a long time ago that would never happen to me.”

“Happens in London as well, Gertrude,” Blake added.

“Proves my point.” She shrugged. “Men are horses asses here and across the ocean as well.”

“Not all men. Your Uncle Fred is a fine man. You’d not deny that,” Blake said.

“No. I would never deny that. He took me in and raised me and I was a trial a time or two I imagine. Treated Aunt Mavis so lovingly,” she said wistfully. Gertrude plopped her chin in her hand and stared out the window.

Blake did the same in the chair across from her.

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

Blake stared at her. She had a lifetime of misplaced trust to get over. He could not erase or change the past but he could stay steadfast in his promise to her. “I’m not. I told you as much.”

Gertrude stood and walked to the door. She stopped and spoke without turning. “What men say and what they do aren’t usually the same.”

Chapter Seventeen

Gert awoke the next morning with energy to spare. She felt like cleaning the house from top to bottom and did just that. She put on the oldest calico dress she had, pulled the waistline up over her stomach and pulled back her hair with a bandana. Gert wiped walls and cleaned out drawers till she sat exhausted on the top step of the staircase. She heard a commotion in the yard and stood wearily to see what was going on.

When she pulled the curtain aside beside the front door she saw Esmerelda Bunchley and Mary Alice Forsyth climbing down from the stage. She watched the cowhands hurry to the barn. Only Will, Blake and Uncle Fred remained in the yard. Will and Blake each offered an arm and escorted the women to the door. Gert turned only to stare when they entered too stunned, too embarrassed to greet them. She heard Esmerelda’s voice first.

“You are too kind, sir,” Esmerelda said as she blinked up at Blake. Her three chins were bright pink against the backdrop of yards of black bombazine.

“And what a charming young man you are,” Mary Alice to Will.

There was no way to hide much longer. “Hello,” Gert said. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

Both women turned from their escorts to the sound of Gert’s voice. Huge smiles were replaced quick enough with shocked stares.

“Dear me,” Mary Alice said, “You look like a wash woman, Gertrude.”

Esmerelda’s head snapped to Mary Alice and back to Gert’s. Her voice boomed with the authority of a general. “Good God, Mary Alice. It’s not the ensemble I’m concerned about but what’s under it.”

For a few quiet moments, Mary Alice just stared. “You’re with child, Gertrude. How did this happen?”

“How in the hell do you...?” Fred began. No one was listening.

“Worse than that, Mary Alice.” Esmerelda’s lip trembled in time with the fluttering of her hand. “Our dear Gertrude must be married. I’m sure her husband will never allow her to continue with the cause.”

Esmerelda firmly believed she was the commander of her small group of warriors. Ever chastising, rarely encouraging and right in her every decision. Esmerelda had long complained of not being called to work in Washington D.C. where the battle for the vote was taking place at the center of government. Gert was not surprised the sisterhood had not called on Esmerelda Bunchley as a spokeswoman. She had long feared that Esmerelda’s righteousness was not a concern for women and their plight but rather an unvarnished hatred of men. She hoped one of Esmerelda’s sermons was not forthcoming. That hope was misplaced.

“I’m sure he’s a horrid type. As all men are we know. Does he beat you, Gertrude?” Her massive bosom heaved with each breath. “Of course he does.” Esmerelda’s arm flew into the air. “Slay the dragon, Gertrude. You will always find solace with us. Guard your pride and your body in the meantime. But we will not fail you. Not ever.” Esmerelda threw the outstretched arm out and pulled Gert’s head to her quivering chest. “We stand with each of our sisters. To the end.”

“I am not married,” Gert mumbled against black fabric.

Esmerelda stroked her hair and continued as if Gert had not spoken. “We must unite against tyranny, ladies. Unite, I say and send the miscreant ... what did you say, Gertrude?”

Gert wiggled free of Esmerelda’s hands. Her face was hot from embarrassment when she spoke. “I am not married.”

Mary Alice’s eyes widened and screamed shrilly. “Esmerelda, did you hear that? Our Gertrude’s fallen into the hands of a man who had his wicked way with her. Dear me. Forced to allow a man liberties with your body. Reduced to begging for a quick death.” The woman’s lip quivered. “And here bravely facing humiliation. Onward, Gertrude. Hold your head high. You are not accountable for the violent urgings of men. No. You are the victim.”

The situation would have been laughable had Gert not been able to hear her own words from what seemed a lifetime ago. She was not married, nor had she been forced but she wondered if she’d ever convince Esmerelda or Mary Alice otherwise. She certainly could not begin the explanation in her stained

calico dress. "Let me change, ladies. Uncle Fred will see to refreshments for you. Will, would you please get their trunks?"

"They're staying?" Will asked.

Benson entered the foyer. "I will see to beverages, Miss Finch. Please be seated, ladies," he said and swept a hand to the sitting room.

Gert went to her room and pulled on a dress she'd just made roomy enough for a ballooning stomach. She brushed through her hair and pulled it back in a knot at her neck. Gert hurried, wondering what Blake or Uncle Fred would say to Esmerelda and Mary Alice's conclusions. She ran to the sitting room and stopped short to catch her breath and composure. She pasted a smile on her face.

"I'm so surprised you've made the trip. Mary Alice. Esmerelda. I hope you haven't gone out of your way."

"Your letter was so vague, dear," Mary Alice said. "We didn't understand why you'd given up traveling. Until now of course."

"We were in the area and thought we'd visit. I'm certainly glad we did," Esmerelda said.

"You're obviously in need of our guidance now more than ever," Mary Alice said and sat forward. "What ever shall we do?"

Esmerelda boomed the answer. "We'll find the lowly creature that stole Gertrude's innocence." She narrowed her eyes. "He must be made to pay."

Mary Alice's mouth turned from a righteous frown to a smile in a second. "And Gertrude, dear, please introduce us to these gentlemen. Your uncle we've met but this gentleman and the young man and the fellow that brought tea. Quite an outfit he wears, Gertrude. They all have such wonderful accents."

Blake had a conniving look in his eye as if he knew of her discomfort and mocked her. Had she sounded this shrill to him? She would not give him the advantage of introducing him with his title. "Blake Sanders and his son, William. And Benson." Gert gestured to the door where Benson stood. "Miss Esmerelda Bunchley. Miss Mary Alice Forsyth. They are two of my traveling companions for the cause."

Esmerelda primly smiled. "I hear England is in dire need of our voices. Is that true, Gertrude?"

There was no one in dire need of this strident voice, Gert thought. Had she been as consumed as Esmerelda? Were there no pleasantries? No inquiries about her travels or the sights she'd seen? Was she as jaded? As single minded? Not quite, but nearly. Or was she just weary? Tired of flouting convention? Exhausted from holding at bay the things she dearly craved? It was true, she thought to herself. Their cause even for all its rightness, Gert only held as a shield. Against the risk of finding a man like her father. Of falling in love with him. Gert stole a glance at Blake. It no longer mattered. She'd already tumbled.

And she admitted to herself fleeting wishes for home and children and love. For a man, not a pirate. No daydream or fairy tale she could mold in her fantasies. A real man, faults and virtues all rolled together. But she'd already given herself to a man. One exactly like Edgar Finch.

* * * *

Gertrude looked stricken, Blake thought. As sorrowful and ashamed as he could imagine. Her vivacity, her exuberance, her laughter were missing. These so-called friends of hers prattled on without hearing a thing that she'd said. She was not married, so they presumed she'd been forced. And for all their words of sympathy, Blake could hear the undercurrent of superiority, especially from the large, beribboned, flowerpot in black. Now she was subtly speculating on Gertrude's behavior.

"As we've warned our sisters so often, never allow yourself to be in harm's way. Our attitudes, while unusual, have always included the strictest adherence to virtue." Esmerelda looked severely at Gertrude. "The first step to falling prey to a man's power is to fall from the chastity God bestowed on us."

"Ladies," he said as he stood.

"Yes, Mr. Sanders," Esmerelda asked.

"Miss Finch's virtue is not up for speculation," Blake said.

"Why, of course, sir. I'm sure Gertrude never realized she'd been flaunting her charms. But many men as you know are unable to curb their violent tendencies. We must be on constant guard..." Esmerelda trailed off as she looked up at Blake's face.

"I was not forced. It was consensual. The gentleman asked me to marry him. I declined," Gertrude said.

The women's mouths dropped. A raindrop landing would have sounded like thunder boomed in the still room.

"Why, Gertrude, I hardly know what to say," Esmerelda whispered.

"Be the first time," Fred commented.

"Why did you refuse, Gertrude?" Mary Alice asked.

"I ... I," was all Gertrude managed.

"I am the father of Gertrude's child," Blake said evenly. Two sets of feathered hats and wide eyes flew to him. "I took advantage of Miss Finch in the basest way. I am wholly unworthy of her. She is too fine a woman to be saddled with a blackguard like me. But I will spend as much time as necessary to convince her I've changed."

"As I have said, it was consensual. He bears no more blame than I," Gertrude added quietly.

Mary Alice tilted wildly in her chair before nearly careening to the floor in a faint. Benson caught her. "Make way," the valet said as he struggled to his feet and headed for the settee to lay his yellow clad burden down. "Miss Forsyth," Benson called as he fanned her prostrate form.

"You ... you were intimate with this man?" Esmerelda whispered as Gertrude rushed to Mary Alice's side.

"Yes," she said.

"There will be no more questions in that vein, madam," Blake said. "Our relationship will not be fodder for your gossip or censure." To Blake's satisfaction the woman's mouth snapped shut.

Gertrude returned her attentions back to Mary Alice, who was moaning and thrashing about. Benson rubbed her hand and called her name. Mary Alice's eyes fluttered open. She stared at Benson as if awakening from a dream. "Are you my knight in shining armor?"

"I believe I am, madam," Benson answered. "Allow me to brew a cup of tea for you. I imagine that will buoy your spirits admirably." Benson rose from his bent knee and walked out of the room, a blank look on his face.

Esmerelda stood and faced Gertrude. "What do you intend to do about this, Gertrude?"

"About what, Esmerelda?" Gertrude said.

Esmerelda huffed and puffed. "You are an unmarried woman, carrying a child. You must marry this man. Even if he is well, a man."

"Women usually do marry men, Esmerelda," Gertrude replied.

Esmerelda's lips tightened and her eyes narrowed. "This is no time for silliness, Gertrude. The storm of ridicule will sweep you under." Esmerelda straightened to her full five feet. "And to think, after all I'd hoped to teach you. To denounce your convictions in such a blatant fashion. I'm ashamed of you."

Blake had had quite enough. So had William and Uncle Fred if the looks on their faces were to be believed. "Miss Finch bears no shame. You on the other hand have been a barefaced hypocrite. Proclaiming friendship while finding her lacking. She is in no need of your harsh judgment. I will not allow it. Especially from a woman who has no understanding of her troubles."

"And I sure as hell can't imagine a man who'd want to tumble a fat old windbag like you," Fred added.

"Well said, Mr. Hastings." Will nodded.

Esmerelda's mouth had dropped to her wide chest. "I'll not be spoken to in this fashion."

Fred ambled to the door and whistled to one of hands to bring the wagon. He turned back to the group. "Ain't none of us is goin' to speak to you anyway, anyhow. 'Specially with you being dropped off in town. I'll put your trunk in the wagon."

"Well, I never," Esmerelda said.

Gertrude turned and stared at her. "No, Esmerelda, I don't imagine you have."

"Come along, Mary Alice. We are not welcome here," Esmerelda said, mouth pinched.

"If Gertrude doesn't mind, I'd like to stay awhile and visit. I haven't heard a thing about her travels." She swallowed as she looked at Gertrude and then Esmerelda.

"You're welcome to stay, Mary Alice," Gertrude said.

"Thank you. I find I'm fascinated with London." She looked up at Benson and smiled.

"Heaven forbid, Mary Alice. Get up. I won't leave you here in the clutches of these, these heathens,"

Esmerelda boomed.

“I dare say, madam,” Benson said. “If the lady is desirous of our company she is indeed welcome to stay. Civility is at the forefront of our offer.” Benson paused briefly. “And we are most desirous that she stay.”

Esmerelda clearly defeated but not bowed, turned sharply and headed out the door.

Mary Alice fanned herself and giggled, “Oh, dear.”

Gertrude and Benson helped Mary Alice up the steps to lie down. Blake, William and Fred plopped into chairs.

“I did not like that woman, not one little bit,” William said sharply.

Fred harrumphed and looked out the window. “The one upstairs or the one slapping Clyde’s hand away while he tries to help her in the wagon.”

“Miss Bunchley, I mean, sir. My mother wouldn’t approve of my language, but she’s a witch.” Will’s head tilted in thought. “The other one doesn’t seem as bad.”

“Benson doesn’t think so, that’s quite certain,” Blake said and chuckled. He sobered quickly. “The other one I could have gladly strangled for upsetting Gertrude and insulting her but I feared my hands wouldn’t quite reach around her neck.”

Uncle Fred stood and put his hat on. “Come on Will. There’s work to do. Oh, hey Sanders, the stagecoach delivered the mail. There’s one there for you the whole way from Scotland. It’s on my desk.”

Blake hurried to Fred’s office. He opened the envelope. One page was from McDonald, the other two from Ann.

Wexford,

Caught Melinda as she attempted to steal out in the middle of the night, on her way to elope with Connor McDougal. His father, the McDougal laird, is my closest neighbor. Melinda is crying at this moment and has been since I found her slipping out the servant’s door. I love the girl as my own but my ears are ringing and she tests my patience, surely. McDougal is a brawny lad and I don’t look forward to killing him, being he’s my oldest friend’s son but I’ll do what I have to. He stares at Melinda so hard I fear her fair hair will catch fire or he’s about to devour her in front of us. Your daughter fans her lashes and stares back. You and I both know what those looks mean. I’m thinking I should send Melinda back to your home and away from here but need Burroughs’ consent to keep her before I do. Felt you needed apprised of the situation.

McDonald

Blake’s hands shook wildly. The letter was dated nearly a month ago. Some large son of a laird in the wilds of Scotland may have his Melinda in his clutches at this very second. Some beefy heathen dragging her along to a cave of a castle, never to be heard from again. He unfolded Ann’s portion of the letter.

Blake,

Donald is fine, riding horses and exploring McDonald's home. He's grown a foot, I imagine since you've seen him. He misses you.

I pray you have found William and he is safe. I know Miss Finch is able and smart, but I still worry. Is he eating well? If Miss Finch's home is in the wilderness, who sees to his bed and his clothes? I know these worries sound silly to you but I cannot help myself. I am still his mother after all and I don't rest for imagining him thin and wan without the comforts of home. Have you two come to a truce of sorts?

Melinda has been to a whirlwind of parties and balls and she and Claire have become fast friends. Men and women admire Melinda wherever she goes. There is a small matter that I'm sure McDonald exaggerated wildly concerning Melinda. A young man, Connor McDougal, has been paying her court as young men do to young women as charming and as beautiful as our daughter. Connor is handsome as well and Melinda has accepted his attentions. He will be laird of his clan one day but I'm afraid you'll find his position lacking for the daughter of a duke. His family is prosperous and his sisters and mother gently bred. The McDougal laird, his father, is well, more Scottish. And so is the son. Throwing poles at festivals and tossing huge sacks over their shoulders as if they weighed nothing. But by the by, our Melinda may have fallen in love. And I do believe Connor will tear this castle down in her pursuit if need be. But fear not. McDonald and his family guard her and Claire most faithfully.

Please write and apprise me of poor William's condition.

Ann

At some point in the reading Blake had stood up. He didn't realize his position until he plopped into a chair behind him. Blake reached for the decanter of whiskey on Fred's desk and uncorked it. Seeing no glass, he guzzled from the bottle. The wildly varying accounts had his head spinning. Ann was worried William was wan and pale all the while he was tan and gaining muscles and confidence by the day. She claimed McDonald exaggerated but yet Blake did not think her new husband was given to flights of fancy. His Melinda was being pursued by an untitled heathen capable of tearing down a castle with his bare hands.

"Esmerelda's gone now and Mary Alice is really a nice woman. She's resting. Blake, what is the matter?" Gertrude asked from the door. "What is that?"

Blake stared at her for the longest time. "My life has fallen apart. Spiraled out of control. I have no say over anything, anyone."

"What are you talking about, Blake?" she asked.

Blake stood and ran his fingers through his hair. "Everything I've been sure of, valued, everything has changed. I fear I'm too old to take it all in."

"Are the children alright, Blake?" Gertrude asked. "You are acting very strangely."

Blake sat down at the desk and folded his hands in front of him. "You arrived in England and my life changed, Gertrude. And I've no rules any longer to rely on." He picked the letters up from the desk and stared at them. "And when problems arise I haven't the foggiest idea what to do. I can no longer hide

away at my club or forget things in the arms of a mistress.”

“I’m sure Helena will welcome you back, Blake.”

Blake heaved a breath, angry. “I don’t want Helena. I want you. Ever since you smacked my nose with your hand as I tried to kiss it, nothing has been the same. You waltzed into my life and announced I was worthless after knowing me a week. You charmed my children to the point that William followed you across an ocean. I have found I liked your silly little country and most of its inhabitants. I dragged Benson three hundred miles out of our way as I chased sunsets.” Blake grabbed the neck of his shirt. “I fear I will never be satisfied without my Levi’s and six-shooter.”

“I didn’t drag you across an ocean. You came here on your own. And who cares what you wear or if you got lost?”

Blake stood and slammed his hands on the desk. “I’m not talking about my clothes, Gertrude. I’m talking about me. I’ve changed. I managed to escape outlaws, skin a rabbit and deliver a baby. And all the while I thought about you. Do you know I rocked a new born infant to sleep in a mud hut?” Blake straightened and drew his hands to his hips. “I never once rocked any of my own children. I have done poorly by them and vowed to make a fresh start with you and this child.” Blake’s head dropped. “And now I fear I won’t be able to. My newfound understanding is tearing me in two.”

“Sanders,” she shouted. “Get hold of yourself. You’re making no sense.”

Blake took a deep breath and closed his eyes as he slipped into the red leather chair. “Melinda has tried to run away from McDonald’s home to elope. I know nothing of these people. There is very little Melinda wants she does not succeed in gaining.”

“You are worried then?” she asked.

Blake’s shoulders lifted on a shrug and he laughed grimly. “Worried, you ask? I just realized I needed, well, wanted to get to know my daughter and she is in danger of being hauled away like a sack of flour over a moor.”

“What did you mean your new understanding is tearing you in two?”

“Ah, Gertrude. Don’t you know? If I tend to my daughter an ocean away, I will not be here when our child arrives. I promised myself I would be at your side.”

“I never expected you to be here. I knew full well what I was doing, Blake.” She twisted a long strand of hair in her fingers. “Granted, I was not thinking of a child at that moment but I knew, Blake.” She whispered the words. “I knew.”

Blake stared hard at her. He leaned forward in the chair. “What were you thinking of Gertrude? Was your mind far away, like mine, in emotions I’d never felt or wanted to? Can you honestly say we were merely swept along in passion? Can you look me in the eye and tell me we didn’t make love but just had sex?”

“I don’t know.” Gertrude’s lip trembled wildly. “I had no experience to compare it with.”

Blake stood and walked around the desk to the door. He stopped and dropped his head, hand on the knob. “I’ve had more experience than necessary. Experience I’m no longer proud of. Whatever you

choose to believe about me or about that night, I will tell you with certainty, it was far beyond mere sex.”

* * * *

Blake went to the corrals and asked Fred and William to talk to him inside.

“I got lots to do today, Sanders. What do ya want?” Uncle Fred asked as he poured coffee and sat down at the table beside William.

Blake told them of McDonald and Ann’s letters. William’s eyes were wide and Fred shook his head.

“So you see, I am in a quandary. Of my own making I might add.” Blake said as he sat down across from the men. “I have a daughter in Scotland trying to marry a man I’ve never met who may abuse her for all I know. Make her miserable at the least.” Blake heaved a breath. “And I’ve got Gertrude in the States with my promise to be here when our child arrives. And I’ve yet to convince her to marry me.”

“I’ll be here for Gert, ya know. It won’t be like she’s going through this alone,” Fred said.

Blake laughed hoarsely. “But you know as well as I if I leave, Gertrude will believe the worst of me.”

“You can come back, sir,” William added. “If you’d like, I’ll stay with Miss Finch till the babe is born.”

“I know you would, son. And I know you are missing home greatly. No, this is not your dilemma William, but mine,” Blake said.

“There is no dilemma,” Gertrude said from the doorway.

“Thought you were napping,” Blake said brusquely.

“No. I’ve been sitting in Uncle Fred’s office thinking,” she replied. “I think you should go, Blake. Go to Melinda. You’ll never forgive yourself if you don’t.”

“And leave you behind?” Blake asked. “I promised....”

Gertrude covered Blake’s hand with her own. “I know you promised. And I think you gave your word with all intentions of keeping it. But I’ve decided to marry Luke Matson.”

“You can’t.”

“Yes, Blake, I can,” she replied. “He will be a good husband for me, I think. Esmerelda is right about one thing. I must marry.”

“Then marry me,” Blake said. “I’ve asked three times. I don’t understand why you will marry him and not me.”

* * * *

Blake had changed. His journey alone was a testament of some kind. Of what, she was unsure. He looked different for certain. He said he wanted her. He had defended her to Esmerelda. But Blake’s guilt over his inattention to his children reached to her and his unborn child. It was clear he wanted desperately to reach Melinda. The look on his face told not a tale of duty to his family name but rather the look of a

father hoping and praying to do his best for a daughter. Weighed against his obligation to her.

Gert felt tears on the edge of her eyes. He had said nothing of love, of some elusive feeling, yes, but not love. What predicament would end his obsession with his newfound conscience? In time, no doubt, these changes would fall by the wayside and he would once again be the Duke of Wexford. He had had a lifetime and centuries of tradition pounded into his head to behave one way. How could she honestly believe, how could she be true to the vow she made to herself and to her mother so very long ago, that Blake Sanders was anything but what he always had been.

She blinked back tears as she pictured herself holding the hand of her mother at her deathbed. Promising the woman who'd birthed her and loved her to do better. *Never tie yourself to a man like your father. Know he'll love you, Gertie, and be true. Know he'll always be there for you. Know in your heart that you are the only one in his.* She looked at Blake. And she, so like her mother, loved a man unable to be true.

Blake would never know it was him she spoke of rather than Luke Matson. "I love him." Blake's intake of breath was audible. He rose slowly and left the kitchen.

William stood to follow his father outside but stopped at the threshold. Blake Sanders was crouched, leaning against a tree, shoulders shaking. Will backed up in the shadow of the porch near an open window.

Uncle Fred stared at Gert as he had when she was girl, underfoot or in trouble. "That's the biggest bunch of horseshit I ever heard. And I've heard some whoppers in my day."

"It's best for all concerned Blake go to Melinda."

Fred turned her towards him and shook her shoulders. "What about you, Gert? You don't love Luke Matson. You love that damn Brit. Ya told me so yourself."

Tears poured down Gert's cheeks. "And he'll never love me. Don't you see? And I made a promise to Ma I'd never marry a man like my father."

Fred stared at her. "I never thought I'd say this to ya, girl. Never thought there'd be cause." He waited till she looked at him. "You're a fool."

Chapter Eighteen

The stab to Blake's heart was painful as if a dagger had been thrust there. He knew now, as he had never known before what poets meant when they spoke of heartbreak. Nothing on this earth or in his life had prepared him to endure the pain that now tore his heart in half. The woman he loved, loved another.

Blake had near convinced himself to say those three words in his heart. But then his Gertrude had gone and said it. About another man. He stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. The old Duke of

Wexford would have ranted. Having his way through intimidation and money. Assuming all those around him owed him homage by some fluke of parentage. Insulated from every thing good life had to offer, blinded by rote and habits born of centuries. Without Gertrude nothing would matter. He would go quietly and allow Gertrude the happiness Matson would bring her.

Blake saw William approach and turned his head away to wipe his eyes.

“Father?”

Blake studied William. How clear his sympathy was. Not belittlement or pity, for certain. Blake didn’t deserve a son as good as the one before him. “I’m fine, William. I think we’d best plan to leave on the morrow. I want to get to Melinda as soon as possible.”

“I heard Miss Finch talking to her uncle,” Will began.

Blake could not bear one more thought of Gertrude at that moment. He held up his hand and smiled with resignation. “I’ll go talk to Benson. We leave at first light.”

Blake found Benson sitting beside Miss Forsyth on the flowered davenport. He waited till the valet joined him in the hall. “I wish to leave tomorrow morning. Is that enough time for all to be in order?”

“Yes, sir, of course. We have no trunks to speak of.” Benson turned his head to Miss Forsyth before continuing. “Your Grace?”

Blake watched Benson’s eyes shift from the blond woman to his folded hand and finally to Blake’s face. “Go on, Benson. We’ve been through far too much up to this point to stand on formalities now. Say your piece.”

“I ... I would like to resign my post,” Benson said abruptly, eyes wide.

“Somehow I knew that’s what you were going to say. What will you do?” Blake asked.

“Miss Forsyth has a small home in Chicago and assures me I would do well with a clothing shop,” Benson said. “I will find lodging near her and look for an appropriate store front.”

Blake tilted his head and put his hands on Benson’s shoulders. “I’m glad for you, Benson. This trip has truly been an adventure, has it not?”

“Yes it has, sir. And it is quite possible I will convince Miss Forsyth to allow an ancient valet to court her. I do believe we would suit even on this short acquaintance. ”

Blake smiled. “I hope I’ve been as good a companion to you as you have to me. But I fear Miss Forsyth will outshine me in many ways.”

Benson shook his head firmly. “No, no, sir. It has been a great honor to serve you. You are the finest of men.”

Blake pulled the remaining money from his money belt. Benson hurried to undo his. “No, Benson. Keep it. And this share as well. You’ll be needing something to start with.”

Benson’s mouth dropped. “I couldn’t, sir. I have some saved at home in my quarters. I was hoping you

would use it to ship my belongings.”

“Absolutely not. You will keep this all and I will ship your things as well,” Blake said.

The valet’s head dropped and his lip trembled briefly. “Thank you, sir. As I have said, you are too kind. Would you like me to see to Master William’s and Miss Finch’s packing as well?”

“William has as little as I and Miss Finch will not be joining me on my voyage.”

“She is wise, Your Grace. Not risking her health with travels.” Benson smiled. “She will be ready to cross the ocean in a few short months.”

“Miss Finch will not be joining me, Benson. Ever,” Blake said softly. “And I’ve a favor to beg of you now. A task I have no right to ask of you. But it is of great importance to me.”

“Anything, Your Grace.”

“Miss Finch and Miss Forsyth are good friends, I understand,” Blake continued to Benson’s nod. “I wish ... I wish to know if there is anything she ever needs.” Blake faltered and began again. “I want her to be happy. Write me, Benson. If you ever think my help is required. I will trust your judgment with my son or daughter. And with her.”

“Of course, Your Grace. I would be honored to watch after her,” Benson said and stared hard at his employer. “If there is anything I’ve learned, it’s that patience is oft times required when we feel the least inclined to grant it. Patience and love. They will win out. You will see, sir.”

Blake Sanders clipped a formal bow to his valet. Benson’s head snapped to attention and returned the salutation.

* * * *

Early the next morning, Blake watched Gertrude as she slept. She moaned and slept fitfully, tossing from side to side. Her hair was the color of coal and waved around her face like a half mask. The eyes he knew were a unique green, a color he would not see again. Her hands held her stomach as if already protecting their child. Her long legs shifted from under her nightgown. Silky and white. He drew a deep breath and touched her face. Knowing this vision would need to suffice. Blake pulled an envelope from his pocket and slipped it into her hand. He kissed her forehead and then left her. To put an ocean between he and his love.

Fred and Benson shook hands with William and Blake. Fred guffawed and pulled William into his arms and slapped him loudly on the back. Blake didn’t mount the horse Fred had given him to ride to the train station just yet. He had one more detail to attend to. Near as hard as kissing Gertrude goodbye.

In the bunkhouse, Blake pulled a sleeping Luke Matson to his feet. Cookie lit a lamp and the hands in their red under drawers listened warily as Blake spoke.

“She loves you Matson. Not I. I will concede defeat on that point,” Blake hissed to the groggy man hanging in his grip. “But if I were ever to hear that she were unhappy. If I were ever to hear you’d disgraced her. If I were ever to hear you didn’t treat her as the priceless diamond that she is, I promise you, I will cross the ocean and tear your heart out of your chest.”

Matson nodded wide-eyed. Blake dropped him to the floor. Not a word was spoken as Blake Sanders, walked silently out of the bunkhouse. William stayed for a moment after his father passed him. He met the eye of every man there. Father and son rode into the dawn.

* * * *

Gert awoke sweating and crying. She had slept late. The air in her room was sticky and thick. Tears rolled down her face. Am I back to my blubbering? Gert wondered. Her hand came up to wipe her face. She clutched a letter in her fist and her heart leaped in her throat. Blake's neat script etched her name. She laid it down carefully on her pillow as if it might shatter. As her heart surely was. Gert knew what the letter said without reading a word. He was gone.

Gert finally emerged from her room after mealtime. The letter tucked away in her pocket, unopened. She crept into the kitchen, hoping to make tea and hurry back to her upstairs. But Uncle Fred sat there holding a mug of coffee, apparently waiting for her to come in.

"Sanders and Will left before daybreak," he said.

Gert nodded and headed to the stove to warm water. "I assumed he'd want to go as soon as possible."

"Will said goodbye. He was right torn about not telling ya himself. Wanted to thank ya for the greatest time of his life." Fred got no response from Gert. "Sanders wouldn't wait."

"He's worried about Melinda."

Fred leaned forward in his chair. "Ya think that's why he tore outa here in the middle of the night?" Gert stirred her tea and Fred continued. "He left me a letter."

Gert turned in a hurry. "What did it say?"

"Says he planned on depositing a whole big pile of money in Fletcher's bank here in town. Sposed ta use it for you and the baby when ever ya want. Gave me his address too. Just in case I might need ta get in touch with him."

Gert leaned on the sink, her massive middle weighing her down. "I never wanted his money."

"Ya don't have ta marry Luke Matson, Gert," Fred said as he stood. "I'll guard ya and with Sanders' money...."

"This child will need a father. Luke's kind and I think he cares about me."

Fred spread his hands wide. "Why, Gert? Why are ya doing this? The baby's father wants to marry ya. And ya love him so much I'm plum tired of worrying about ya. Marry him Gert. A man goes to the pains of taking care of ya like this deserves better. Ya know he lifted Luke outa his bunk this morning with one hand. Threatened to come back and kill him ifn he ever heard Matson hurt ya."

"I can't," Gert said as she withered into a chair.

"Tell me why, Gert? Just tell me why and I'll leave off the questions," Fred said as he sat down beside her to gather her hands in his.

Tears rolled down her face. She wiped them away. Fred waited as she swallowed and stared hard at the wall. "Ma begged me as she was dying to never marry a man like my Pa. Blake isn't poor, he'd keep food on the table but he'd tire of me and move on." She bowed her head and continued softly. "He'd have a mistress like he's always done." Gert lifted her tear stained face to her uncle. "He doesn't love me."

"What else did yer Ma say?"

"To marry a man who'd love me and be true. Never make the mistakes she had." Gert's hand came to her lips and her eyes wandered. "It killed her you know."

"Consumption got yer mother, Gert. And I won't believe for one second that Blake Sanders don't love you. He might not have the words in him but a man's actions count more and you know it." Fred rubbed her hands softly. "Ya know I loved yer Aunt Mavis with all a my heart." Gert nodded and smiled. Fred dropped his head with the admission. "I never told her till the night that she died."

Gert shook her head in wonder. She had lived with the couple nearly all of her life. She knew Fred loved Mavis as surely as she knew she loved Blake. "All those years?" she asked.

Fred nodded and swallowed. "All them years." He wiped a calloused hand across his eyes. "Ya know what my Mavis said when I told her? Said she knew all along. Said she knew I loved her and them words ya keep in yer heart don't always need said. I go to her grave and tell her everyday though. Sure wish I'd said 'em more when she lived."

"I love you, Uncle Fred."

"I know ya do, Missy. I love you, too."

Gert pulled the letter from her pocket. "Blake left me this."

"What'd it say?"

"I haven't read it." Gert turned the envelope over in her hand. "I don't know if I'm ready."

"Ready for what Gert?"

The day seemed to be made for confessions. "When I came back here, expecting, I had resigned myself to never seeing him again. Then he came," Gert said softly. "And I let myself think, dream of what it would be like to marry him. Have a family." She stared at the letter she held. "When I read this I'll know in my heart my pirate has sailed. For good."

"Listen to yourself, Gert. You all got yourself convinced you'll never be happy. Convinced the man you want, never wanted you. And then going and telling him some fool nonsense about Luke Matson. That's why Sanders left, Gert," Fred said. "Don't ya see? He loves you enough to let you be."

"He'd have left anyway. Whether I married him or not," Gert whispered.

Fred sat back on his chair and rubbed his hand the length of his face. "Ya don't know...."

"Yes I do," Gert shouted as she shoved back her chair and stood. Her hair flew wildly and tears poured down her face. She was near hysterical and could not control what she said. "My father left me. Told me

he'd come back and never did. What does a twelve year old do to make their father hate them so much?"

Fred held his hand out to her. "Now, Missy. Settle down. You're confusing the matter. Edgar Finch was the one wrong. Not you."

But Gert was too far-gone in old pain to listen. "He told me that day. That day he brought me here," Gert whispered. "Told me I was just like Ma. Too tall already. Too tall and ugly to hold a man's attentions for very long. That I'd convince a man somewhere along the line to get under my skirts. Then the poor fool'd have to marry me. Just what Ma did when Pa got drunk one time at a saloon." Gert turned watery green eyes to her uncle. "I was twelve when he told me."

"Ah, Gert."

"And that's exactly what happened. I knew when I woke up that night Blake had been drinking. He would've left if I hadn't begged him to stay. I wanted him to love me so much, wanted at least to have a memory of love so badly I trapped him. Just like Ma did to Pa," Gert whispered.

"You ain't tall and ugly. That bastard done said all that to make his own self feel better. And I don't think you trapped Sanders. I think ya wanted him and loved him already. But more important than all that is that your Brit came for you. Something your Pa never did. Cause he loves you. Same reason he left."

Gert stared at Fred, bleary eyed. "He left because he loves me?"

Fred nodded. "Men folk are different than women, Gert. Women want to raise their children right and make 'em a home to do it in. Want their man to love 'em and their youngins'. Men just want their woman to be happy. Sanders proved to me he loves you when he rode out of here at dawn."

Gert tilted her head and held back another flood of tears, teetering on the brink of hope. "Do you really think he left because he thought it would make me happy?"

"I know it, Gert. I know it."

Gert glanced nervously about the room wondering if she'd allowed the specter of Edgar Finch's own misery to taint every decision she'd ever made. Had she walked her life in a fog of unworthiness, too terrified to venture into the light? Had she allowed her father's taunt to set her course even as she railed across the country trying to convince women to set their own path? She had. Someone cleared their throat in the room and Gert looked up.

"Excuse me, Miss Finch," Benson said.

Mary Alice flew into the room smiling, behind him. "Gertrude! Benson is going to move to Chicago and open a clothing store. What do you think? I think he'll do just fine." She slipped her arm into the stoic servant's crooked elbow and smiled up at him.

"A clothing store?" Gert said.

Mary Alice nodded. "Chicago's booming and I know just the place for him to get started."

"We will impose on your hospitality no longer, Miss Finch. Miss Forsyth and I are off to town to check the train schedule and then will travel to Chicago." Benson said and smiled broadly. "But before we go,

I'd like to make sure you have Miss Forsyth's post number and that we may have yours."

"I would like to keep in touch with you both," Gert said and heaved herself from the chair to find pencil and paper.

Benson read her address and tucked the paper in his vest pocket. "I mustn't lose this," he said as he tapped his chest. "The Duke of Wexford has entrusted me to keep an eye on you and I will not fail." His face sobered. "You must promise me, Miss Finch. If you are ever in need you shall write. I have a great debt to the Duke to fulfill. He was most insistent yesterday. Whatever would be needed to ensure the comfort and happiness of you and your child is to be met, post haste."

"He said that?" Gert asked.

Benson nodded. "Most definitely. I've known the duke since he was in short pants. And I will say he asked this of me in a fashion I'd never seen." Benson looked Gert in the eye. "His intensity and desperation were most obvious. He has entrusted to me the guardianship of a most valued commodity."

"Sanders would feel that way about his child, Benson," Gert said. "For all his blustering and faults, he loves his children."

Benson shook his head and stepped to Gert, gathering her hand in his. "Oh, it wasn't his child he was most concerned about." He saw Gert's head tilt in question and he smiled. "'Twas you."

Gert spent the rest of the day in a fog, helping Mary Alice prepare to leave. She battled her own demons and pulled Blake's letter from her pocket six times. Her back was sore and her face a mess with red swollen eyes and nose. But she smiled until she finally sat in Mavis' rocker by the window in her room. Holding the letter, turning it over in the moonlight, stealing one more moment believing he loved her. She blew a deep breath and opened the envelope.

My Dearest Gertrude,

I have never been one to write poetry or find words for the deepest feelings in my heart. I do not believe I've ever had cause to. Until now. It is imperative to me that you understand my feelings. You have changed my life in ways I am sure you are unaware of. I have been too long lost in centuries of tradition and self-importance to understand the greatest gifts I'd been granted were all around me. Waiting for me to see them. I would have gone to my grave believing balls and society held a candle to my children. That my horses and homes could compare to what you've surrounded yourself with. Your family of cowhands and Uncle Fred. Your vast wilderness and sunsets. I only pray it is not too late for my children to understand how much I love them. I owe you a debt I am unable to repay.

I've found recently that there is much of my life to regret. Be assured that does not include one instant in your presence. From the moment I first kissed you, to the night that we made love to the second I saw your round stomach holding my child; I experienced a rightness I cannot begin to describe. I will cling to that rightness, to those memories until I go to the hereafter. My heart will forever be in your keeping.

You deserve every happiness this life has to offer. You are kind and bright and courageous and sometimes most endearingly contrary. You will make the most wonderful mother to my child. I fear though I will be envious always of my son or daughter. They will look in your eyes and see love. Hold

your hand and feel love. Comfort you or be comforted and be loved. Having you each minute of the day to know that love does indeed exist. In your laughter, in your smile and in your touch.

You are beautiful, Gertrude. Did I ever tell you? Ah, that will most certainly be the only regret of my time spent with you. If you are still inclined to grant me one wish, I would be most eternally grateful. Be happy and well, Gertrude. As you have said on many occasions I am selfish and high-handed. So you must give me leave to be so once more. The privilege of loving you falls to your husband in the future. But for today, just today allow me this. Know I love you.

Your Servant,

Blake Sanders

Gert stared at the moon till it faded. And then to the sun as it peaked over the horizon. He loved her.

* * * *

Fred Hastings awoke from a sound sleep with a start. Gert was on the floor beside his bed, pulling out his battered black suitcase. She sat back on her haunches, saw his open eyes and graced him with a beautiful smile.

“Hurry up, Uncle Fred,” she said as she pulled herself from the floor. “I’m nearly packed.”

Fred yawned and stretched and wiped his hand down over his whiskers. “Where we going?”

“England. Come on get up,” Gert said as she sailed out of the room.

Gert sat on the edge of her bed in the room and wondered if she would ever see her home again. The thought was not nearly as frightening as first imagined. Very little is, she supposed. The baby moved and rolled and Gert smiled as her hand came to her belly.

“Hang on, little one. We’re off to find your father and that means we have to sail the whole way across the ocean.” And she knew as well she might never sail back. But it hardly mattered. Blake loved her.

Chapter Nineteen

Blake stood at the rail of the ship as he did every day, letting the wind and the sun hit his face. A feeling previously foreign to him, had settled over his mind and his body. He was not angry, not afraid, nor indignant. Not feeling superior or pompous or powerful. Blake’s heart hurt and sent tremors of pain to every limb of his body. Meals at the captain’s table did not tempt him. Other passenger’s attempts at conversation found him with nothing to say. William sat or stood beside him silently. In a mature way for his near fifteen years, allowed his father solitude while all the while within reach.

Blake's list of errors with Gertrude was endless. He tallied and maneuvered them by order of magnitude. He had yet to decide his greatest transgression. The worst time of the day was as he climbed into his bed. Before darkness and exhaustion closed his eyes. That was when the feeling overwhelmed him. Blake counted William's shallow breaths in the bed beside him. Counted stars as they twinkled off the water. Anything to hold back the flood of despair that seeped into his soul.

By the time England came into view, Blake had wrestled his pain to a deep hidden spot. He managed to smile at William and think more of his home and children. But he was changed and he knew it. Blake knew if by some stroke of ill fortune or perhaps luck he were to lose his title and estates, he would endure. If his town cronies witnessed him drunk and in tattered clothes he would but shrug. If he never felt velvet or the weight of gold in his hand, never saw a priceless piece of art again, he would survive. If he shoveled manure to feed himself and his children it would not matter. Blake had realized with blinding clarity little on this earth mattered without love.

Blake and William set out on horseback for Scotland. They strapped saddlebags filled with denim shirts and Levi's across the rumps of their mounts. Slept at inns and occasionally under the stars on their trek to the McDonald's castle. For all his errors and mistakes, he would not fail his Melinda now.

* * * *

It was nearly the end of November by the time Gert and Uncle Fred finally arrived in New York City. The traveling was harder than Gert had expected and Uncle Fred had made stops in several cities and found a hotel room for them both. He insisted she rested while he took in the sights. But they had finally arrived and Gertrude was impatient to sail.

At nearly eight months pregnant, the captain of the ship was not inclined to let Gert travel. She begged, cajoled and cried. Uncle Fred took him aside. The captain returned white-faced, but willing to allow Gert to come aboard. The voyage for Gert was uneventful. She felt fine and sat daily on the deck letting the breeze hit her face and wondered. What would Blake think of her following him? Would he be angry or ashamed? Would he regret his remarks? Would she regret showing up on his doorstep? Just as doubts filtered in, Gert would pull Blake's letter from her pocket. It was never out of her reach. And she had read it a hundred times if not more.

She knew what Blake spoke of when he wrote of rightness. Gert felt it as well. For all their arguing and disagreements, she knew deep in her heart he was meant for her. She pondered many hours, with little else to do about that feeling, that rightness. There was something mystical and magical about it. As if a fairy wand or stardust had touched them. It had nothing to do with practicality or place in the world. Nothing to do with habit or situation. Less to do with birthright. And everything to do with some force beyond her knowledge or understanding. Her heart was drawn to his without regard to location or personality. She had stopped fighting the feeling. Stopped questioning how they would live or where their home would be. Because Gert knew it no longer mattered. She desperately and for no accountable reason needed to be near him. As the sun sought the horizon at dusk, she sought her place in this world. Beside him.

* * * *

"Gertrude," Elizabeth shouted. "Jenkins, find my husband post haste, we have a houseguest." She smiled broadly at Gert and held her arms. "I cannot tell you how worried I've been about you."

"I am so glad to see you, Elizabeth. And will be happier still when I can lie down. I'm exhausted." Gert

introduced Uncle Fred and he gazed at the arched ceilings and whistled.

Anthony came down the hall and stopped with a start. "Gertrude!"

"That Burroughs?" Fred asked. Gert nodded and waited as he came to her and gathered her into his arms.

"And you must be Gertrude's uncle," Anthony said and held out his hand.

Fred poked Anthony in the chest. "I'll be guessing yer the one was to be watching out for Gert while she was here."

Anthony stiffened and nodded.

Fred put his hand on Gertrude's massive stomach. "We wouldn't be here with Gert near due ifn you'd been doing yer job."

"You're quite right, Mr. Hastings," Anthony said solemnly.

Fred looked Anthony up and down. "Ya look like some dandified city boy compared to yer friend. Specting you knew Sanders was up to no good. I got my pistol in my trunk and if this don't work out for Gert, I'm holding you responsible. Got that?"

Anthony indicated a door. "Let's talk about this over brandy, Mr. Hastings." He stopped suddenly. "I look like a dandy compared to Blake?"

Fred ambled off and slapped Jenkins' hands as the servant tried to take his coat. "Don't need no valet like you English boys to dress me in the morning."

"I'm the butler, sir. Not a valet."

Fred eyed him as Jenkins stared back. "Goody for you. Where's this whiskey you're talking about, Burroughs?"

Elizabeth escorted Gertrude to her old room. Elizabeth had a hundred questions but Gert was sound asleep before she could ask. She joined Anthony and Gert's uncle in the study.

"So, Blake didn't get the letter I sent?" Anthony asked.

"Only letter I know about is the one from the Scot," Fred said.

"But you did say Blake left ahead of you," Elizabeth asked as she seated herself.

Fred grimaced. "His sense of direction ain't too keen, though. Let's hope Will led the way."

Tony tapped his mouth and stared out the window in thought. "If Blake received McDonald's letter and not mine, I believe he would have gone straight to McDonald's home before coming here."

"Might a done that," Fred agreed.

Elizabeth's eyes darted. "This is a terrible situation." She stared at her husband.

“Sanders’ll git here shortly,” Fred said. “How far outta the way is this castle of McDonald’s?”

Tony swallowed and stared at Fred. “I doubt in time.”

“Melinda is to marry Connor McDougal, three days from now at Blake’s home,” Elizabeth said softly.

Fred waved his hand. “Tell ‘em to hold off till her father gets here. Couple of days, a week at most ain’t gonna make no never mind. Sanders had hisself in a righteous tizzy. He’s the Papa. He ought to at least meet the boy ‘fore the deed’s done.”

“I think the wedding should proceed as planned,” Tony said.

“What’s the rush?” Fred asked. No one answered his query. His eyes opened wide. “Yer not telling me ya let another innocent slip through yer fingers?”

Tony looked away. Elizabeth explained. “Melinda has indicated the wedding should be done post haste. Either that or she’ll run away.”

“Can’t none a you boys keep yer parts in yer pants till the preacher gets here. Hell’s fire,” Fred said.

Tony leaned forward to lean on his knees. “We aren’t sure if the ah ... the ah.”

“The seed’s been planted?” Fred asked.

“She won’t tell us for sure,” Elizabeth hurried to say. “She’s using our ignorance to get what she wants, especially before her father arrives. And she wants Connor McDougal.”

Fred couldn’t stop himself. He laughed. “Oh, Sanders. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when the shoe’s on the other foot. He’ll be hoppin’ mad, that’s fer sure.”

“That brings us to another question. We saw clearly Gertrude is with child. How are things with she and Blake?” Tony asked.

Fred sat back in his chair and wiped his brow. “Right hard to say. Now before Sanders got to the ranch, my Gert was a mess. Ranting and cryin’ about the silliest things. Drove me and the hands near crazy. Then my Indian friend, White Cloud, found Sanders and Benson and kinda drug ‘em back to the ranch.” Fred looked up and smiled. “Fine sight, I thought. White Cloud knew it was our fight. Knew me and the boys were a waiting ta kill him. Sanders marched right through us, blustering and shouting. Said he didn’t come all the way without talking to her. Will had punched his Daddy a good one and Sanders just stood there staring at Gert with blood running down his face. Fine sight, I’d say.”

“William hit Blake?” Tony asked.

Fred nodded. “Might a cracked his jaw. He clicked when he talked from then on. But ole Gert, she just stood there staring at him like she ain’t never seen nothin’ so wonderful in all her life. Told him she was worried and she hated him. But never stopped staring.”

Tony shook his head. Elizabeth smiled.

“Him and his boy seemed to come to friendly after that. Had a long talk. Sanders was nearly torn in two

fer leaving Gert and getting home to his daughter.” Fred sighed and frowned. “Then Gert goes and tells Sanders she’s marrying Luke Matson. One of my hands at the ranch. Sanders nearly croaked when she said it. Took off before sunrise after scaring the shit outta Matson. Don’t think that boy’ll ever be the same.”

“He left me a letter,” Gert said from the doorway.

Elizabeth hurried to Gert’s side and helped her sit down. “I know how exhausting those last weeks are. And with you traveling yet. You need your rest.”

“I couldn’t sleep any more. I’ll be fine, Elizabeth.” Gert dropped her head. “Especially after I talk to Blake.”

“We think Blake went to Scotland. He didn’t receive my letter,” Tony said.

Elizabeth explained the situation at Blake’s home.

“Blake was in a fine fit when he left. Worrying so about Melinda. But if what she’s hinting at is true, they need to marry right away. What does her mother say?” Gert asked.

“Ann is content with it all. She feels Melinda has found her soul mate,” Elizabeth said.

“I hope she gets what she wants,” Gert said.

“Knowing Melinda, she will,” Tony added.

“It’s a love match, I believe,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “Certainly not who her mother or father envisioned for her but a love match still the same.”

“Then she should fight for him,” Gert said.

“Is that what you’re doing?” Elizabeth asked. The men stood and stepped out of the room and Elizabeth waited till she and Gert were alone. “Are you fighting for Blake?”

Gert turned her head and pushed out her chin under trembling lips. “I deserve him. I love him. And he told me he loves me in his letter.”

“Of course you deserve him, Gertrude. Whoever said you didn’t?” Elizabeth asked softly.

My father, Gert thought. “I won’t let Blake keep a mistress. I won’t stand for it.”

“I don’t think he will. It sounds to me as though Blake has come to realize some things. Important things.”

“We’ll see. I’m worried what he’ll think when he sees me. Chasing him back home when he’s got so much on his mind with Melinda.”

“You have to trust him, Gert. I wouldn’t have said the word trust in the same sentence with Blake’s name a few months ago. But you have to listen to your heart. You know, Gert; deep down inside if he’s telling you the truth. What is your heart telling you?” Elizabeth asked.

And that was the crux of the problem. Her heart was screaming to love him and trust him. Her mind was building a wall against more hurt. But if she didn't take this chance on Blake, she would spend the rest of her life with regret. Wondering if he had in fact changed. If the love he proclaimed he felt for her was enough to make him stare into her eyes alone. Fear of regret was one of the reasons she'd boarded a ship to find him. She had best battle that fear. Take a chance on the only man to stir her insides. The only man she'd ever wanted to talk to, to share dreams with, to make love to.

"I want to talk to him so badly, Elizabeth. There's so much I want to say. My heart's brought me this far. I won't give up now."

* * * *

"What do you mean McDonald is away from home? Where in the hell is he?" Blake shouted in the rain. The nearly one hundred year old housekeeper would not let William and Blake in to McDonald's castle. Burly Scotsman stood on each side of the woman while he ranted and raved over thunder.

"Don't trust no Sassenach with knowing where my laird is. Bad enough he done and married one," the gnarled woman said.

"I'm your laird's son by marriage," William said clearly. "I want to know this minute where my mother has gone. Speak, woman."

Blake stepped back and watched William take over. Blake straightened his shoulders and glared in superiority over his son's shoulder.

"You the fool lad went off to America?" the big man beside Blake asked.

William nodded.

"Let them by, Ernestine," the man said. "I'm the McDonald's cousin. Fitzroy McDonald. I'm in charge here while he's gone."

Blake and William stepped into the foyer of the castle, shaking water from their hair and coats. The walls were covered with massive tapestries and swords and shields. Woolen plaids adorned every chair and cushion.

"Then pray tell me," Blake said, tired and exasperated, "where is my daughter Melinda and her mother?"

Fitzroy McDonald slapped Blake on the back and guided him to a room filled with the soft glow of a fire. "Sit down, Sanders. You'll need a nip of something to hear this."

It took all of Fitzroy McDonald's arguments and William's pleas for a night in a bed to convince Blake to rest their horses and themselves.

"Those clothes you are wearing are soaked through and your mounts near exhaustion. Won't do your Melinda any good for you to break your neck on the trip. What about that outfit of yours? Is this what they wear in America?" Fitzroy said and leaned forward to study Blake's Levi's and camel jacket. And the gun belt tied down around his thigh.

"You're wearing a skirt. No need to question my attire," Blake said and leaned back in his chair.

Fitzroy blustered and William spoke. "This is typical American garb. Works quite nicely when breaking broncos."

Three other men slipped into the room to stand behind Fitzroy. "Tell us your tales of America."

William's face lit up and he proceeded to entertain the Scotsmen. Blake stared glumly at the fire as the words William spoke conjured up Gertrude's face. Her sunsets. Her horses. Her round stomach. Luke Matson. And now his sweet, innocent Melinda was sullied by a brawny man such as these men listening to William with rapt attention. He was too late. Fitzroy had told them Melinda did not say she was expecting but that every look that passed between the two indicated they had been intimate. He had been away chasing unattainable dreams while Melinda was seduced under her mother's nose. Blake was broken. The woman he loved loved another and the daughter he loved slept with a Scotsman. He missed Gertrude. Blake stared into the fire, hearing the hum of William's stories and fell asleep.

* * * *

Blake and William were on their horses mid-morning.

"We could have left earlier, William," Blake said as they trotted away from McDonald's home. "You should have woken me."

William shrugged. "You're tired, Father. You need your rest." He turned and stared at Blake. "You called out for Miss Finch while you slept."

Here was another mystery of life unfolding and Blake would've preferred to not see. His son was caring for him. Blake sighed. Soon his children would be spooning gruel into his toothless mouth.

"No doubt I was cursing the day I met the woman," Blake said.

"Uncle Fred said she loved you and she admitted it," William said.

"What are you talking about William?" Blake said as he kneed his horse to a faster pace.

"The day Miss Finch said she was to marry Luke Matson. I left the kitchen and saw you." William turned a frightened face his father's way. "I could have sworn you were crying, so I leaned back near the window. That's when I heard Miss Finch and Mr. Hastings talking."

Blake blew a breath. "I was blubbering like Donald when Mrs. Wickham smacks his bottom. She said she loved me?"

"No, sir. Not in those words but Mr. Hastings said she did and she agreed."

If what William heard were true, maybe there was hope for he and Gertrude. Ah, no use wishing for what wouldn't be. She is married to Luke Matson by now. He would be the one to talk to her and hold Gertrude's child. The anger bubbling in Blake's soul made his mouth twitch. The thought of another man holding and kissing her, teaching his son to ride in not so many years was more than he could take. Blake found himself furious. He was angry and jealous and could not shake it. He should have stayed and fought for what was his. Gertrude was his, just as surely as the babe she carried was his son or daughter. And he had let her go. Everything in his life had come easily until Gertrude. And the one thing that required effort, forced his thoughts to admit emotions, required humility and strength and blared his

weaknesses was the one thing he should have fought for with his dying breath. He had allowed his love for Gertrude to be defeated.

* * * *

Ann McDonald insisted Gert and Uncle Fred stay at Blake's home with Elizabeth and Tony for Melinda's wedding. Gert wondered how she'd feel around Blake's former wife but she admitted to herself the woman was charming. Ann had hugged her, with tears in her eyes and thanked Gert for taking care of William. Angus McDonald was cordial and took Uncle Fred to see Blake's stables. Gert was tired most of the time and her back hurt. She couldn't get comfortable in a bed or a chair any longer. Elizabeth and Ann exchanged glances and told Gert her time was coming and soon.

Melinda Sanders and Connor McDougal stared into each other's eyes with rarely a thought or a glance at anyone else. The young Scotsman bowed low over Gert's hand.

"'Tis my pleasure, Miss Finch, to make your acquaintance," Conner said. His large arm wound itself about Melinda's waist.

Melinda hugged Gert and a serene smile lit her face. "I'm to be married tomorrow, Miss Finch. It seems so long ago we all rode to London for my come-out."

Gert couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. "I still think you're a bit young to know your mind, Melinda. But he's handsome enough, that's for sure."

Melinda tilted her eyes up at Connor. "The handsomest man in the world."

Connor tilted the girl's chin. "And the prettiest lass."

Melinda's eyes rolled dreamily. She spoke to Gert without turning her face from her beloved. "Age doesn't matter so much, Miss Finch. I know in my heart Connor is the man for me, now and forever."

It was all Gert could do to not cry. The young couple before her reminded Gert of a fairy princess and her prince. Their love reminded her of Blake.

"Your father is worried sick over you," Gert said.

Melinda's gaze dropped. "I'll admit I'll be glad if we're married before Father gets here. I couldn't take hearing him shout about Connor's family and my title and duty."

Gert tilted her head. "You may be surprised, Melinda. Your father is a different man than the one that left not so long ago."

"I wish I could believe that," the girl said softly. Echoing Gert's own fears with her words.

* * * *

The preparations continued for Melinda's wedding. Blake's forty-bedroom home was filled to capacity. The ballroom was decorated. Melinda's dress was nipped and tucked while Gert played with Elizabeth's daughter Sarah. Gert was having trouble even getting her breath her stomach was so large. She waddled and fought Ann and Elizabeth over an outfit.

“Pregnant woman do not attend balls and such here in London. I’ll stay in my room and entertain Sarah,” Gert pleaded.

They ignored her and the seamstress added a bolt of material, Gert figured, to a ready-made gown to cover her burgeoning stomach. The fabric was a fine gold color and made her hair look darker. Gert pinched her cheeks and noticed her eyes did indeed look greener against the hue of the fabric. She may as well look nice, she conceded. If she didn’t have her baby in the middle of dinner she could at least watch the dancers and tap her foot to the music. Ann had a full orchestra contracted for the reception to be accompanied by bagpipes from Connor’s clan. The wedding should prove to be the grandest thing Gert had ever attended. Uncle Fred, Anthony and even Angus McDonald fussed over her, always asking if she needed anything. Even as she stared at the door of Blake’s home one of them would pat her arm, help her to her feet and tell her Blake wasn’t here yet.

* * * *

Nearly two hundred people crammed the chapel on Blake’s grounds. Some standing outside near open windows. Melinda did indeed look like a fairy princess in a gossamer ivory gown. Her husband stared at her with such intensity; Gert feared Melinda’s flowers would wilt. The two embraced in a heated, lengthy kiss interrupted by Angus McDonald’s cough. And still Blake had not arrived. His daughter had married without him and Gert knew Blake would be crushed. Anthony and Angus McDonald had walked Melinda down the aisle in Blake’s stead. It would have been Blake’s right to give his daughter away. But Gert could not fault everyone’s actions. The wedding needed done and done now.

The wedding breakfast revealed a full complement of titled English peerage and Scottish royalty. A rich contingent of plaids adorned lord’s waists and draped their wives shoulders. Powdered wigs and bright waistcoats denoted some of England’s finest families. Gertrude watched the goings on with interest. She was certain only Ann McDonald’s charm as a hostess and her mother, Lady Katherine’s glare, kept swords from being drawn. Each group made subtle comments about the other’s strange dress or traditions. But Melinda’s mother flitted from group to group allaying tempers, smoothing ruffles until she had, to Gert’s amazement, convinced each and every person, they were the most important guest at the wedding.

Donald Sanders and the Scottish guests his age with Mrs. Wickham’s grandson, Malcolm, were busy climbing trees and sailing boats. Gert watched out a long window and thought back to the first time Blake had kissed her while the boys climbed that ladder. Even now, the memory sent a shiver down her spine. Uncle Fred wandered around the mansion picking up priceless works of art and shaking his head. But she knew he was having a grand time. He and Angus McDonald had been holed up with Blake’s grooms and trainers all day. He begrudgingly admitted Sanders knew horseflesh. Quite a concession from her uncle.

The guests had been led to Blake’s grand ballroom and Gert watched from a chair near the door to the servant’s entrance as Melinda and Connor danced for the first time as man and wife. Melinda had been handed through divine interference or fate or love from the arms of her father to the arms of the man she would spend her life with.

To everyone’s surprise, Melinda had announced she had no intention of living in England. Her husband’s land was in Scotland and she was eager to take her place as mistress of his home. Ann had tried to convince Melinda to live in one of the many homes belonging to the Wexford family, that certainly her father would present them one as a wedding gift. Servants were established, routine in order and would ease Melinda’s change in role from daughter to wife. The girl would have none of it. Melinda assured her mother she would do fine with a small staff and would oversee household duties herself. Melinda

admitted she had much to learn about Connor's family and history and if she was to be the wife he deserved she had best learn it from the McDougal clan. Her husband said she was stubborn and a perfect wife for him. He would do whatever she wished, but couldn't be happier Melinda wanted to live at his home.

This was indeed the fairy tale ending, complete with grand knights and ladies. Connor and Melinda would disagree, Gert was sure, but the two of them at their young age already knew the value of compromise. Had Gert herself been less hard headed, she may have been a wife at this very moment. Gert studied her hands and glanced up as Angus McDonald and Ann, Elizabeth and Tony and Connor's parents joined the couple on the dance floor. The orchestra played a waltz while bagpipes accompanied and Gert was surprised how the two musics blended. Much as Connor and Melinda's lives would, Gert thought. Uncle Fred stood behind her with his hand on her shoulder.

Chapter Twenty

The closer Blake rode to his home the more gripping his want was. He hadn't realized he could miss it. All these years he'd been accustomed to the rich tradition and beauty of his home. It had taken a lengthy absence to make him long for familiar faces. His children, his servants, his favorite chair in the library by the fire. There was something soothing and comforting about coming home and Blake imagined it did not matter whether that home was a hovel or a castle or ranch house south of Chicago. It was where history and family surrounded a person and assured them whatever had happened could be righted. Whatever calamity or tragedy befell them, solace was found there. And Blake badly needed what those walls, fires and faces could give him.

As William and Blake neared the edge of the Wexford land they cast a glance to one another and smiled. They were home. Both leaned close to their weary mounts to gather speed. Blake could see the massive roof come into view from the top of a rise and he swallowed a lump in his throat. A few more minutes at best. But as they rode up the tree lined drive William and Blake reined in hard and stared. Carriages, horses and milling servants were everywhere. Even on the front lawn.

"What could possibly be going on that the grooms would need to leave carriages in the front drive?" William asked.

Blake crossed his hands over the horn of the saddle. "Only one thing I can think of." William looked at his father. "A wedding."

William looked down at himself and then at his father. "Look at us, Father. Levi's and boots and holsters. Stetsons and trail dust. It looks as though every title in London is here from the seals on barouches."

"Probably some Scottish lords as well," Blake remarked. "Well, I could care less what I look like. My daughter, I assume, is getting married and I want to meet this husband of hers and dance at the fete." He pulled his mount's head to the house. "Are you coming?"

William nodded quickly and followed his father down the drive, dismounted and both strode to the door. Briggs opened the door, looked them up and down from over his nose and told them where the servants' entrance was located.

"Good God, man," Blake said. "You don't recognize me?"

A rare smile graced Briggs' mouth and Blake saw Mrs. Wickham rushing down the hall, calling to other servants. Blake grasped Briggs' shoulders and clapped his hands hard. "It's me. Sanders. And your dour face is a sight for these sore eyes."

"Your Grace! Master William!" Briggs said.

Mrs. Wickham turned her attention from a young liveried man with a tray of champagne to the door. "Your Grace," she called. "You're home."

"Indeed I am, and I could not be happier for the sight of you." Blake drew Mrs. Wickham into his arms and hugged her.

The housekeeper's eyes widened and her lips trembled. "I am so happy you are here," she said.

William watched in wonder as his father and servants embraced. Briggs shook his head but was smiling. Sanders was grinning as if he had discovered gold. Mrs. Wickham held one hand to her mouth and with the other touched William's cheek. She backed up quickly.

"Give Mrs. Wickham a hug, William. She changed your nappies from the day you were born. Indulge her." Blake said. Mrs. Wickham clapped her hands together under her chin as William wrapped his arms about her.

"Much I need to tell you two, as I'm sure you have much to say but for now, I'll just let you know Benson is opening a clothing shop in Chicago. I would not be surprised if he is soon married to a plump blonde. Her name is Miss Forsyth. Briggs, tomorrow, you and I will have to pack his room and prepare to ship his belongings," Blake said.

"A plump blonde?" Briggs asked.

"Chicago?" Mrs. Wickham gasped.

"Yes. And he is exceedingly happy. So we must be happy for him as well. Benson and I had quite an adventure together. I will tell you some evening the whole story. But for now, I assume these carriages mean Melinda is to be married."

Both servants nodded.

"Well, then William. Let us join the festivities," Blake said.

"I would be happy to help you change, Your Grace," Briggs said.

"No, no. If they don't like me as I am then the hell with them," Blake said. "Right William?"

William smiled and nodded. Mrs. Wickham and Briggs watched as the two men strode toward the door of the ballroom.

“Your Grace?” Mrs. Wickham called.

Blake turned. “Yes?”

“Miss Finch will be thrilled that you have arrived.”

Blake skidded to a halt. “Pardon me, madam?”

Mrs. Wickham smiled softly. “Miss Finch and her uncle are here. She waits by the door most days to see you.”

Blake’s lip trembled. He could not stop the reaction. Gertrude was here. “But, but she is so close to ... to--”

“Any day now, Your Grace,” Mrs. Wickham said.

There was but one question dancing in Blake’s mind. He rubbed the two days worth of beard on his chin and looked to his son.

Blake turned slowly and approached the door of the ballroom. His son opened the doors wide. The two of them stood in the entrance seeing a magnificent ball in progress. Slowly, heads began to turn and whispers abounded. Melinda was dancing with a man double her size. Angus and Ann. Elizabeth and Tony. And an older couple, Blake did not recognize. As the room began to silence, Blake and William entered. Blake saw Gertrude sitting in a far corner in a magnificent gold gown, with Fred’s hand on her shoulder. He recognized his peers of the realm among men and women wearing plaids.

The orchestra stumbled to a halt as the dancers turned to stare at the door. Blake heard his name whispered and saw Tony’s half smile. A French horn was the last instrument to quiet when a viola bow smacked its player on the head. The only remaining sound in the hushed room was an oblivious bagpiper merrily pumping his pipes. Blake watched Gert struggle to rise with Fred’s help. An expectant hush covered the crowd, other than the Scotsman still bellowing. Blake Sanders had something to say, and by damn, he wasn’t going to shout over the clatter. He eyed the player, the man’s eyes closed in his music, twenty feet to his right. The other pipers had moved away, leaving the lone man at the mercy of Blake’s glare.

Blake’s six-shooter was out of his holster in a split second. When the bullet hit the bladder of the bagpipe, its noise was reduced to a fizzle. Guests jumped and stilled as Blake holstered his firearm.

“The Duke of Wexford,” Briggs announced.

Blake turned to the still crowd. “I have one question to ask.” Every ear turned his way. Subtle movement brought the crowd closer by inches. The silence was so deep; Blake could hear the beat of his own heart. And that was where the question originated. His heart. “There are two women in this room, in this world, that I love. Are they either or both married?”

Melinda shrugged out of Connor’s arms and ran to her father. “Father! I wanted you here so badly but was terrified of what you would say. Yes, I am already married.”

Blake hugged his daughter, patted her back and laid his cheek in her blond curls. “There, there, poppet. Don’t cry. I am home. I want to meet this Scotsman of yours.” A large handsome, young man

approached and bowed deeply. It irritated Blake to no end that he had to tilt his head back to see his son-in-law's face.

"Your Grace. I am Connor McDougal. I have taken your daughter to wife."

Blake looked at William beside him. His mother was crying and covering him with kisses. "What do you think, William?" Blake asked.

"He's no heathen, father. Seems polite and well bred. And not the least bit afraid of you," William said over his mother's shoulders.

"He's as big as a bloody tree, William." William shrugged and Blake turned back to his daughter's husband. "You may not be frightened of me, son. But rest assured, if you do not make my daughter happy, I will track you down and stake you out on a moor till some wildebeest eats you."

McDougal's eyes widened just a hair and Melinda's mouth dropped.

"I will be happy to call you my son if you strive every moment of the day to assure my daughter's well being. Are we clear?" Blake said.

"We are clear, sir."

Blake nodded to Anthony and Elizabeth.

"You're looking well, Blake," Anthony said.

"Quite the outlaw, I'd say," Elizabeth commented. "You said there were two women in this room that you loved. I know Melinda is one. Pray tell, who's the other?"

Melinda and her husband stepped aside as did William and his mother. There at the end of the corridor of guests stood Gertrude, tears running down her face. She was ethereal in the fading sunlight as it poured through the window. Gertrude was massive, he admitted, but to his thoughts the most strikingly beautiful woman in the room. The connection he felt when they made love was every bit as strong at this moment. He prayed she felt it as well. Blake loved her mind, her heart and every square inch of her body. Her laughter and arguments had rescued him from a sure, slow death as a duke and given him new life as a man.

Blake willed his feet to stay planted when he asked aloud. "Have you married?"

* * * *

Her pirate had arrived in cowboy duds and put to shame every other man in the room. Blake stood there, all man, every inch as masculine and wonderful as she remembered. His scruffy beard and western clothes was to her a stark contrast to the lofty duke with a clipped British accent. But he was perfect to her, for her, she knew. They would argue and fight and love and make up and raise horse-riding viscounts in western hats. There would be no mistress between them if Blake's heated look were any sign.

Gert took one step forward and smiled softly. "I am not married."

Blake took a step closer to her. "I thought you loved that cowboy. The one stupider than the cinch on

my saddle.”

Gert’s legs moved under the mass volume of her dress inches closer to the man that she loved. “I found out just in time that a brilliant, handsome man from London loved me.”

“That man would wonder if the object of his desire, his very being, feels the same way.”

“I believe she loved you from the first time she bloodied your nose.”

Blake strode forward. He dropped to one knee and took her hand. “I have asked this question so often, I’ve lost count. I will ask it if need be until the day that I die. Gertrude Finch, will you marry me?”

Gert smiled down broadly at Blake’s raised face. “Yes, I will marry you.”

Blake rose and pulled Gertrude into his arms and kissed her. She smiled up at him shyly and her uncle tapped his shoulder.

“I be thinking the ceremony ought ta get started right soon.”

Blake nodded and scanned the room. “Ann? Did you send the minister home yet?”

His former wife rushed forward tears in her eyes. “He’s still here, I believe, Blake.”

Anthony dragged a man forward holding a plate of pastries in his hands. “Marry them,” Tony said.

The small man looked around the room wildly. “But the banns, Your Grace. They’ve not been posted.”

William and Blake pulled their guns in the same instant. Blake tilted his head as he aimed at the white collar around the quivering man’s neck. “Indeed?”

“Now is not the time to question the Duke of Wexford, sir. Wouldn’t you agree?” William asked.

Someone took the heaping plate and shoved a black book in the minister’s hands. His voice shook as he spoke. “No, now is not the time for questions.” He glanced at Gertrude’s stomach. “Far past the time, one might say.”

So there in the fragrant ballroom, amidst two hundred finely dressed guests, Blake took her hand from her uncle. They spoke their vows as if no one in the world existed but them. She was crying, but smiling. Blake grinned. A sharp pain doubled her over and she gasped for breath.

“The baby,” Gertrude said.

“Dear God, there’s no midwife,” Elizabeth said from behind.

Blake put his hands around Gert’s waist. “Fetch the doctor. I’ll help till he gets here.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “Blake, is that wise?”

Blake looked over his shoulder as he and Fred helped Gert to the door. “I delivered a young woman’s child in a mud hut. I think I can manage with my own.”

“Thought you just helped the neighbor woman, Sanders,” Fred said.

Blake glared over Gertrude’s head. “We’ll be fine till the doctor arrives.”

* * * *

Gert could hear the soft sounds of an orchestra, minus one bagpipe, as she lay in a bed holding her daughter. Ethel Mavis Sanders. The labor had been quick, Gert was thankful for that. The doctor had arrived in the nick of time. He ushered Elizabeth from the room but her husband had refused to leave. He told the old man he had promised to be there when his child was born and he had no intention of breaking his promise. Blake stared at her and their child with the awe of a man just awakening. He had kissed her and the soft downy hair of his daughter and bemoaned the day some brawny Scot would carry her off. Gert loved him so much at the moment she could not fathom the depth of her feeling. As she lay in pain in the throes of contractions he had promised her the stars and the moon. She looked up to his face; filled with love she could see and shook her head softly.

“Everything I ever wanted is right here in this room, Blake. No need to lasso a star.”

Epilogue

Ethel Sander’s was riding her Great Uncle Fred’s shoulders, wearing his hat low over her eyes all the while shouting, “Giddyup.”

“I need the exter for new corral supplies. I told ya last spring we was goin’ build a new one,” Fred Hastings said and grimaced as his grand niece pulled one of the few remaining hairs on his head.

“This year hasn’t been up to par,” Gertrude Sanders said from behind the desk in her uncle’s home. She and Blake lived closed by but they had agreed to run the horse business together and she still did the bookwork in Uncle Fred’s red leather chair. “You told me that yourself.” Her husband sat sprawled in a chair, to her right. He rolled his eyes.

“Dear Lord, Gert. We’re not paupers. Fred and I want to get this work done before Anthony and Elizabeth get here. Sign the blasted bank draft,” Blake said.

Ethel shimmied down her uncle’s back and up her father’s crossed, booted leg. He held her hands and rocked his leg up and down. She laughed and her dark curls whirled around her face. Blake Sanders grinned, crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out. Ethel laughed harder.

“And I want to have a grand party for them. With Donald coming to visit and Tony and Elizabeth’s girls too, I want to have something wonderful they’ll never forget.”

She watched her five-year-old daughter Ethel charm her father into giving her a hard candy he always carried in his pocket. “She’ll spoil her dinner, Blake,” Gert said and sat her foot on the bow of the cradle holding the two year old, Geoffrey.

“We can’t entertain guests and buy lumber in the same year?” Blake asked.

Gert pulled her mouth to one side and looked down at her open books. “We’re going to have to add on to the house soon and get Mrs. Wickham some help.”

“Cripe sakes, Gert. How much bigger a house ya need then the one ya got. Twice as big as this one as is. Don’t be puttin’ on airs. I taught ya better than that, Missy,” Fred said.

Blake’s head tilted and his foot stopped swinging bringing a frown to his daughter’s face. “Why, pray tell, would we need more room at the house, Gertrude?”

Gertrude stared at the husband she loved and the uncle she adored. “Well, if you must know we need to add another bedroom. I’m expecting. Again.”

Fred threw his hat to the floor. “Well, shit a big pile and damn it to hell and back. You know I’m happy as hell for ya but we can’t afford to lose hands from yer screaming and ranting and raving again, Gert. I love ya but pert soon no cowboys goin’ a work here.” His head swiveled to Blake. “Ya figure out what causes this yet, ya dumb Brit?” When no one seemed inclined to answer his question, Fred picked Ethel up and headed out the door of the office. “Yer goin’ a be eighty fer this one’s out a diapers, Sanders”

* * * *

Blake stood to admire his wife. She seemed to only increase in beauty these last five years. Their first year married was spent in England. He was glad when Gert said she missed home. Blake happily handed over the reigns of the Wexfords to William. He would have followed Gertrude to China if need be but he too had thought America was going to be a wonderful place to raise his family. No one watching his or Gert’s every move. No one to censure their children but themselves and Fred Hastings.

Blake rose from his chair, turned Gert around and knelt before her. He smiled up at her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Gertrude said. She sat back and lost her smile. “At this rate we’re going to have a dozen children.”

Blake touched her cheek. “Do you mind?”

She shrugged. “No.” She smiled with a gleam in her eye. “Not as long as we can keep doing the fun part.”

Blake chuckled. “The fun part?”

“I know what I’m like when I’m expecting. At least for the first four or five months. But getting that way gets better every time.”

Blake cocked his head. “There are things in life that only get better with time. Like a fine wine. We’re an excellent vintage by now.”

“You’re still a pompous idiot,” Gertrude said and slapped him on the shoulder.

“And you, Mrs. Sanders, need to lay down. If I remember correctly, an afternoon nap does wonders for your disposition.”

Gertrude accepted his arm, while Blake carried Geoffrey up the steps to her old bedroom. Her eyes closed instantly. Blake kissed her forehead and his son's cheek and tiptoed out of the room.

* * * *

"I'm so glad for you, Gertrude," Mrs. Wickham said when Blake took his wife and his children home later.

When Blake and Gert announced they were going to make a permanent home in the States, Mrs. Wickham had declared she must come along. Her son and daughter-in-law had been talking of moving there any way, she told Blake. "They can settle near us or maybe work for Mr. Hastings. And anyway I've helped raise three of your children. You'll not deny me to raise the next. Will you, Your Grace?"

Gertrude had said yes and hugged her, as long as Mrs. Wickham called her by her first name. Briggs had declared himself indispensable to the next Duke of Wexford and indeed had no interest in living in the wilderness. He would stay in England, thank you very much and make sure William stayed out of trouble. Blake had shaken his head that day and wondered when all of his servants had become so willful. But he taught William and Briggs as well about the account books and the Wexford investments. The two of them argued constantly and Blake was glad to leave them to settle their own tiffs. William was the right person to lead the Wexfords in the next generation and Briggs would dog his heels every step of the way.

So Mrs. Wickham made her home with him and Gertrude, her children and grandson Malcolm nearby. She declared housework and cooking was not beneath her, if it gave her son a chance to do better in the world. He was a wood worker by trade and as far as Blake could tell was becoming more successful every day. Malcolm though reminded Blake too much of Donald and sometimes he wished Mrs. Wickham hadn't come for that reason. Donald spent time with his mother and Angus McDonald, with his brother William, his sister Melinda, her husband and that growing brood. Leaving little time to spend with Blake and Gertrude. But he was coming this spring, escorted by Anthony and Elizabeth and Blake thought the day could not arrive soon enough.

* * * *

That night Gert and Blake lay in each other's arms talking.

"I must write Benson and Mary Alice to come down from Chicago when Tony and Elizabeth visit," Gert said. She was curled on Blake's shoulder and he absently ran his fingers through her hair.

"Can't they stay with Fred?"

Gert looked up at her husband in the moonlight. "I imagine someone will have to stay there. We don't have the room for everyone."

"Let it be them, then, my dear. Benson's wife's voice cuts through my head like a knife," Blake said.

Gert giggled and snuggled closer. "I'll never in all my days forget Benson's face when Mary Alice asked if he was her Prince Charming."

"And in that lovely plaid shirt of his," Blake said and laughed.

Gert reached up and ran her fingers through the hair growing gray at Blake's temples. "I loved you so much that day you defended me to Esmerelda Bunchley."

Blake rolled Gert on her back in one swift motion. "Don't speak of Esmerelda, right now, dear. Her picture in my head does nothing for my stamina. And I'm getting to be an old man." Blake kissed her then and ran his hands down her face to her bare shoulders. He looped his tongue around the shell of her ear as his hand skimmed the edge of her breast pressed tight against his chest. He growled in her ear. "I want you more than I thought it possible for a man to want a woman."

Gertrude arched her neck and ran her hands over Blake's back and down the corded muscles of his arms. "I don't worry as much as I used to about you having a mistress."

Blake stilled above her and held her face in his hands. "Besides the fact I want no woman but you, explain to me exactly when I'm to find time to have a mistress. Your uncle has me riding fences. Your children have me on the floor as their own personal pony and Mrs. Wickham has taken to make me drive her to see Fred nearly every day." He kissed her hard and unyielding. "And you keep me chained to your magnificent body in this bed."

Gert raised her hips and Blake groaned low in his throat. Thoughts were not coming as clear as usual to Gert when Blake dropped his head to her breast. "Do you think, oh dear, Blake, do you think Mrs. Wickham has her eye on, oh," Gert moaned.

"Enough chatter," Blake growled. He entered her swiftly and listened to his wife's ragged breathing.

Long, languid strokes followed. Hushed words and pleas. Exquisite torment spiraled with tempo to the plane of pleasure they sought for each other. One begged. The other complied and they lay entwined, sweat glistened and panting.

Gert tilted her head and sighed with pleasure and satisfaction, glowing from her head to her toe. When her mind awoke from the pleasure in her soul she thought about what Blake had said earlier. "Do you really think Mrs. Wickham is interested in Uncle Fred?" Blake had rolled them to their sides. Her back to his front. She cuddled closer and repeated her question. A low rumble in her ear was her husband's reply. Followed by a loud, stilted intake of breath. The Duke of Wexford was sound asleep and snoring like a freight train. As usual, Gert thought and smiled. She did her damndest to hear that snore in her ear every night.

The End

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