

# Awaiting the Fire

*Donna Lea Simpson*



BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK



PRAISE FOR

## Awaiting the Night

"A fabulous gothic romance . . . Donna Lea Simpson provides her growing fandom with a wonderful historical that is a one-sitting read."  
—*The Best Reviews*

"A spine-tingling, gothic paranormal tale . . . Taut suspense and an intense and sometimes spooky plot make *Awaiting the Night* a book that's almost impossible to put down. Be sure to pick up a copy of this beguiling story."  
—*Romance Reviews Today*

"Intriguing and brilliant."  
—*Fresh Fiction*

"A tightly crafted paranormal romance with gothic overtones. Victoria Holt would be proud."  
—*Romantic Times*

## Awaiting the Moon

"By mixing a classic gothic with paranormal overtones Simpson has a winner . . . Here is a pure-classic plotline with just the right touch of the ominous, the perfect amount of suspense, and plenty of sexual tension to keep you reading late into the night."  
—*Romantic Times*

"Atmospheric . . . Simpson peoples the castle with distinctive characters."  
—*Publishers Weekly*

"This luscious, well-written novel is a rare treat for werewolf paranormal genre lovers . . . Fabulous sensuality."  
—*The Best Reviews*

"Simpson sucked me in . . . Best of all, her writing is fresh and distinctive and confident."  
—*Paperback Reader*

"Draws readers in right from the beginning . . . a complex and intriguing story."  
—*Romance Reviews Today*

*Berkley Sensation titles by Donna Lea Simpson*

AWAITING THE MOON

AWAITING THE NIGHT

AWAITING THE FIRE

# Awaiting the Fire

*Donna Lea Simpson*



BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK

## **THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP**

**Published by the Penguin Group**

**Penguin Group (USA) Inc.**

**375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA**

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada  
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Mairangi Bay, Auckland 1311, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,  
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

## **AWAITING THE FIRE**

A Berkley Sensation Book / published by arrangement with the author

Copyright © 2007 by Donna Simpson.

Interior text design by Stacy Irwin.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,

a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ISBN: 1-4362-4665-2

**BERKLEY SENSATION®**

Berkley Sensation Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group,

a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

BERKLEY SENSATION and the "B" design are trademarks belonging to Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

# Chapter 1

London, 1795

“WES, I'M frightened.”

Simeon St. Ange, the Earl of Wesmorlyn, waited for his valet to finish the last detail, the positioning of his jacket cuff to properly display the elegance of his pearl gray gloves, then turned to face his much younger half sister, Hannah, as his valet retreated. Her gentle voice, so quiet it was almost a whisper, had hardly echoed in the grand front hall of his London townhome. He moved to stand in front of her and gazed down at the pale oval face trustingly turned up to his. “Hannah, you have more courage than you know. Think of our family, stiffen your spine, and stand up straight.”

She did as she was told, but the paleness of her face gave away her continuing terror.

“It is a ballroom, not a torture chamber,” he chided.

“B-but there will be so many people, and they will all be looking at me.”

“You must not be so morbidly vain. Some will look, but you will only suffer that for a moment, and then it will pass.

Once Countess Charlotte von Wolfram and her brother arrive, all eyes will be on them."

"That frightens me too," she said, staring up at him, her almond-shaped eyes wide with anxiety. "Aren't you the least bit anxious, Wes? Countess Charlotte is your future bride. What if you dislike her, or what if she is rude? What if . . . what if she doesn't like *me*?"

He smiled, finally understanding her fear. His own anxiety about meeting his German-born fiancée for the first time was well controlled and no one else would ever know his inner turmoil. The Wesmorlyn heir always married a lady from outside of England; he was following family tradition. Honor your father and your mother, the rules said, and he had always done so, even to following their last wishes by choosing a bride from another land. He would not allow a trembling uncertainty in his gut to undermine this first meeting. He framed Hannah's delicate face with both of his hands, noting that her usually flyaway hair was ruthlessly tamed into a perfectly modest hairstyle befitting her status as a young lady about to enter her first season the next spring. This ball to welcome his bride and her brother would be a modest practice for his sister, with the excuse that she was to meet her sister-in-law-to-be; perhaps in the spring she would not be as nervous and green as the other sixteen-year-old girls.

"Hannah," he said, patting her cheek. "You are a sweet angel from heaven. How could the countess not like you?"

"I've never had a sister," she said, brightening. "Perhaps she will like me a little, and we'll become friends."

"How could she help but love you?"

Hannah smiled, radiantly, her pale skin glowing like nacre. "Will Lyulph be there?" she said, casually, of their old family friend and neighbor from Cornwall.

"Of course," Wes said, frowning and noting that she turned away into the shadows as she spoke of him. "He is in London, as you too well know, and did hint for an invitation. How could I refuse?"

"I thought you might say no," Hannah said, softly, fiddling with her fan. "You are not so close to him now as you once were."

"Things are different in London, Hannah. In the country



our various stations in life do not matter so much, but in town the boundaries must be observed." He was silent for a moment, observing her, the peachy perfection of her skin, the exquisite flawlessness of the matched pearls around her slender neck. Coupled with her naïveté, her beauty and wealth could draw the wrong kind of attention from predatory males. But had he been unwise to keep her so cloistered from the outside world? Is that why she had such a fixation on Lyulph Randell? He had done what he thought right, and her mother had never objected. Perhaps he should have reversed things . . . introduced her more to the world and kept her from Lyulph Randell's company. If there was one man in the world she must not marry, it was him.

"I hope," he said, watching her open and shut her fan, "that you don't spend all of your time talking to Lyulph this evening. I would not have even invited him except that I will give him no excuse for feeling slighted. But still, you must not be seen doing any more than briefly acknowledging his presence; you may be polite, say hello, and inquire after his well-being, but little else. This ball is for Countess Charlotte and her brother, Count Christoph. Please be polite to them both and do not hide away. I know it's difficult, but not much will be expected of you; it's your first appearance at a ball, after all, and you are just now out of full mourning for your poor mother, and so you should be a little reticent. Your modesty and shyness will be seen as becoming in a girl your age. But do not let the ease of Lyulph's familiarity lead you to spend an inordinate amount of time with him," he finished, shaking his finger at her.

"I will be correct, Wes, I promise," she said, her tone satisfactorily submissive. She folded the fan, prettily painted with biblical scenes, and held it still in her gloved hands.

"See that you are. As a St. Ange, much is expected of you. It is especially important to make a good impression on our cousin the marchioness, Lady Harroway, for if she likes you she will sponsor your coming out next spring." He stopped himself from fussing too much, afraid he would make her more nervous than she already was.

She stood away from him. "Am I presentable?"

"Turn," he said, and examined her as she slowly turned in

a complete circle. Her gown was gray and delicate, with little ornamentation, but had a tiny cape of gauzy silk falling from her shoulders to below her waist in an unusual style those females born to the St. Ange family had always affected. Her hands were gloved in gray silk that stretched up her slender white arms to above her elbows.

"Nothing is showing?" she asked.

"You look perfectly lovely," he said.

"I wish mama was here." She bit her lip, but tears welled in her eyes.

"I know," he said, and stepped over to her, taking her in his arms and hugging her, the briefest of gestures before turning away to accept his walking stick from the butler. "Your mother would be proud. She loved you very much. I'm sure she can see you tonight, Hannah."

As she turned away and applied a delicate scrap of lace to her welling eyes, he felt a pang of pity. Hannah's mother, his father's second wife, had outlived her husband by many years, but in the autumn of the previous year she had succumbed to a fever. It was then, forced to acknowledge mortality anew, that he accepted what he had known for some time. He must marry and start a family. He was twenty-nine, and life did not last forever. It was up to him to bring to earth the next Earl of Wesmorlyn.

When the Prince of Wales had condescended so far as to suggest he consider marrying a cousin of his new wife, Caroline, Wesmorlyn had cautiously agreed to hear more. Countess Charlotte von Wolfram, suggested to him as an appropriate bride, was a young lady of impeccable lineage and related by birth to many kings and princes. She was intelligent, could speak at least three languages, and had been under the tutelage of an Englishwoman to learn British ways and manners, for her family was looking for an English husband for her. That fact alone, that she had made a study of English ways, appealed to him; she seemed the ideal bride for a man like him, and so he had acquiesced.

He had eschewed the need for a likeness before the engagement. Beauty was not necessary nor even particularly wanted. Modesty, chastity, obedience, and good birth were all far more important, and attested to by the girl's uncle, Count

Nikolas von Wolfram. The betrothal, which was firm on his side but conditional on hers, served the purpose of finding him a wife of excellent heritage and foreign birth, and ingratiated the prince to him. He had made the contract, but had specified that the young lady had the right to refuse if she came to England but found she could not go through with it. He would force no woman to uphold a contract in which she had little say, though friends thought him odd and overly nice in his notions of consideration toward the fairer sex.

Of course, now that the prince's marriage was turning out as it was—unhappy and combative, even though the princess was successfully with child—it would not serve Wesmorlyn politically to wed the Countess von Wolfram, but he was never one to evade a commitment once it was made. If she wished the marriage to proceed, he was obligated in every way. He took in a deep breath. He just hoped his future wife would not be the embarrassment to his reputation that Princess Caroline had become to the prince. Raw, bawdy and jocose, forward and disobedient, Caroline was distasteful to Wesmorlyn and even more so to the poor prince, who must nonetheless support his wife until the birth of his heir freed them to live separate lives.

"You look very pleasant, and exactly as you should," he said to his sister, and patted her shoulder. "But you mustn't cry; you don't want to have red, swollen eyes, or people will talk."

"Thank you, Wes. You are always so kind to me," Hannah said with a sniff, stiffening her spine and defeating with a great effort the tears that threatened to spill over onto her cheeks.

"And so we are ready to go," he said. "Will we do, Sam?" he asked, raising his voice.

Semyaza, commonly called Sam, who had appeared while they spoke and stood waiting by the door, nodded solemnly. "It is raining. Be sure that your sister does not get cold."

"Of course. Her cape, please."

The tall, solemn-visaged Semyaza picked a dove gray cape up from a seat near the door and helped Hannah into it. She looked up at him and he nodded.

"Thank you, Sam," she said, her voice once again quiet and restrained.

"Shall we go?" Wesmorlyn said, as he took his sister's arm.

LYULPH Randell arrived back at his London townhome just a moment before the rain began to sheet down, changing from the sprinkle of late summer drizzle it had been, to a torrent from above. He had timed it well, but then, he had a sense about such things. Nature was no mystery to him, and the change in the air that preceded the downpour was like a beacon shining through the mist.

He shook the dampness from him, droplets flying from his unruly, dark hair, and raced up the stairs to where his faithful serving man, Diggory, waited patiently with his evening clothes laid out. This ball at Lady Harroway's would be a dreadful bore, but he had two objectives in mind, and so would find interest enough. First, he must at any cost make sure Wesmorlyn and his foreign fiancée did not get along, and then, he must continue his campaign of winning little Lady Hannah's heart so thoroughly she would never dream of marrying anyone but him.

Given his peculiar talents and attractions, he did not see that as a problem. No, it was Wesmorlyn who would prove to be the thorn. And so he must think of how best to detach the young lady to whom the earl was engaged. Again, he had talents that would make it simple enough, but still, he would not risk offending Hannah. She was the ultimate prize.

As the wordless Diggory assisted him, Lyulph hummed a merry tune. Tonight would see many of his schemes advance. Wesmorlyn, stultifyingly boring and priggish, had no chance against him in the end. Too polite to cut him out of his life completely, the earl would one day regret that softness.

SHEETS of rain obscured the view outside of the carriage, but Countess Charlotte von Wolfram was not looking out anyway. She was glaring resolutely ahead, to the seat opposite her where her half sister Fanny sat, her mild blue eyes filled with

tears. But Charlotte hardened her heart. "Take me home, Christoph," she said to her older brother, who sat beside Fanny, "or at least to that moldy, damp, disgusting pretence of a home we are forced to live in while we stay on this godforsaken island in this disgraceful city. London! Pah! Nothing better than an open sewer."

"We must attend this ball!"

Charlotte glared at her older brother, almost as blond as she, but without the dimple in the chin and bow mouth. In a measured and calm fashion that belied the way her insides were quivering with nerves she said, "I don't want to."

Fanny wept openly, but Christoph spoke from the gloom, his tone resolute. "We are going to Lady Harroway's ball, Charlotte, even if I have to carry you kicking and screaming. I will not have you insult the Earl of Wesmorlyn, your future husband, for God's sake, by running away."

If only he had offered one scrap of sympathy, said one kind word, she would have broken down and confessed all her fears, her exhaustion, the way her stomach wrung like a washcloth in her belly. Instead all he did was bark orders, and she couldn't bear to tell the truth about being afraid with him so remote and frigid. She tensed. Her stubbornness was his own fault. He should never have told her to mind her manners, to curtsy properly, to speak only when spoken to, and all of the other bits of "advice" he had seen fit to impart. Any anticipation she may have had for the ball was now dead, stomped out by his fussing, and her nerves were wrought up to a fine, high, feverish pitch. "I wouldn't be running away," she said, through gritted teeth. She took a deep breath, trying to calm the wave of hysteria that threatened to overwhelm her. "I would merely be delaying the meeting until I have rested. And I haven't agreed to marry him. I just said I'd look him over." She clutched her hands together in her lap to keep them from shaking.

"We came all the way from Germany to do so!" Christoph said, his normally quiet voice holding a note of tension. "I will not have you insult the earl by not attending the ball put on in our honor!"

Fanny, choking back her tears, said, "We *did* just arrive

this morning, Count Christoph, and I think Charlotte is weary.”

“Stop calling him ‘count’! Call him Christoph!” Charlotte barked at her half sister. “He’s your brother, almost as much as he is mine!”

“It will take more time than I have yet had to learn to call him brother, I’m afraid,” the girl demurred, with quiet dignity.

“Get out of the carriage, Charlotte,” Christoph muttered, “or I swear—”

“Don’t threaten me,” she replied, lowering her head and glaring at him through her fringe of blonde hair, “or you *will* have to carry me in, and I will make a scene such as you have never imagined.” He should know how she felt, she thought, desperately, peering through the shadowy gloom, without her having to say a thing. Couldn’t her brother tell that she was walking the precipice above a deep, dark pit of anxiety? This was no great moment for him or for Fanny, but this was supposed to be the night she met her future husband. She was tired, she was scared, and Christoph should know that. They had always known what the other was thinking and feeling.

Back home, when she had agreed to come and meet the earl, it had seemed a far-off hazy event; and she had agreed because she had a more important reason for wanting to come to England—one that did not include her potential husband. She was supposed to meet Lord Wesmorlyn in a private fashion, find out if she liked him, and if she didn’t, she would never have to face any public exposure. But there had been delays along the way to England, and now, to see him immediately at almost the very hour of their arrival in London and be forced to meet for the very first time in public . . . it was all too much.

“Please, Charlotte,” Fanny said, putting one hand on her half sister’s arm. She glanced out the carriage window. “Look, the rain has stopped now, and the house is alight with candles, and there are lovely ladies dressed so prettily going in!”

“Charlotte, so help me, if you do not go in . . .” Christoph’s words trailed off, for he had no threats that could command his sister if she had truly decided against going in.

“Charlotte,” Fanny said softly, “we have such pretty gowns

on, and it really would be a shame to not go in after all the time it took to dress.”

Charlotte sighed and looked down at her gloved hands, pulling at the end of one finger, a loose silk thread unraveling as she did so. She knew Fanny, though frightened, was looking forward to this ball more than she would ever admit. Her sister had a new gown of lovely pale blue with silver stars embroidered on the skirt; it had been made for this night, this grand occasion. Taking in a deep breath, Charlotte summoned up her courage, willing her exhaustion and nervousness to subside. She was a von Wolfram. No mere lot of English lords and ladies could intimidate her. She supposed since she had made an agreement, she would fulfill her part of it, which was just to look at the Earl of Wesmorlyn and say yea or nay to marrying him. She had already decided what her answer would be, but she must go through the forms.

And after all, she thought, working herself up to what must be done, it was not the earl’s fault that their journey through Europe and over the Channel had been difficult and arduous, their arrival delayed, their house in London a disgrace, and their hired serving staff barbarians. She admitted to herself that none of that would ever stop her from doing something she wanted to do. She had great personal courage, had displayed it in the past, and so would not let her nerves and a fluttering stomach keep her from doing what was right.

Decision made, she said, “All right. I’m ready. Let us go in.”

Christoph rolled his eyes. “Finally!” But as the two young ladies got ready to get out of the carriage, he put one quelling hand on his sister’s arm. “Charlotte, you must promise to behave once we are inside.”

“Do *not* begin in that fashion again,” she said, “or I vow I will sit here and let you go without me.”

They all descended to the wet pavement, and Christoph took one lady on each side of him. Together they climbed the stone steps and entered the doors being held open by silver-liveried servants in powdered wigs. As their names were announced by yet another liveried servant, an elderly lady, dressed in a dark purple velvet gown and wearing a turban

decorated with tall gray feathers glided forward and accosted them.

"Count von Wolfram," she said, in dulcet, cultured tones, "I am Lady Harroway."

Charlotte examined her as Christoph acknowledged her greeting. This, she knew, was Marchioness Harroway, elder cousin of some sort to the Earl of Wesmorlyn, her fiancé. This was her London home and she was hostess of this ball, held in honor of Charlotte and Christoph's arrival in England after an arduous and at times unnerving trip from their home in Germany through the Low Countries.

"And this," Christoph said, stepping back, "is my sister, Countess Charlotte von Wolfram and . . . and my younger half sister Miss Fanny, uh, Sanderson."

Fanny colored at his stumble over her name. Being their illegitimate half sister, a fact she did not even know until mere months before, she was sensitive about the relationship and unsure of herself, Charlotte knew. It had not been her choice to acknowledge the relationship in public; it had been Charlotte and Christoph's joint decision. Fanny was still not sure it was a wise one, she had said just that afternoon, and even as excited about it as she was, and as enthralled with her new gown, that it might even be considered an insult to the hostess to bring someone of her birth to such an affair. She was willing to go only as Charlotte's attendant, but Charlotte felt strongly that their little sister deserved consideration. It was not Fanny's fault that their father, Johannes von Wolfram, was a philanderer and adulterer who had seduced her mother, a young English girl visiting Wolfram Castle. As the daughter of their father, she had every bit as much right as they to enjoy the privileges of their station. That may not be the way of the world or of the law, but it was Charlotte's way.

Charlotte curtsied perfunctorily and gave her hand to the woman, watching for any insult at all to Fanny, but the slight did not come and the woman was perfectly polite, if a shade condescending for Charlotte's taste. She offered to introduce them to the Earl of Wesmorlyn and his younger half sister, Lady Hannah St. Ange.

Charlotte's heart rate accelerated as they followed the serene woman through the crowd, and she was alive to a



thousand sensations. The ballroom, really a series of rooms thrown together, was large enough, but overcrowded and hot, with the humidity of the air barely dispelled by the candles flaming brilliantly in wall sconces and a row of enormous chandeliers that hung above them. Crowds of young people, more than she had ever seen in all her sheltered years, stood in groups conversing, and older gentlemen and ladies sat in chairs that rimmed the ballroom. She clutched Fanny's arm close and whispered, "It's dreadfully warm in here, don't you think?"

"Yes," Fanny murmured back, her voice faint and tremulous.

Charlotte at first kept her eyes firmly on a prominent mole on the broad back of the dowager marchioness, who sailed along on Christoph's arm. Her brother, as always, was perfectly upright, ramrod straight, his sandy blond hair glittering in the flickering light. But gradually, as they made their way slowly through the crowd, Charlotte became aware of the voices of those around them.

"What an odd dress she is wearing. And who is that naïve-looking girl on her arm?"

"I know! It looks for all the world like she has brought her maid with her to the ball!"

Some giggling followed, but when Charlotte turned, wrath in her eyes, she could not tell among the half dozen young ladies nearby who had made the unkind remarks, and they had to move on to follow the marchioness and Christoph.

"How outré her hairstyle!" another cutting voice, this one male, proclaimed. "Not even *last* year's fashion, nor the year before that!"

Charlotte turned again, but saw only perfectly polite faces of young women and men. There was some delay, and the crowd surged around them. Young men, their pale faces set in blank expressions, gazed back at her as she stared. She couldn't breathe. She was suffocating and felt faint.

Fanny squirmed, and whispered, "Charlotte, you are squeezing my hand so tight it hurts!"

"I'm sorry." She let go of Fanny then, trying to ignore the trickle of perspiration that trailed down her back. The anxiety had returned and was stifling her, choking her. Her lungs

would not fill, and her breath came in short gasps. The edges of her vision became hazy and pinpoints of light prickled before her. Finally Lady Harroway and Christoph ahead of them moved on, and Charlotte followed on numb legs, placing one foot in front of the other and trying to overcome the panicked sense of the crowd closing in around her.

They were almost to the far end of the ballroom, and she could see a few sets of large glass doors, beyond that the darkness of outdoors, torchlight flickering in the twilit dimness. Instantly her mind went there: the night air, cool dampness, being able to breathe without the scent of a hundred or so bodies overwhelming her. Her longing for the outdoors was like the memory of a flavor, something she could almost taste in recollection, but with her attention focused, she could almost breathe again.

Christoph and Lady Harroway stopped, then Christoph, still in front of Charlotte, bowed low. The two parted, and before her was standing a tall man with broad shoulders; he was slender, russet-haired and very handsome, with even, stern features, a beaky nose and a broad forehead. No smile was on his well-shaped lips. On his arm was a very slight, dainty girl who looked no more than a child next to him.

"Charlotte," Christoph said, taking her arm and drawing her forward, "this is his lordship, the Earl of Wesmorlyn, and his younger sister, Lady Hannah St. Ange. My lord, this is my sister, Countess Charlotte von Wolfram."

Charlotte curtsied, then looked up into his brown eyes. With a jolt she read his expression. He was disappointed! He bowed, the frown swiftly erased as his expression became a polite, smooth social mask. Trembling, she turned to the young lady, who almost hid behind her larger brother. But the girl, at a muttered order from her brother, stuck out her hand and murmured something too softly to be heard. Charlotte took her hand and they exchanged the merest light pressure before the girl released her.

Turning and pulling Fanny forward, Charlotte said, "This is our sister, Fanny."

Fanny, pale and quivering, curtsied but would not raise her head.

"Sister?" the earl said, his voice quiet but penetrating. "I

had not understood you to have any other siblings but each other.”

“She is our half sister, newly discovered, in one sense,” Christoph said.

“I am Wes’s half s-sister,” Lady St. Ange said, the last word coming out with a nervous stutter. “Just like Miss Fanny is yours.”

Charlotte warmed toward the delicate and fragile beauty, the earl’s half sister. The girl looked terrified, but then her expression calmed as she looked behind Charlotte.

“Lyulph,” she cried, affection in her voice.

Charlotte turned to see another gentleman, not quite as tall as the earl and darker, with olive skin, startling green eyes, and dark thick hair that curled deliciously on his forehead. He gazed down at her and his smile turned up one corner of his full mouth in a delighted grin.

Lady Hannah looked up at her brother, but he made no move to introduce anyone, so she stuttered, “C-Countess von Wolfram, this is Mr. Lyulph Randell, a neighbor and *very* good friend of ours from Cornwall. Mr. Randell, this is Countess Charlotte and her brother, Count Christoph von Wolfram. Oh! And M-Miss Fanny, their sister,” she said, the last introduction coming out in a jumble.

The earl cleared his throat, and Charlotte caught a look between him and his sister, who turned pink, her doe eyes widening. Familiar with the ways of brothers, she immediately knew the earl was correcting his sister on something she had done or said. She fumed. How priggish he seemed, and so tightly controlled. The man had not a natural bone in his body, judging from the rigid way he held himself. She looked back to Mr. Randell. He was relaxed and smiling, bowing.

“How charming to meet you, Countess. You light up this drab occasion with your golden beauty.”

“You are a friend of the family, then?”

“More than just a friend,” Lady Hannah blurted, and then clapped her mouth shut and looked up at her brother again with alarm.

Lady Harroway, who had been drawn away immediately after introductions were made, returned and glanced around at the various expressions. “The dancing is about to begin,” she

said, with a wave of her gloved hand toward the ballroom floor.

"May I solicit the exquisite pleasure of the first dance with you, Countess?" Mr. Randell said, with a hopeful smile.

"I would be absolutely delighted, sir," Charlotte said with a happy sigh, relief flooding her. Dancing would dissipate the nerves; all of her fearful anxiety would have an outlet.

"Charlotte, the earl should have your first dance," Christoph said in her ear, though his voice was loud enough to carry to the others even over the sound of the orchestra tuning up.

"But Mr. Randell asked first," she whispered back at him. "I could hardly refuse."

"That is quite all right, Count von Wolfram," the earl said, with a stiff bow. "Since Randell has been so forward and quick, he must, I suppose, be rewarded, but I will solicit the second dance and the supper dance."

Charlotte curtsied. "Perhaps, as Fanny is not engaged for this dance—" she began.

"Since this is my sister's first ball," Wesmorlyn said over her words, "and she really cannot dance with anyone else, I will dance with her for the first set."

*How rude*, Charlotte thought, turning to take Mr. Randell's arm as he led her to the dance floor. She glanced back at Fanny, trying to encourage her to smile with a look, but it was no use. The poor girl was mortified. Charlotte felt in that moment that she would never forgive the earl for that rudeness. But then her attention was commanded by her partner and the exigencies of the dance.

She glanced around the room as the couples lined up. *Good*. Christoph had taken poor little Fanny into the dance. How rude the earl had been, snubbing their sister like that, but strangely, it had eased the rest of her nerves. She could not care what he thought of her, not when he was clearly not the picture of perfect English gentility. While she had imagined him to be the epitome of good breeding and refinement, she had worried about hurting his feelings when she had to tell him she had no intention of marrying him, but now she had no such compunction. She caught sight of Fanny and smiled. She would certainly not worry about the Earl of Wesmorlyn any more, and would just enjoy her very first public ball.

• • •

"I'M very nervous, Wes," Hannah whispered across the form to her brother. "I'm so grateful you are my first partner. I feel sure I should faint if it was anyone but you or Lyulph."

"Though I do not like Lyulph putting himself forward like that to the countess," he said, smiling over at her, "I was happy that it worked out this way, for I did not quite know how to tell my fiancée that I really wanted to give you your very first dance. And you know, because you are not truly out yet, you may not dance with any other young man this time."

"I hope that Miss Fanny was not hurt. She looked for a moment a little—"

"Now Hannah, you are just inferring how you would feel, with your own overly tender feelings, in such a situation. I'm sure Miss Fanny has no wish to dance with me."

"How could any young lady not? You are so much the handsomest man here," Hannah said. "You, and Lyulph, too."

There was that mention of Lyulph again! How could he expunge the man from his sister's tender heart? They could never marry—nature forbade it—and yet it was not something Wes could explain to her yet. Though perhaps he would have to, as indelicate and earthy as the subject would become when it approached the impossibility of them having a child together. "You are just prejudiced in my favor, my dearest little sister. And it is all the easier to say since this ball is so very thin of society, barely enough people here to call it a ball. Of course, it *is* August, and all the best company will have retreated to their homes in the country. Indeed, Lady Harroway only kept her home open and held this ball for my sake." He gave her a nod to let her know when their pattern was about to begin, and as they came together, he whispered, "Keep your chin up, Hannah, and a smile on your face. No matter if you make a slight error in the figures, just keep smiling. You are young, and not expected to be perfect."

As the dance progressed and Hannah appeared to be doing well, he had leisure to look about him, and he gazed down the line at Countess Charlotte von Wolfram. It had been a severe jolt to find her so absolutely breathtaking. After meeting the prince's German wife, Caroline, he supposed he had expected someone along her lines, short, stout, and ruddy. That had not

concerned him at all. The lady's behavior was far more important than her appearance, and he had been prepared to censure her if she was loud, crude, bawdy, or forward.

But finding the young countess lovely of face and form—wide blue eyes, skin like pearls, pink bow lips with a faint dimple in her chin and possessed of a slim, lively figure—he had experienced a rush of something like disappointment. Why was that? Had he really preferred a dowdy woman? Was this tug of attraction he felt something to be dreaded? Did he fear he would not keep strictly to a morally perfect path if he wished to marry her for other reasons than good bloodlines, excellent lineage, and the hope of children to carry on his title?

She was laughing at something Lyulph Randell said as they came together in the figures. What a contrast she was to the languid beauties who stepped through the paces of the dance as if they suffered permanent fatigue. Her step was too lively; she bounced too high and laughed too loud. She also held Lyulph's hand too long and let her gaze linger on his face.

It hit him like a blow to the stomach. She was flirting!

"Wes, what is wrong? You look most fierce," Hannah whispered as they joined to do a step together.

He calmed his expression. "Nothing is wrong."

"But it is, for—"

"Hannah!"

The dance ended and Randell behaved correctly, Wes was relieved to see, and returned Charlotte to her brother, who had been dancing with his half sister. Taking Hannah's arm, he escorted her back through the crowd.

Charlotte, happily out of breath, was whispering to Fanny about how unexpectedly enjoyable dancing had been, when Christoph drew her away.

"What is it?" she asked, looking up into his eyes.

"I felt something the minute we came into the ballroom," he said in a hushed voice. "And now I know what it is."

"What, Christoph? What is it?"

"There is, in this ballroom, another werewolf."

## Chapter 2

“ANOTHER WEREWOLF?” Charlotte asked, studying Christoph’s face. Personal knowledge of her family’s inheritance, the predisposition to become werewolves, was still new enough that she found it exciting and thrilling. Stretching back hundreds of years, the unique legacy made them different and gave her the sense, in walking through a crowded room, of being something more than the others, even though as a woman she could not share in the most exciting of gifts, the ability to transform.

“Yes, another werewolf.” Christoph stared across the distance.

“Who is it?” she asked, breathless with anticipation. She followed his gaze back to the knot of people, Lady Harroway, Fanny, Hannah, the earl, and Lyulph Randell. A faint prickle of presentiment trilled up her spine like fingers on piano keys. *Could it be?* She grasped Christoph’s sleeve and gave it an impatient tug. “Who? Who is it?”

“Lyulph Randell; he’s the werewolf,” Christoph said, his voice tight with tension. “And he knows I’m one, too. I can see it in his eyes.”

"How exciting!" Charlotte said, watching the man, remembering the magical green eyes and quirky smile. She had danced with him, touched him, and yet had not known his secret. To her chagrin, that once again pointed out the gulf between herself and her brother. She was destined to merely pass on the transformational ability, and never experience it for herself.

Christoph wasn't so sure it was exciting. He would need to approach this delicately, for his uncle, Nikolas von Wolfram, leader of their family and a werewolf himself, hadn't prepared him for this eventuality. Werewolves were not so common that one would expect to meet one in every ballroom in London. In fact, he had never even considered that he would encounter another one, though the extended clan of lupine humans seemed to draw and repel each other simultaneously in some odd brotherhood. Like attracted like, and yet two adult males of the wolf blood could not coexist in the same house without quarreling and jousting for dominance, which was why he had had to leave Wolfram Castle. He and his uncle, as much as they now respected each other, were constantly butting heads since he had experienced his first transformation just that spring, and in fact for years, even before he had been told the family secret.

"We must go back," he said, taking her arm. "I suppose I should ask the earl's sister to dance. I wish I had paid more attention to Elizabeth's lessons. Or our dancing master's tutelage. Remember him, Charlotte? Nice enough young fellow, but mousy and easily cowed. I don't even remember why he left."

"Never mind that," Charlotte said, sharply, pulling her elbow from his grip. "If you dance with Lady Hannah, I suppose I will have to dance with the earl."

He frowned down at her, a puzzled grimace twisting his mouth. "Of course you must dance with him! He is your betrothed husband, no matter what you think this moment. Why do you dislike him so already?"

"He was rude to Fanny. Didn't you see it?"

Christoph sighed, glancing around at the crowd, waiting for an opportunity to head back to their group through the crush. "If you remember, it was not my idea for her to come.



I thought it would be awkward for the poor girl, and I don't think she really wanted to attend."

"Yes she did!" Charlotte said, with an exasperated sigh. This was a topic they had canvassed already, and it wearied her to have to defend her certainty yet again. "She had a new gown for it, and was very excited, more so than I. You're not a lady, Christoph, and you will never understand how important balls and gowns and dancing are to girls."

"Well, still, it's a delicate position for poor Fanny."

"She's our sister, Christoph."

"Our illegitimate half sister, Charlotte!"

She dragged in a sharp breath. "How can you be so cruel?"

"I'm not," he replied, putting his hand to her back and firmly guiding her toward their party. "I feel sorry for her, too. I just think it was more your idea than hers for her to come, and you got her excited about it."

Charlotte shrugged away from his guiding hand and sped ahead to where the earl, Mr. Randell, Fanny, and Lady Hannah stood in an uncomfortable knot. Christoph, following more slowly, observed Lyulph Randell, wondering how to approach the man with their unacknowledged shared identity. Or even if he should approach him. What was the protocol? And did the earl know his friend's secret, Christoph wondered? Perhaps he would find out in time, if he became friendly with Mr. Randell.

Though that did not seem likely. Even at this distance he could feel his wolf sense, hackles rising, at the challenge of another wolf. Perhaps he was intruding on Randell's territory, or perhaps this was *his* territory now. Among men there were etiquette, established rules of conduct, and precedence by rank or title. Among wolves, only challenges met, acknowledged, and fought or withdrawn from. But what was there between men who were also wolves?

The dance lines were forming again, and Charlotte, with an unhappy expression, was being led into the dance by the earl. Lyulph Randell led Lady Hannah out, so that left Christoph along the side. He talked quietly with Fanny and watched, letting her in on the secret of his discovery of Lyulph's werewolf identity, which she heard with wide eyes.

But she accepted it readily enough, and went back to

avidly watching the dancing, breathlessly commenting occasionally on different ladies' dresses and appearance. Perhaps Charlotte was right about bringing her, he thought, looking down at Fanny's pretty, happy face. Perhaps he worried too much about the implications of every little action, but he had learned the hard way never to take anything for granted in his life.

Charlotte, coming together with the earl in the figures of the dance, was trying to decide if she truly did not like him, or if she had just allowed her first impulsive impression to rule her. She had no wish to be unfair.

"Is Miss Fanny your younger sister, Countess?" Wesmorlyn asked, as they promenaded in the middle of the dance.

"Yes. I am twenty-two; she is just nineteen."

"Is she your father's child or your mother's?"

Though he knew all about her antecedents from her Uncle Nikolas, but Fanny would not have been mentioned. His curiosity was natural, but awkward. "May I ask the same of Lady St. Ange first?" she replied, stalling the inevitable while she tried to figure out a delicate way of explaining.

"My mother died very young, and my father remarried a few years later. Hannah was their only child. My father died ten years ago when she was just six. We are in the last months of mourning for my stepmother, who passed from this earth last autumn."

"Oh, how sad for you both." Now, how could she acknowledge Fanny's illegitimacy? What was a delicate way to put it? "My father had . . . outside interests. Fanny's mother was an Englishwoman staying at our castle for the summer." His hand tightened around hers.

"Then she's . . ." He didn't finish.

She could feel his rigidity. "Yes, she's illegitimate," Charlotte murmured, her voice tight. She waited; what he said that moment would tell her much about him.

"Baseborn, and yet you brought her here, to this ball?"

The room swirled around her and she felt the heat rise to her face, her cheeks no doubt blazing red. Exhaustion reclaimed her. She was hot and miserable, and sure she looked a fright compared to all the other languid, pale young ladies who drifted by, stepping through the dance as if every move-

ment was an effort. "Surely, my lord, the misbehavior of my father and her mother is not her fault?"

He frowned over at her, his brows slanting over brown eyes in a disapproving expression. "Did you not think," he said, quietly, as they came together again and clasped hands across the line, "that it may have been impolite to bring her to this ball, to Lady Harroway's home?"

A violin in the string section screeched, and she clenched her teeth against the discordant sound. "Impolite?"

"*Worse* than impolite," he muttered, as he turned her in the figure of the dance. "Surely you can see what a grave insult you have offered?" He shook his head. "What have you done? How can we explain this to poor Lady Harroway?"

Mercifully the dance parted them at that moment; another second and she would have replied rudely. She watched him make his way down the line of ladies, weaving in and out, as she did the same down the line of gentlemen. Her first impression was confirmed; he was a cold, priggish fish. She was relieved, in a way, for now she need not feel another moment of guilt about deserting their engagement!

"There is no need for explanation," she muttered to him, when the figures brought them back together again. "No one else need ever know, and I will not be the one to tell Lady Harroway, if that is your concern. I only told you because you asked!"

The dance ended and she rejoined their group, her chin up in what she hoped was clearly haughty disdain of his lordship's precious opinion. Mr. Lyulph Randell introduced a few friends, and in minutes Charlotte's weariness was swept aside by the group of admiring gentlemen, who chatted with her and complimented her, kindly bringing Fanny into the circle and plying her with attention, too. Just as she had told Wesmorlyn, there was no need to explain Fanny's birth. She was accepted as Charlotte and Christoph's younger sister. Other young ladies watched, and Charlotte could feel their jealousy at the attention they were receiving from the men. After the rude remarks she had overheard about her looks as she entered, she experienced a heady rush of triumph.

"How fortunate we are that you made the arduous journey from your homeland to ours," one young gentleman said after

one of her stories about their trip. He cast a languishing look in Charlotte's direction.

"Are you truly already affianced to that old sobersides, Wesmorlyn?" another fellow, a shorter man with a bulky frame, said. He made a gesture at the other young gentlemen, and added, "Any one of us here would make a more entertaining husband for such a lovely young lady!"

She laughed and tapped him with her folded fan. "How impertinent English gentlemen are!" she cried.

"And how delightful German ladies!" he replied with a saucy wink.

Mr. Randell held up one hand. "Gentlemen, I am going to steal the countess away for a stroll about the ballroom, for I am jealous of dividing her attention." He took her arm and led her away.

"Are you really so jealous, sir?" she said, looking up at him through her lashes. She felt a quivering sense of her own power; she had captured so much attention, when there were many girls left languishing with the spinsters along the side of the ballroom floor. Whichever ones had made the cutting remarks when she first entered were getting their just punishment, she was happy to conclude, for her companion most certainly was a fine figure. The earl was perhaps better-looking in the strictest sense, but Mr. Randell had a liveliness of expression Wesmorlyn did not possess.

"Am I jealous? I shall choose not to answer that, for you will think poorly of me if I say yes. Instead I will say that you have the most enchanting eyes and a delightful laugh, and I wanted both for myself."

She chuckled, and glanced back at the earl and Christoph, standing with Lady Hannah. The Earl of Wesmorlyn watched her, and then he turned to Christoph and said something. Christoph eyed her for a moment, and Charlotte remembered what he had said about Lyulph Randell being another such as he. She looked up at her companion. His sparkling green eyes met hers and he smiled, white teeth showing in his grin.

"I think we have much in common, sir," she said, shutting out the voices and hubbub swirling around them.

"Do you? I am captivated by the idea, Countess." He pulled her closer to his side, ostensibly away from the crowd.

"I think you know of what I speak, sir," she said, feeling the power of his body beneath his jacket, her breath coming a little faster.

"I hope I do," he replied. "May we retreat to the privacy of the terrace and speak of this?"

She opened her mouth to say yes, but stopped. It was hardly fair to the earl to flirt like this and then go outside with another man at the ball meant to introduce her to London as the earl's nominal fiancée. It wouldn't be right, she decided, with regret. "I don't think I can, sir," she said, even as the gentleman's astounding green eyes drew her in. It was tempting, but no, she must be firm. "Shall we meet again while I am in London? I'm afraid this is not the time nor the place to further our acquaintance."

He glanced around. "Why ever not? No one would notice, I assure you, in this odd crowd. Lady Harroway always invites too many people, and since all the best have left London for the country, this is a motley assortment indeed. Come, do not be coy." He touched her hair and stroked her neck with one finger.

Breathless and feeling a thrill of consciousness at his touch, she was still master of herself enough that she was shocked at his forwardness, and was about to draw away from him, when her elbow was grabbed and she was *pulled* away. She turned to find her brother glaring down at her. "What is it, Christoph?" she asked, alarmed by his expression.

"You are acting like a common flirt, and making a fool out of the earl and of me with your behavior," he said, his tone a growl.

She gasped. "I beg your pardon?"

"You will behave yourself and show some restraint, Charlotte."

"What exactly have I been doing that is so wrong?"

"You laugh too loudly, and look too much at Randell, and—"

"This is what the earl has said?"

"He is concerned only for your reputation, Charlotte. He would not have you become ridiculous, as our cousin Caroline apparently became upon her arrival to wed the prince."

In a furious but restrained tone, Charlotte retorted, "Caroline

always was thoughtless, forward, and heedless. You know that's true. Do you dare compare me to her?" Though even as she said the words, she felt a blush of shame for past indiscretions that would make her perhaps worse than her cousin. Still, he should not be reprimanding her in public.

"Of course not, but I will not have you become the center of gossip, nor will I have you disgrace the earl in this manner. You have everyone looking at you, and next they will be gossiping. Would you have them call you common? Or hoydenish?"

She stared at her brother for a long minute, thinking how out of character this was for him. She glanced across the ballroom and caught the earl watching the scene intently. "So, the earl sent you to do his bidding, did he, to reprimand me?" she muttered. The babble of whispering voices threaded through the music, filling the pauses with a sound like dry leaves blowing in the wind.

"He merely mentioned his concern."

"How kind of him. What exactly did he say?" Their little contretemps was now drawing attention, just what Christoph and the earl said they wished to avoid.

"He said you were being common and courting scandal by standing too close to Mr. Randell." Christoph's blue eyes narrowed. "I have to say, I have never seen you behave like this."

Astonished, Charlotte glanced around the ballroom. Everywhere groups of young men and women gathered, flirting, talking, strolling. She had done nothing out of the ordinary, if she was to judge by every other young lady at the ball's behavior. It was only now, with Christoph standing at her elbow, his pale face turning ruddy with emotion, that they were drawing unwanted attention. "Well, perhaps I have not been in company enough to expose how heedless and hoydenish I can be," she said, her tone laden with sarcasm. "Really, Christoph, I can't believe what you are saying to me! I've done nothing wrong."

"May I be of assistance?" Mr. Randell said, approaching.

"Keep your distance, Randell," Christoph said, leveling a glare at the man. "This has nothing to do with you."

"On the contrary, I think it does. Has Wesmorlyn complained to you about my attentions to your sister?"

"Leave us alone, Randell," Christoph said, taking Charlotte's arm and hustling her back around the ballroom to rejoin Fanny, Lady Hannah, and Wesmorlyn.

She pulled her elbow from his grasp and stalked the rest of the way alone, but just before they rejoined their party, she turned to him, glanced around to be sure they were out of hearing distance from others, and then said in a low voice, "You have embarrassed and humiliated me, Christoph; surely if you had a concern you could have voiced it in a manner not so public, nor so graceless. Do not come near me for the rest of the evening, or I shall have no compunction against setting you right in front of everyone. So the earl sent you to do his bidding and you trotted along like a good little puppy; well, you are no wolf, sir, nor even a good brother." She whirled and stalked to Fanny, took her arm, and whispered to her that she needed a breath of fresh air. With a frosty glare at Wesmorlyn, she left the ballroom through the huge glass doors that stood open just beyond some potted plants.

"How *dare* he behave that way?" Charlotte fumed sotto voce to Fanny as they walked the length of the flagstone terrace, which was peopled by couples and pairs of ladies and gentlemen escaping the heat of the ballroom in favor of the cooler night air. Potted plants and stone benches provided refreshing and yet semiprivate spots to talk, and three steps led down to the grassy and inviting lawn, beyond which extensive gardens stretched.

"What happened?" Fanny asked.

Charlotte briefly acquainted her with what had gone on between her and their brother. Fanny was silent after the recitation of grievous ills.

"You do not think him right, do you?"

"No, of course not, Charlotte, but . . ."

"But what?"

"I suppose he was just doing what he thought correct. Gentlemen usually do."

"That doesn't mean he was right to chastise me publicly!"

Mr. Randell approached them diffidently. "Countess, Miss Fanny," he said with a nod. "I hope you are enjoying the night air?"

Out of charity with everyone in that moment, Charlotte snapped, "As much as I can enjoy any air in this stifling city."

He nodded. "It is as I feared. You are out of sorts now because your brother, sent by the earl, chastised you for walking with me, was that right?"

Charlotte observed him for a moment, then sighed and said, "But it was my behavior and not yours that incited the reprimand."

Randell sighed. "Wesmorlyn always was a stiff fellow. He means well enough, I suppose."

"And yet you are good friends?"

"We were at one time the best of friends, as close as brothers and raised almost together. We went to the same school at the same time. I fear our difference in position has parted us. He is a little too aware of his consequence as an earl."

"How revolting," Charlotte said. "I could never bear to be married to a prig such as he."

Fanny whispered in her ear that she was perhaps being a little too open, and Charlotte sighed. It was her constant failing, and one that she fought to correct, an impulsive and hasty nature. No matter the extreme provocation, it was not fair to expose the earl to gossip, and she had no wish to be the genesis of any ill-natured talk.

"Please don't say anything to anyone of what I just said, sir. It was ill-mannered of me." She paused, but then continued. "I would ask that you keep this in the utmost confidentiality, for I am committed to at least consider this engagement with the earl, and I'll not let myself judge him too harshly before we even have an opportunity to speak privately."

"How gracious you are," he said, admiration shining in his eyes. "In truth, I think you the wisest and most beautiful young lady I have met in many a long year. How fortunate Wesmorlyn is."

She smiled up at him, her ire beginning to cool in the face of his warm admiration. There was something very attractive about him, so open and manly and yet gracious and diffident, and she felt the attraction like a tonic surging through her veins, making her tremble. "And how pleasant *you* are sir!"

"In truth," he said, gently, approaching more closely, "I think all you need is a short walk in the coolness of the night



air, and you'll feel refreshed. May I escort you?" He gestured to the lawn. "There are many others enjoying the stroll about the grounds, after which the ballroom will not seem so confining, I promise you."

She gazed longingly into the dimness of the treed lawn, where couples, arm in arm, strolled and chatted. Lanterns twinkled in the branches overhead, throwing dancing pools of light over grassy pathways that wove among the gardens, and night flowers bloomed, giving off a delicious scent. She longed to walk among them. She glanced quickly back at the ballroom, and in that moment saw her fiancé dancing with another young lady, swirling past the window, his stony gaze fixed on her upturned face.

"You must not, Charlotte," Fanny whispered, her tone frantic. She wrung her hands, her gloves bunching and twisting. "Oh, please don't! Christoph will be so angry! And the earl!"

"Let us walk, sir," she said immediately, exasperated by Fanny's frightened voice in her ear. She took his arm and allowed him to lead her down the three steps to the mossy walkway that led to the trees. She heard Fanny's quick, tapping footsteps on the flagstone behind her. Turning, she said, "You don't need to accompany me, Fanny. I shall be quite all right with Mr. Randell."

"I'm too frightened to stay alone."

"Then go back to Christoph," she said.

Mutely, Fanny shook her head, and Charlotte, relenting, held out her gloved hand. "Then come walk with us. I don't mean to be a bear, Fanny, you know I don't, but I do so want to see the gardens, and look how many others are doing the same thing. With your company it will be even more acceptable." She took her sister's hand in her free one and they walked. She needed this respite, this moment of peace and calm. "Have you ever seen anything so delicious?" she asked, noting the clustered plantings of night-blooming stocks, their scent like fine perfume in the air.

"It's beautiful," Fanny said, meekly.

"You must be terribly weary," Randell murmured in Charlotte's ear. "For I understand you only this afternoon got to London after your long journey."

"*I am* weary," Charlotte said. "This whole day and evening

feels unreal, as if it is a pantomime I am watching, with actors playing out their roles, though it is really me!" It was a relief to have someone so sympathetic to talk to, and she felt his concern for her radiate. When the damp night breeze felt a little chilly, he pulled her closer to his side, and she could feel his warm solidity. It was comforting and yet discomforting at the same time.

"We have been walking too long," Fanny finally said. "We must go back!"

Charlotte sighed. "I suppose you're right." She turned to her companion, looking up into his face. "We should return to the ballroom, sir."

In profile, his face was a study in agitation, his dark brows furrowed, his mouth twisted. He turned to gaze down at her. "Please, Countess, tell me you will not rush into anything with Wesmorlyn. He's a good man, but I just don't know if he can appreciate what a precious flower he has in you! If it were anyone else but a good friend like Wes I would . . . but never mind."

"What?" she asked, breathless, noting the pain in his grimace. "What were you about to say?"

"We have to go, Charlotte!" Fanny said. She dropped Charlotte's hand and edged toward the pathway, from which they had wandered away.

"I truly can go no further, as a gentleman of honor," Randell said. "There are things about the earl . . . but no, I must not go on."

"Do you know something to Wesmorlyn's discredit?" Charlotte asked, intrigued. Why did he stop just as he was about to relate some interesting tidbit?

"Charlotte!" Fanny said, with more urgency.

"Please don't ask me that," Randell said, softly. He touched her cheek with one long finger, and drew it down to cradle in the dimple in her chin. "You are so lovely, in looks, of course, but in heart and soul more. If I could but fight for you myself, but I suppose it can never be." He looked away.

Her breath catching in her throat, Charlotte said, "Sir, if I have said anything to lead you to believe—"

"No!" he cried. "No one as perfect as you could ever do anything like that. It is all me, all my own heart, my own

senses." He turned and stared down at her. "I've never met anyone like you. I know there can be nothing between us, but oh! My poor heart would rest easier if I had but one sweet memory to look back on."

"What do you mean?"

"One precious, chaste kiss." He lowered his face to hers, but hesitated.

She felt his warmth, and trembled, her heart pounding. What was he asking but what she wanted, too? And yet—"I can't, sir," she murmured.

"You can," he whispered. He touched her lips with his, his warm breath mingling with hers. "You can," he whispered against her lips, and deepened the caress.

Caught in confusion, she did nothing, neither responding, nor pulling away. Her weariness numbed her and the day's confusion washed through her in the seconds as he deepened the kiss. She was irresolute, unsure, and so quiescent. When he paused in the caress, she said, "I don't think that was proper at all, sir, and I think—"

But he kissed her again.

## Chapter 3

THE EVENING had not begun nor progressed as Wesmorlyn expected. Some odd sense of being usurped had overcome him as he watched Countess Charlotte and Randell stroll around the room, comfortably laughing and chatting as if they were the engaged couple. He had expected the young lady to be awed into silence by his rank and bearing, but instead she had appeared to appraise him and find him wanting, preferring an untitled nobody with whom to spend her precious time. It was unconscionable and humiliating, and he had put an end to it by alerting her brother to her behavior. He may have been precipitate, and it had, perhaps, caused a rift between the Count and Countess von Wolfram, but it was too late to take it back.

After dancing with yet another intimidated young miss at the marchioness's express request, he looked everywhere for his fiancée, but could not find her in the crowd. The count was also covertly searching the ballroom for his sisters. Wesmorlyn started toward the terrace doors, but just then their younger half sister, Fanny, bolted in through them, went

directly to the count, and whispered something in his ear. Immediately he loped out the doors ahead of her.

Wesmorlyn followed. Had the countess fainted, or been attacked? Alarmed, he raced after them, through the dimly lit garden, over the damp grass, through the misty night air, and circled a clump of bushes just behind Christoph and Fanny. There, entwined in the shadows in an ardent embrace, was his fiancée and Randell. She was being thoroughly kissed, bent almost backward in the fellow's grip.

"Let her go, Randell," Wesmorlyn shouted, elbowing past the shocked and silent Count von Wolfram.

Randell did release her, and she, her cheeks ruddy and her hair ruffled, backed away from the angry confrontation.

"What were you thinking, Charlotte?" Count von Wolfram said to his sister, in a harsh and guttural tone.

"More to the point," Wesmorlyn said, stalking toward Lyulph, "is what were *you* thinking? How dare you take my fiancée out to the garden and molest her in that insane manner?"

"He didn't molest me," Charlotte protested, patting her hair back, tucking a stray strand behind her ear. Fanny had retreated to her side and clung to her sister.

"I promise you Wes," Randell said, his green eyes glinting in the light from a single lantern hung in the branches of the linden tree nearby. "If she had protested, I would have released her immediately."

That could not be allowed to pass without comment and reaction. A breeze came up and the leaves rustled, the light shifting and bobbing, shadows dancing. Controlling his fury as best he could, he muttered, "Lyulph Randell, you have trespassed on my kindness long enough and have impugned this young lady's character. As her fiancé and protector, I demand satisfaction!" He stopped, hardly believing the words that were coming out of his own mouth. A challenge? From him? But he continued, compelled by some inner force he had never experienced. "Tomorrow morning you will meet me at dawn on Battersea Fields. Swords, not pistols. First blood only will suffice, sir!"

Christoph, his mouth open in surprise, stared at him.

"You are challenging him?" Charlotte cried, shaking off

her sister's arm and stepping forward. "How *dare* you take this as a slight to you?"

"A duel?" Randell said, his dark brows diagonal slashes over his green eyes. He lounged against the trunk of the tree, the very picture of ease. "Really, Wes, are you not taking this all too far?"

"I'm not taking this as a slight to me," Wesmorlyn said to Charlotte, ignoring the other man, "but to you! Did you not hear him? He impugned your character, and yet you can defend the scoundrel?" He stared at her in puzzlement, as a breeze wafted through the shadowy, moonlit garden and lifted her ruffled curls. Her pale face had two dark spots of red high on her cheeks, and her hands were balled into fists at her sides. He was mystified by her, and yet entranced.

"I heard no impugning of my character, but just your own precious sense of outrage that he has interfered with what you deem your prerogative!"

"Charlotte, be quiet . . . *now!*" Christoph said, his face brick red down to his collar. "You have done enough damage for one evening. I'm ashamed to call you sister. And you, Randell," he went on, turning to Lyulph, "you are fortunate indeed that it is the earl who has challenged you," he said, jabbing his finger in the other man's face. "I think you know exactly what I mean when I say you had better stay away from my sister." With that he turned and stalked away, clearly struggling for self-control.

Wesmorlyn glanced back at Charlotte and his heart constricted, seeing her beautiful blue eyes fill with tears as she watched her brother stalk away. Her lips trembled, and the tears spilled over and rolled down her smooth cheeks, dripping off her dimpled chin. Fanny put her arm over her shoulder, gave both men a look of disgust, and pulled her elder sister away. Charlotte's sobs echoed.

"You have such a way with ladies, Wes," Randell said with a cynical smile, "that I'm not surprised you had to gain a wife by mail." He, too, turned and walked away, back toward the brilliantly lit house.

"Tomorrow morning, Randell," Wesmorlyn called after him. "Dawn, at Battersea Fields; I shall provide the surgeon. Choose a second and come prepared!" He whirled and

stomped back toward the ballroom, by a different route than his adversary.

Charlotte sat on a bench in a quiet corner of the terrace overhung with the branches of potted ornamental trees and tried to regain her composure. The night air was damp and misty, muffling nearby murmured conversations of people who strolled the long flagstone terrace in the far shadowed reaches beyond the torchlight. She smiled tremulously at Fanny in the dim light that trailed out of the many glass terrace doors and windows that lined the flagged veranda. "I've made a terrible mess of everything, haven't I? One day in London and I've become an example of how not to behave at a ball."

Fanny sighed. "Why did you allow Mr. Randell to kiss you?"

Shrugging, Charlotte tried to untangle her emotions, but the knotted mess had an enigma at the heart. "I don't know. I really don't. It sounds absurd to say, but I felt as if I was in a fog and was not really thinking about anything. I don't know if I was weary, or just numb, but when he gazed into my eyes, I felt as if I were experiencing Herr Mesmer's infamous animal magnetism and was in a trance." She shook her head and shrugged again.

"Do you like him?"

"He's very handsome and very flattering," she admitted. "And he has the most beautiful green eyes. I must admit, I find it fascinating that he is a werewolf. Who would have thought we would meet another werewolf almost the moment we land in this country? But I don't know why I let him kiss me." The moonlight had played a part, she was suddenly convinced. He had stared down at her, and the moon had sparked in the green depths of his eyes. She had leaned forward, drawn to him; she shook herself, trying to rid herself of that sensation, the feeling of being drawn in, but the effects lingered.

There was a ready explanation, though, and given her contrary character, it was the likeliest answer. "He is very handsome and sympathetic," she mused, "but I think it more likely that it was in retaliation for how the earl and Christoph made me feel earlier in the ballroom, like I was some silly little horrible child who couldn't make her own decisions." She sighed

and slumped. Impetuosity, her fatal flaw. "And now I've just confirmed every awful fear Christoph had of my ability to behave in a ladylike manner and have truly made a fool of myself in front of the earl."

"I'm so sorry I ran to Count Christoph, but Mr. Randell frightens me, and I was worried."

"Don't apologize Fanny. I would have done the same thing, perhaps, though you must know I was in no danger. Mr. Randell, after all, would have stopped immediately if I had protested. Even as he kissed me I could feel that. He's just a very nice gentleman who was overcome by his attraction to me."

"Do you really think they'll fight a duel over you?" Fanny said, her blue eyes wide. "It's so romantic!"

"It's not romantic in the slightest," Charlotte retorted, astonished by her half sister's hitherto unrevealed romanticism. "Wesmorlyn had no right to do such a melodramatic thing. No one saw us, nor did anyone hear the words that passed between the two men. A duel is completely unnecessary and farcical. Mr. Randell was perfectly right in his disbelief. Wesmorlyn only offered the challenge because of his own injured sensibilities; it had absolutely nothing to do with any care for my reputation, which will surely be more damaged by two gentlemen having a duel over me than from a confrontation no one else saw."

She stopped and looked off into the darkness. The night had lost all of its charm, and she was back to thinking of London as dreary and dull. She faced her pain and admitted it. "The worst of it is, I never thought Christoph would treat me the way he did tonight. I know I disappointed him, but still, he shouldn't have said what he did."

"He had no right to speak to you like that," Fanny agreed, crouching down and hugging Charlotte. "He said horrible things!"

Charlotte was deeply wounded by Christoph's words. The bond between them had always been strong, but from the very moment of their arrival in London, it felt strained and tenuous. She could not think of that or she would cry. Instead she pondered what the earl had said about her poor judgment in bringing Fanny to the ball. It was an echo of what Christoph had



said to her, though the two men were saying much the same thing for different reasons. She still didn't regret her decision; she couldn't blithely rush off to a ball and leave poor Fanny alone in a strange house on her first night in England. Their younger sister was her responsibility, she felt, much more so than she was Christoph's. And if Fanny was coming to this ball, she was coming as their sister.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This was not what she had come to England for: going to balls, dancing, being kissed in the dark. She had come, in truth, solely to find her half sister's mother, and to unite the two of them so they could have a chance at a mother and daughter bond, the chance that had been denied to Charlotte by her mother's early death. And that was what they would do.

"Fanny," she said, rising and holding her hand out to help her sister up, "I think tomorrow we shall embark on a little adventure."

"What do you mean?"

"I brought you all this way to find your mother. Eleanor Dancey is out there somewhere, and I intend to find her."

"*You* intend to find her? H-how?" Fanny stammered. "I don't understand. What will you do about the earl and Christoph?"

"What of them?" Charlotte said, resentment of the two men bubbling up within her. She took in a deep breath and stiffened her spine. "I may have behaved imperfectly this night, but they both have acted worse. If they get along so splendidly, having found a common enemy in Mr. Randell, they can have each other and their duels at dawn and their violent ways. Men!"

"Charlotte," Fanny said. "Though we may not understand, gentlemen have their own notions of honor, and are merely doing what they feel necessary."

"The earl seems to be satisfying his own sense of injury rather than any perceived slight to my honor."

Fanny abandoned the topic, and returned to the subject of their search for her mother. "But what about the inquiry agent your . . . our uncle Nikolas hired to find my mother?" she said, wringing her hands together, but stopping as her gloves twisted. "Should we not wait to see what he finds out?"

"I have little confidence in him; he will surely draw the search out just to earn a higher fee." Charlotte frowned and paced a few steps. "We can figure this out for ourselves. Frau Liebner told me that when she last visited Miss Eleanor Dancey, the woman was happy to hear that you were a good girl and settled at Wolfram Castle. She also said that she had to travel all the way to Plymouth to find her. Therefore," she said, returning to her sister's side and linking Fanny's arm through hers, "we shall set off for Plymouth and make our own inquiries. There's nothing wrong with two young ladies traveling together in such a manner. I have money; we'll hire a carriage and driver and stay at a respectable coaching inn. It will all be quite upright."

"Excuse me for interrupting your conversation," a voice said out of the dimness created by the potted trees.

Fanny jumped and gasped; Charlotte steadied her with a calming hand. "You startled us, Mr. Randell."

"I'm so sorry, ladies," he said, as he walked up the three steps toward them and bowed. He appeared ill at ease, glancing up and down the long flagstone terrace and at the windows that showed the ballroom inside like a series of paintings of elegant London life.

"Sir," Charlotte said, eyeing him warily. "I think it would be best if we are not seen talking right now."

He retreated slightly, until he was concealed by the shadow of a potted tree that overhung the terrace, its leafy branches extending to create welcome privacy. "I agree, and I promise not to detain you. I only approached you to apologize most sincerely." He cast his gaze down at the terrace. "I am abominable. Never have I let my feelings carry me away like that, but your beauty and sweetness . . ." He broke off and shook his head. "I'll not meet you like again," he whispered.

"How romantic," Fanny sighed, some of her prejudice against the man apparently tempered by his heartfelt admission of preference and apology for causing Charlotte trouble.

Pity for his obvious discomfiture moved Charlotte to say, "Perhaps you should not have behaved so, sir, but I am equally to blame. I should not have walked with you in the garden like that. But it matters not, as I doubt we shall meet again, for I'm leaving London tomorrow. I pray that you and

the earl can settle your differences without resorting to violence, which I abhor most severely.”

He gazed into her eyes with a feverish expression on his darkly handsome face and struck his chest with the flat of one hand. “For you, countess, I would even desert honor and de-lope rather than let you suffer a moment of worry for the earl’s health.”

“I’m not concerned for him,” she said, sharply.

“Oh. Well, good. Wesmorlyn can take care of himself. But where are you going? I had understood you to be settled in London for the time being?”

“My sister and I are going . . . uh . . .” She hesitated, exchanged a look with Fanny, and continued, saying, “We are going to seek an old acquaintance down Plymouth way.” The evasion came easily. She had never thought herself such a practiced liar.

“Plymouth! Why, you will be going almost all the way to my own estate in Cornwall. Who is it you seek, if I may be so bold?”

“Well . . .” She hesitated, but what did it matter really if she said something to him? “Fanny was raised with us, but her mother returned to her homeland. It is my half sister’s mother, in fact, whom we seek, a Miss Dancey.”

“Miss Dancey?” he said, staggering back a step. “Could it possibly be a Miss *Eleanor* Dancey, formerly of Plymouth? Oh, this is too much of a coincidence!”

“Whatever do you mean?” Charlotte asked, clutching Fanny’s cold hands in hers. “Do you know the woman?”

“I have just in the last few months rented one of my houses to a Miss Eleanor Dancey, once of Plymouth but now settled in Cornwall for a short while, before she leaves the country forever!”

“Miss Eleanor Dancey?” Fanny whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. “Can it be true?”

“How many ladies of that name can there be?” Mr. Randell said, earnestly. “Truly, Dancey is not an uncommon name, but putting everything together, I think we must take it as a certainty that this is the lady you seek.”

“But you said she leaves the country?” Charlotte said. “Why would she leave the country?”

"Well, it is not my place to say." He moved slightly out of the shadows and lowered his voice even more. "She confided her situation only as a great secret, you know, but she alluded to an indiscretion in her background and that someone was using it to make her feel uncomfortable." He looked both ways, up and down the terrace. "I dare not say another thing to protect the poor woman's confidence. But she did mention in her letter leaving her past behind and moving to . . . to Ireland."

"Ireland?"

"Or perhaps she said Upper Canada, the colonies."

"Oh, *no*! So far?" Charlotte staggered back a step, alarmed at this news.

"Yes, I'm sure it was Upper Canada," he said, earnestly. The terrace was now deserted, and he moved from the shadows, lounging against a low wall that bounded one part of the veranda. "She came to my attention through a mutual acquaintance, and I only remember some of the letter. I wrote back that she could have Moor Cottage for as long as she wished."

"Upper Canada?" Fanny said, looking up at Charlotte. "Is that not a great distance away, across the ocean? How could we ever follow so far?"

"That decides it," Charlotte said, brushing her skirts down with swift movements. "We must go immediately." She paced a few steps. "I will go now to Christoph and—" She stopped abruptly, remembering that she and her brother were not on good terms that moment.

"What is it?" Randell said.

She chewed her lip. Would she be able to convince Christoph? And how could she tell him what Mr. Randell had said when she could not even say his name at the moment?

"I will give you the directions," Mr. Randell said, watching her, "and you ladies and your brother may set out on a little jaunt down to Cornwall. I'm sure the earl will understand once you tell him your mission."

Would the earl really understand a trip out of London to find her illegitimate sister's disgraced mother? And that was not the sticking point; it was Christoph's opinion about which she cared.

"What is it, Countess?" Mr. Randell asked.

She turned back to him. "It's complicated. But after that little scene in the garden I'm sure you understand that offering my brother your information will not be a simple matter."

He paused and nodded. "I hadn't thought of that. How clever you are! What shall we do about that?"

"It will have to wait," Charlotte said reluctantly. She turned to Fanny. "I don't see any other way. You know I would do anything to find Eleanor Dancey, but we may have to wait until I can convince Christoph. Perhaps we may get her direction and write to her," she said, turning back to Randell.

"Of course, Charlotte," Fanny said, putting one small, gloved hand on Charlotte's arm. "We shall write her a letter."

"I'm sure you're being very wise," Randell said, nodding. "If Miss Dancey should leave Cornwall this week, as she mentioned—"

"This week?" Charlotte cried.

"Did I not say that? I believe this week or next was her projected time for sailing."

Charlotte stared at Mr. Randell for a long moment, searching his eyes, trying to see into his heart. Was this true? It had to be; try as she might she could think of no reason why he would mislead them. He barely knew her, and even if there was some absurd plotting behind all of this, if he had become swiftly enamored of her and wanted to part her from the earl, he knew enough already to know that she had no intention of marrying the man, so there would be no reason to hasten her departure from London. No, this must be legitimate, as coincidental as it seemed.

"I wish I could rely on Christoph to be reasonable!" she mused. "But he seems irritable, and the earl! I will not abuse him in front of an old friend, though it seems to me he has not acted like any friend, but he is so completely unreasonable that actually, it matters not that I make him even angrier, for I have already made my decision."

"Your decision?"

"You must know I have no intention of marrying such a loutish prig!" She clapped her hand over her mouth, but her incautious tongue had already led her so far, and really, what

harm had it done? He must already know that was true. "I should not have said it so, but it's true."

"Then . . ." The gentleman paused.

"What is it, sir?"

"It seems to me that what matters most is that this young lady find her mother and be united with her," he said, waving his hand toward Fanny. "At least they can meet before Miss Dancey departs these shores forever. I suppose you could hire a carriage driver, stay at inns along the way, and then follow my directions to Moor Cottage on the Little Honet road near Bodmin in the Eastern District of Cornwall."

She glanced over at a speechless Fanny, who listened with wide eyes. "It seems such a daunting journey," she said, imagining the difficulties inherent in such an expedition. When she had impulsively suggested it to Fanny, she had clearly not thought of all the details. "I'm not a coward, but it does seem arduous, as we don't know England at all. And with the pressure of time, I would not wish to become lost along the way."

"I have never in my entire life met a lady with such courage and brilliance," he said, with a low bow. "If it would not be too forward, it would be my great honor to give you the use of my closed carriage and driver; my man knows the way intimately, and you will have nothing to do but unite this sweet young lady with her mother."

It was becomingly said, and Charlotte clapped her hands. "Spoken like a true gentleman!" His altruistic kindness pleased her after the treatment she had received at the hands of the earl and her own brother that evening, but she paused, and then shook her head, reluctantly acknowledging that she could not take him up on his kind offer. For once in her life she would be prudent. "However, I don't think that would be wise. How would it look, sir, if we accepted your generous offer? And truly, I should stay in London long enough to consult with my brother. And, as little as I wish it, the earl. Until I inform him of my decision, I am still his betrothed."

He gazed at her for a moment, in the moonlight, and then said, "I must, of course, bow to your concerns, but pardon me if I express my innermost fears. I'm afraid if Wesmorlyn is informed of your intentions before you go, he will stop at nothing to detain you."

“Why would he do that?”

Mr. Randell hesitated. “There may be reasons I cannot and will not canvass at this moment. But even beyond the reasons I cannot tell you, you saw how he was in the garden. Just so is he with everything in his life; whatever he feels he possesses he jealousy guards like a dog with a bone. For example, his younger sister Hannah has a great affection for me, almost like another brother. You saw how she greeted me in the ballroom! She is truly the sweetest child in the world. Our estates are very close, and I have been in the habit of giving the poor girl a few happy hours of riding about the countryside in my open gig. But when Wesmorlyn heard of our jaunts, he put a stop to it. She is not allowed such treats anymore.”

“How sad,” Fanny said.

“How intolerably mean-spirited,” Charlotte said, indignantly. “But why would he do such a thing if his sister enjoyed the treat so? Does he not love her?”

“Yes, he does. He’s a good brother, truly he is. But I fear poor little Hannah expressed her joy in such a way as to make him believe I had usurped his position as a favored brother might.”

“You do him honor by imagining him with motives inspired by affection rather than resentment.” She observed the man for a moment in the shadowy light from the torches. Everything he said, everything he did, showed him to be the more truly honorable of the two men. If things were only different, she could imagine falling in love with just such a man as this. “We so appreciate your kindness, sir. My brother said something to me about you.” How could she raise their shared bond, the werewolf heritage that linked them irrevocably? She had never spoken of it to anyone outside of their family, but she felt it strongly in his presence, and perhaps that was what he felt for her, too. Maybe what she was feeling was the kinship of their blood, and so perhaps it was natural that she was drawn so to him. Christoph had claimed that Lyulph Randell was aware of him as another of the wolf blood, but it was still an awkward topic. “He told me that you are very much alike, that you both . . .” She paused, confused about how to go on.

“Yes, well, it is not something to discuss in a ballroom set-

ting," he said, with a smile and a hasty glance at a couple a ways down the terrace who had just exited the ballroom. "Let me just say," he murmured, melting back into the shadows thrown by tree branches, "that I truly hope that the count and I can someday be as close as brothers, perhaps in more ways than one."

"You're very kind," she said, feeling her cheeks warm at his implied interest in her.

"Will you *please* take my offer of my carriage and driver?" he said, his hands clasped together in a gesture of supplication. "I would only feel secure that way, knowing that the driver will take you directly to the country home I have rented to Miss Dancey."

Charlotte glanced back into the ballroom, the swirling couples, the haughty ladies. As much as she had thought this might be entertaining, it had turned into a debacle, mostly due to her own behavior. This was not her life. She had never really cared for gowns and dancing and gossip beyond a passing interest, and she was too old to start now like some green girl in her first year. She had no intention of marrying Westmorlyn, nor did she even intend to stay in England. She glanced over at Fanny; they had one chance, perhaps, to find Eleanor Dancey. How could she live with herself if she waited for Christoph's approval, only to find that Miss Dancey had already sailed out of Fanny's life forever?

And to be honest with herself, did she have the slightest idea of how to go about hiring a carriage and directing the driver to go down to Cornwall to find this cottage? If she had paid attention to her Uncle Nikolas's hasty lessons on English geography she might be able to point out Cornwall, but the sad truth was she couldn't. She was being given the opportunity to get what she had, after all, come to England for. Making a sudden decision, Charlotte impulsively said, "Yes! Yes, Fanny and I would be delighted to accept your kind offer." Beside her Fanny gasped and started, but she put out one staying hand to silence any exclamation.

"But you must go tonight! I would not want you to be disappointed after going all that way, only to find her already gone. It will take a few days to get there, you know."

"How are we to arrange it?"



"I will have my driver by your door at two in the morning, awaiting your pleasure. I shall leave a note with him telling you what inns you should stay at along the way, and where he is taking you. If I can get away after this ridiculous challenge of Wesmorlyn's, then I will meet you in Salisbury and accompany you on horseback the rest of the way. If your brother is with you, so much the better, but if he is not, then you will at least be safe."

"Christoph *must* come!" Charlotte paused and gazed at him steadily for a long moment. "I'm not sure how to proceed if we cannot convince my brother. To go alone in your carriage, and accompanied by you—"

"Oh!" he exclaimed, hand over his heart. "It shall all be completely proper, I promise you. I would not dream of traveling in a closed carriage with you, I swear."

Charlotte nodded sharply, taking Fanny's hand in her own. "We'll do it; I'll convince Christoph somehow. If I don't do another thing while I'm in England, uniting Fanny with her mother will be enough." She gave him their address, and indicated that there was a tiny, grim park opposite, in front of which a carriage could park at that time of night without being noticed.

"Burgess is one of my drivers, a little surly and quite the West Country character, but perfectly reliable. He'll be waiting outside your townhome at two in the morning, at your disposal." Randell bowed and disappeared back into the shadows.

Fanny and Charlotte returned to the ballroom. Christoph and Wesmorlyn stood on either side of Lady Hannah St. Ange like two grim sentinels, and the poor girl appeared extremely uneasy. Charlotte would have offered the young lady her arm to stroll about the room, but knew the earl would consider her an unfit companion for the innocent child. The notion made her burn, but she joined the unhappy group. All she wanted was to leave and get on with their plan.

"I saw you sitting with Fanny on the terrace and thought the cool night air might calm your temper," Christoph muttered, without meeting her eyes. "Have you recovered sufficiently to behave as a lady would, for a while, at least?"

"How beastly you're being," she replied, through gritted teeth. "I wish we'd never come to this miserable island."

"After tonight, I'm sure that will not be a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll speak of it later!" he hissed. "Smile as if you are having a lovely time!"

She blinked, trying to hold back the tears brought on by his continuing anger at her. She was homesick for Germany: dear, dismal Wolfram Castle, the dark forests, and even little Wolfbeck, their village. And yet she was wholly committed to helping Fanny find her mother before she left this wretched country. Caught up in her misery, she was unaware of anything more until Fanny tugged her sleeve. She looked up to find everyone's eyes on her.

"The earl asked you a question, Charlotte," Christoph said, impatiently.

"I beg your pardon. What was the question?"

"Would you do me the honor of promenading to the conservatory with me?"

Her first thought was to say no, but almost anything would be a relief from standing in this frozen unhappy group saying nothing. She took his arm.

Wesmorlyn had never felt such a conflict of emotions all at once in his whole steady, quiet, safe life. The fury he had felt upon witnessing Randell kissing the countess, his betrothed bride, was an amalgam of frustration, possessiveness, jealousy, and pique, he had concluded. And yet jealousy implied attraction. He *was* attracted to her, he admitted to himself, but it was surely the passing interest one would have in any lovely lady. He would not allow it to go beyond that.

She was unsuitable in so many other ways: forthright, outspoken, bold, haughty, and brash. It would be the best thing for him if she would reject their engagement and go home. Even as he told himself that, though, he fumed, for as much as he had intentionally left the engagement open on her end so that she could do so, he had never considered until now that she might reject him. How dare this girl throw away his hand in such a bold manner? For surely kissing another man at the ball intended to introduce her to London society as his fiancée must be considered a rejection of his hand in marriage. His

thoughts were a tangle of contradictory and confusing responses.

He glanced down at her strolling beside him, her figure stiff, her expression unhappy, her sweet bow lips turned down in a scowl. Curious glances followed them, and whispered words passed from lips to ears. What a sight for the gossips they must be. He shuddered to think what the society column in the newspapers would hint; never before had he been fodder for them, but he feared that he was about to learn how scathing they could be, especially if word got around about his duel with Lyulph Randell the next morning. He still wasn't sure that he had taken the right action, but the man's words had provoked his seldom-roused temper.

He must transcend his anger and triumph. He *must* condescend and speak with her, for though his sense of rectitude was outraged at her conduct, he would not leave her with anything of which to complain. "Countess Charlotte," he said, stiffly, "I'm sorry your first evening in London has been so difficult." Even though she had brought it all on herself.

"And so you should," she said, not looking up at him, but only straight forward. "I have never been so humiliated in all my life."

Staggered by her words, he restrained a quick retort, and instead managed a tolerably restrained reply. "And how would you say *my* conduct was lacking?"

Now she did look up at him, her blue eyes wide with incredulity. "You don't know? How is that even possible? You insult my poor sister—"

"I did no such thing!"

"By insinuating to me that she is not a fit guest in this house, and then . . . and then . . ."

"And then what? I am agog to hear what next you consider my failing."

"And then you blunder in to what is clearly a private moment and issue that idiotic challenge," she said, her voice cracking with fury. Her cheeks were pink, glowing with emotion, and the delicate draped curls that caressed her neck danced from her trembling.

He felt her quiver and steadied her by tightening his grip on her arm. "I certainly did issue a challenge," he growled, but

then clamped his lips shut. They passed through a crowded spot near the door to the card room, where a group of men were clustered, some of them fellows with whom she had been speaking earlier. Once they were out of earshot, he said, "That challenge was the only honorable response I could make to the man who was kissing my fiancée, and who then deepened his discreditable conduct by implying that he was only doing that which she had invited!"

She gasped. "He said no such thing!"

"He may as well have."

"But he didn't! And anyway, another moment and I would have parted from him. I was merely taken off guard."

"Off guard?" He jerked her closer to him and guided her past another cluster of ladies. "You shouldn't have been out there with him in the first place. That is the behavior of a trollop. Have you no restraint, no idea of what proper conduct for a young lady is?"

She dropped his arm and stepped away from him. Her contemptuous gaze swept around the room at the knots of young men and women. "Oh, I have heard and seen enough to know what is considered fit conduct in London society," she said, her voice low but trembling with anger. "It is fit conduct, apparently, to insult a stranger to your shores, her mode of dress and hairstyle, even her choice of companion, as some of these fine young ladies and gentlemen did tonight," she said, waving a hand to indicate the room at large. "It is fit conduct to be so insipid that one barely has a pulse, judging by these simpering ladies." She glared up at him. "And it is fit conduct to make a lady feel that nothing she could ever do would be good enough and that she is despoiled by the merest impromptu kiss in the garden." She whirled and began to walk away.

His temper ready to burst, a pounding headache accompanying it, he grabbed her arm and pulled her back, twisting her around to face him. "Merest impromptu kiss? You were entwined around him like the serpent in the garden, young lady, and I know Lyulph Randell well. I have *never* seen him act thus, so without some extreme provocation on your part, for I must believe you threw yourself at him shamelessly—"

She slapped him hard; it resounded like a clap in the ballroom, and even the orchestra did not drown it out. Horrified,

Charlotte stared at the earl, who, thunderstruck, nursed his reddening cheek. "I . . . I'm sorry," she cried, then whirled and ran out of the ballroom.

Stumbling toward the lady's withdrawing room, Charlotte found the door and bolted to a dark corner where she huddled on a stool and sobbed. A few moments later Fanny, pale and frightened looking, slipped over and crouched down by her. "Charlotte, Count Christoph says if you know what is good for you, you will this minute accompany me outside where our carriage will be waiting," she said, her voice trembling on the edge of tears. "He has made his apologies to the earl for your behavior, he says, and we will sort out the rest tomorrow in a place not so public, since, he said, he cannot trust you."

"Enough. I've heard enough," Charlotte said, rising, her wretchedness turned to cold anger and her tears drying on her cheeks. "And did my brother even ask the earl what he said to occasion such an outburst on my part? No, he wouldn't. I don't know what's wrong with Christoph, but since the moment we landed on the shores of this dreadful nation, he has not been the brother upon whom I have my whole life been able to rely."

Fanny was silent, her blue eyes filled with tears and misery.

"There, there, Fanny," Charlotte said, patting her sister's shoulder, ignoring as best she could the curious knot of ladies who lingered nearby and rudely listened in on their conversation. "It is nothing to do with you, you know. Come, let us leave. If anything could have stayed me in my plan, it is clear now that there is not one reason to remain in this filthy city." Raising her voice, she said, with a proud look around, "German manners are to make a stranger feel comfortable and welcome, but apparently the English do not subscribe to such a code of conduct." She lifted her skirts and swept from the room.

The carriage ride back to their townhome was silent; Christoph was rigid with anger and Charlotte much the same. They had not quarreled so since they were children, and she felt alone, suddenly, bereft. She knew she had behaved badly, but strongly felt that each one of them had: she, Christoph, and the earl. Fanny only was innocent of any wrongdoing.

The moment they arrived she stalked upstairs, deigning to

say not a word to her brother. He didn't deserve her forgiveness and wouldn't get it even if he asked. But a half hour's pacing and calm reflection cooled her somewhat. Her plans swirled in her mind, but the old habits of reliance on her brother would not allow her to abandon him without at least trying to draw him into her scheme. She tapped on his door and he called out "come." When she entered, it was to find him at the desk in his sitting room. He was writing a letter.

"Christoph," she said.

"What is it?"

"To whom do you write?"

"To Frau Liebner, to tell her we will be going home as soon as I can arrange passage."

"What?"

He turned, his blue eyes blazing with fury. "Isn't that what you want, Charlotte? Isn't that what all of this evening's antics were about?"

"Never mind about me, what about Fanny? We are to find her mother—"

"She doesn't care about that! She never has. I asked her after you stormed upstairs to pout and she says it doesn't matter."

"Of course she would say that to you, idiot! She's *terrified* of you. And especially since you probably bellowed at the poor girl, and—"

"No, Charlotte, not another word!" he roared, interrupting her. His face was scarlet and a vein pulsed blue at his temple. "It has always been your scheme, not hers. The girl was completely content at Wolfram Castle until you filled her head with some idiotic idea that to feel whole she must meet her mother."

"Perhaps that was true in the beginning, but Christoph, now we have an idea of where to find—"

"Enough, Charlotte! I've heard enough from you for one night," he said, his voice holding a harsh tone of cold fury she had never heard before. The color had ebbed from his face, but the vein still throbbed along his hairline. "We're going home so I can deposit you in our uncle's care, and not a single word you can say will change my mind. I will break your

engagement to the earl so he doesn't have to suffer your hideous behavior, and we will leave directly."

"What is wrong with you?" she cried. She was the impetuous one, not he. He was always so reasonable, so thoughtful, but now he was acting as if . . . a thought occurred to her. "You don't know how to handle meeting another werewolf. Is that it? Is Lyulph Randell behind your sudden decision to leave?"

"Don't be absurd! Shut the door on your way out, please. Good night, Charlotte." He turned away from her, hunching his shoulders and scribbling, dipping his quill rapidly and spilling blotches of dark ink over the page in front of him.

So that was it. She stared at his back for a long minute, and then left, closing the door quietly behind her. She went down the hall and tapped on Fanny's door. Entering, she went to the wardrobe that the hired-in serving staff had filled with Fanny's clothes and dragged out one bag.

"What is it?" Fanny said.

Charlotte looked up. "Christoph is being completely unreasonable. He is arranging for us to go back to Wolfram Castle, and will not listen to reason. So if we are to find Eleanor Dancey, we have no other choice but to take Mr. Randell up on his kind offer and meet his carriage at two. That gives us one hour to prepare."

## Chapter 4

LYULPH RANDELL pelted into his townhome and hastily called for his most trusted servant, bound to him by a magic so old and deep most had forgotten it ever existed. Diggory attended him in the library, where Lyulph sat at a desk, a pool of lamplight cast over the leather surface.

“Master?” Diggory said, gently.

Scribbling a hasty letter, Lyulph gestured and his servant fell silent, simply waiting in stasis for what should be required of him. Everything had changed, Lyulph thought, as he paused, in ways he had not foreseen. The moment the young German count had entered the ballroom he had felt the surge of energy from him, the threat to his power, the challenge to his dominion. No other werewolf existed in all of England, and he intended it should stay that way, thus the male of their line must be eliminated or chased from the island and the female . . . he closed his eyes, remembering his first sight of Countess Charlotte von Wolfram, sweetly rounded and elegant of figure, lovely of face and form, but intelligent, and yet with a naïveté that was deeply appealing. Ruined or subjugated? Which was most logical? Perhaps ruining her and



letting her fall into disgrace in Wesmorlyn's priggish and haughty glare would be most entertaining, but there was an attraction in considering taking her as his woman, and mother to his brood.

His plans, formulated during many late-night runs in the forest near Randellwood, had been overturned in just one night. He had always intended that Wesmorlyn's chosen bride would be disgraced, and Wesmorlyn himself should die childless. Then he, Lyulph Randell, would marry Lady Hannah St. Ange, righting the wrong that had been done to his family four hundred years ago or more when the earldom of Wesmorlyn, promised to his ancestor, was instead handed to Wes's ancestor in a breathtaking betrayal. Thus he had always maintained a careful friendship with Wesmorlyn, never allowing any hint of his deeper plot to peek through his veneer of casual amity. The conflict this night over the countess was a hasty concoction to thrust a wedge between them. Had he taken the right course? He must think. He stopped scribbling and put his head in his hands. Careful planning, using every bit of his considerable charm, the attraction of the wolf, on the impressionable Lady Hannah St. Ange, all would be for naught if he diverged from his careful plan now and instead decided to make Charlotte von Wolfram his bride and mother to his children, the future heirs of a dynasty.

He must not be rash. Each lady had her charms. In Lady Hannah he would gain the Wesmorlyn estate, eventually, though it would require more in the way of devious scheming to find a way to eliminate Wesmorlyn without shedding blood. He did wish to avoid that if possible. Also, with her as his bride his offspring would have the most unique heritage of any child ever born on earth. No one even knew what one would be like, a child born with the combined talents of his and the Earl of Wesmorlyn's lines. There was a risk, though, in that Wesmorlyn was absolutely resolute that the Randell and St. Ange families would never mingle their bloodlines. Unless he could find a way to change the earl's mind, he must either wait until Hannah was of age to marry without her brother's permission—that was years away—or escape with her to Gretna.

If he changed courses now and took Countess Charlotte

von Wolfram as his bride, with her fresh, vigorous, and untainted line of werewolf blood, he could be assured that his children borne of her would be powerful and fast, strong and pure. It was an intriguing thought, and he had made a promising start in attracting her sufficiently to break with Wesmoryn and take him as a mate instead. She appeared to be vulnerable to his wolfish glamour.

But there was one more option. What if he simply told Wes about the von Wolframs' werewolfism? With the earl's poorly concealed disgust of the breed he would immediately repudiate the countess, and that would no doubt force the Germans to leave England or suffer humiliation. But *would* he reject her? The earl's intent that Hannah not mingle her offspring's blood with the Randell werewolf strain did not indicate that he would be so delicate himself. No, Lyulph reluctantly decided, it was far too dangerous to take that path. If he told Wes the truth, and the earl then decided that there was an attraction in the thought of the power, strength, and possibly unusual talents their children might have, bloodshed would be the inevitable result.

Lyulph sighed deeply. What to do? His control over Hannah had borne interesting fruit. At his command she had spent some time talking to Fanny, Countess Charlotte's sister, and had winkled the story of the countess's plan to find Fanny's mother, now that they were in England, out of the girl. Was it happenstance that he then overheard Countess Charlotte and her illegitimate sister talking about their plan to leave London and find the younger girl's natural mother? Or was destiny conspiring to bring him everything he needed to become undefeatable? It was as if the maidens were thrust into his control, so perhaps fate was giving him the opportunity to build a future beyond what he had even imagined. Or the chance to make a huge mistake by not staying with his plan.

Perhaps he could go on with his current project without making a final decision. He finished the letter, scrawled his signature, sanded and sealed it. "Diggory," he said, and his servant snapped to attention. "Take this letter to Moor Cottage in Cornwall," he said, handing him the note. "You must start immediately and on horseback."

The man blanched and began to shake. "Moor Cottage. To Madam Morwenna?"

"Yes, to Morwenna." The man hadn't touched the letter. "Diggory!" he said, waving it. "Take it and do as I say."

Quivering still, the pale fellow took it and began to sob.

"What's wrong with you? Are you afraid of her?"

He nodded.

"She won't hurt you; she won't even touch you!"

"But she doesn't have to, sir. Touch me, I mean. She was inside of me last time, and I couldn't do a thing!" He shuddered convulsively. "She began to seek my thoughts, and when she found things she did not like, she tossed them out. It was like I was a room, and she began to move the furniture around inside my head! I thought I was going mad." He touched his forehead with one shaking hand, terror in his eyes, which had gone black and empty.

Diggory perhaps had reason to fear Morwenna simply because of his susceptibility to magic, and she did like to amuse herself on occasion with simpletons and the vulnerable. Lyulph drew an amulet out from under his shirt and pulled it off over his head. It was a sharp canine tooth strung on a leather thong, and he held it out to Diggory. "Take this and wear it. It is mine and will protect you from her. Do not let her see it, and you must never take it off. Don't let her charm you into taking it off, for she has her ways, does Morwenna, and none know that better than I. It amuses her to practice her wiles on the unwary. I have her under my control right now, but how long that will last I cannot say. Do this and you will be safe."

Reminded of his distrust of Morwenna's complete commitment to him, he quickly scrawled another letter in a language far different from English, and sealed it as well. "This also must be delivered," he said, handing him the other letter as well and giving him the direction of how to find the recipient. "Now, take them both and fly like the wind, Diggory."

The servant slipped the amulet over his head and tucked it under his shirt. An expression of peace covered his face and he sighed. "Thank you dear sir, and bless you." He ducked his head and bowed, taking the letters. "I will do your bidding."

"Send Burgess to me, even if you have to waken him from

a drunken stupor. And then leave immediately, but come directly back from Cornwall after delivering the letters, for I have some tasks here in London for you."

THE street was wet from another brief shower, but the moon had come back out from behind the clouds, casting a faint glimmer of silver across the wet paving. As Charlotte tugged Fanny after her, lugging their bags over her other arm, she felt more afraid than she ever had in her life, even though she had faced grave, deadly danger in the past and seen things no young lady should ever witness. But this step was her own responsibility, and thus, the consequences. Fanny was depending on her.

"There is the carriage, just as Mr. Randell promised!" she exclaimed, as a distant church bell pealed the time. Two bells. The carriage stood waiting across the street by the little park, a dark blot in the misty shadows. Pulling Fanny behind her, she hurried across the wet street, looking back at the tall, narrow row house and hoping no one in their own abode or the attached ones to the left or right had seen or heard them leave.

The driver leaped down and approached. "Bist you th'for-rin lasses?" he grunted, his eyes just shadowy hollows in his seamed face.

"Yes," Charlotte said, relieved that he had made it easy to know he was the right man. "You are Mr. Randell's driver?"

"Ar, that'd be me. Burgess I be by name." He grabbed the bags from her and tossed them into a trunk on the back of the carriage and opened the door. "Letter for 'ee frum Maister Randell on th' seat o' the carriage."

"Come, Fanny," Charlotte said, taking her sister's arm, but Fanny hung back. "What is it?"

"Are you sure we're doing the right thing?" she said, her light-timbered voice trembling.

Charlotte stopped for one moment and thought. Were they? If the objective was to find Fanny's mother, then this seemed not only the correct thing, but the *only* thing to do, and since Christoph would not help them, they must do it alone. She had tried to be prudent, but now she must be de-

cisive. "We have to do it this way. Christoph is being completely unreasonable right now and I have no confidence that I could convince him to help us. He has never, through all the turmoil and horror of the last years, treated me so abominably."

She took her sister's hands and stared at her, then touched her cold cheek. "Fanny, if it were not a matter that Eleanor Dancey is about to leave England forever, I would not be so hasty, but time is against us. Come. It's not so far; we've come much further already, all the way to England. We can't leave this vile land without finding your mother."

"But I'm afraid to leave without Christoph."

"I'm not afraid, Fanny. Trust me, and come. It will be an adventure."

"I don't think I like adventures."

"I'll take care of you, I promise."

In the light of the street lantern Fanny gazed up into Charlotte's eyes, and then she nodded once. "All right," she said, and climbed in ahead of Charlotte and took a seat.

Charlotte climbed in behind her and rapped on the roof of the carriage. It began to pull away. As confident as she was of doing the right thing, when she gazed through the carriage window up at the townhome and saw a dim, flickering light in Christoph's window, still she felt a pang of heartbreak. Her brother had always been her rock in an uncertain world. When their parents had died tragically weeks apart from each other, Christoph, then just nine years old, had been stoic and steadfast, comforting his little sister and helping her through it with an amazing maturity. Though life since then had been difficult in many ways, and he had been through his own share of troubles, she had always been able to talk to him. Now she couldn't.

She turned away from the window and hung her head. Fanny's small hand on her arm brought her back to reality and she forced a smile to her lips. She had leaned on Christoph often enough in her life, but now it was her turn to be the strong one for someone else. "Let's open Mr. Randell's note, shall we?" she said, brightly, shedding her Brunswick cape and turning up the coach lamp. She broke the wax seal as the carriage jolted.

She could not look back, and refused to even glance

through the window, instead scanning through the letter. She nodded. "That's good. Mr. Randell says that in the morning when he meets Wesmorlyn he will do his best to talk reason to him. He has no desire to duel with such a good friend and sees no need of it; he hopes that after a break the earl will be more agreeable. At that time Mr. Randell will also let him know that you and I are safely on our way to Cornwall to meet Eleanor Dancey. He says not to worry, he will take care of everything. We are just to concentrate on meeting your mother."

She folded the letter and stowed it in her reticule, feeling heat rise to her cheeks at some other nonsense in the note, his professions of undying fidelity, and his hopes that he did not shock her too much with his ardor. "The rest is just directions of where to stay, and his hopes of meeting up in Salisbury, which is on the way, so he can guide us and introduce us to Miss Dancey. Isn't this exciting?"

"Certainly, Charlotte," Fanny said, but her voice was tremulous.

"Now, Fanny, you must be brave!"

"I will try to be, but it is not so natural to me as it is to you. You're so courageous, and have even faced werewolves!"

Werewolves! Fanny knew about Christoph, but persisted in her odd belief that werewolves were terrible, deadly creatures; Christoph was an exception in her mind, an aberration from the general run of things. No amount of reasoning about their Uncle Nikolas being one, too, and others in the family, would shake her irrational fear. Charlotte sighed.

"Why is it," Fanny asked, her expression one of puzzlement, "that men of the family transform but ladies don't?"

"I don't know. Frau Liebner says that Uta told her much before passing on last spring." Countess Uta von Wolfram, Charlotte's great aunt and the holder of many family secrets, had died in the spring, but had used every bit of time she had left on earth sharing that lore so the next generation in their family would have all they needed to deal with their unusual and difficult heritage. "But no one can explain to me why men transform and women do not. They just say that is how it is. How I wish I could become a wolf! I would run with Christoph."

"I don't wish such a horrid thing," Fanny said, shuddering. "I'm afraid enough of the power we ladies *do* have!"

She spoke of the women of the family's ability to pass on werewolfism to a man they bonded with. It was a poor exchange, Charlotte thought, for the power to *become* a werewolf, faster and more powerful than a true wolf, and with lingering abilities even in human form that gave Christoph better sight, hearing, and smell than she could imagine. "It's not enough. I will always think that we, as women, received the poorer end of the bargain."

"What do you mean, Charlotte?" Fanny asked, her voice small.

"I was just wondering if any woman has ever really *tried* to transform. Is it just a story that we are unable? Is there more beyond our abilities than simply passing on the gift to a man? I wonder."

"Best not to try," Fanny said, clasping her hands together in her lap. "I wouldn't want to become a beast. I'm very happy as a lady."

Charlotte started laughing and could not stop, hugging Fanny close, tears streaming down her cheeks as her laughter turned to weeping. "Oh, Fanny, I'm so happy I have you."

A mist as thick as blanc mange rolled up from the river and clung to the dips and hollows of Battersea Fields. Wesmorlyn paced, his sword swinging at his side. Semyaza stood nearby, ramrod straight and impassive. In the distance, on a rise, was the carriage holding the surgeon. Not having slept or eaten at all, the earl was strung as taut as a bow. His back itched between his shoulder blades, and that was not a good sign. Since he was a child he had always thought of that as a portent that he was on the wrong path.

He strode up to Semyaza. "Do I have it wrong, Sam? Have I doomed us, my whole family? Good heavens, I pray that I have not wasted the efforts of a lifetime, for I couldn't bear it if I destroyed poor Hannah's chance of redemption just on this foolishness."

Semyaza merely bowed his head.

"I know. You cannot say." Wesmorlyn strode away and

gazed out over the amorphous landscape, fretting. Was it right? Was it wrong? In the moment Randell had said the words implying that the countess had invited his kiss it had seemed there was only one choice, and that was to preserve her honor by dueling, though he had never done such a rash thing in his entire careful life. Now it seemed not so certain an answer. Perhaps it was hubris, pitiful vanity, one of the deadly sins, to think that her honor could only be preserved by an action of his own.

Another hour passed, and still Lyulph did not arrive.

It gave him too much time to think as he paced. The mist began to burn off, and the river became visible down the slope, and beyond it, on the other side, Chelsea. What was he doing? Why had he reacted so impulsively as to challenge Lyulph Randell, long his friend and Cornwall neighbor? Perhaps when the man showed up, both would offer a nick of the sword tip to each other, to satisfy honor and the challenge of first blood, and then talk out their differences, he thought, glancing toward Semyaza, still impassive but watching him with burning interest. Yes, that was the right thing to do; he felt it, and the itching between his shoulder blades eased as he considered that course of action.

But where *was* the man? He took out his watch and read the time. It was almost nine. Wesmorlyn was anxious now for the meeting, for he wished to explain to Randell why he had felt honor bound to issue the challenge, and to ask what had been in his heart when he took the lovely countess in his arms to kiss her. Had the young lady really done something to invite the kiss? He knew so little of her, and could not determine if she had lured Lyulph to such an uncharacteristic gaffe. Lyulph Randell had always had some kind of special charm that attracted women to him in droves. He had never been celibate, but Wesmorlyn refused to judge him for only doing what most other men their age did. Most of his friends took lovers and mistresses, happily indulging in sexual excess as much as alcoholic and prandial excess.

The intertwined histories of their families and the proximity of their estates in Cornwall had forced Wesmorlyn and Lyulph into a kind of friendship over the years. The Randells could not help being what they were, and in truth, Lyulph



more than any other Randell male seemed to the earl to exhibit the most positive attributes of humility, hard work, and fortitude. It was not enough to make Lyulph a safe companion for Hannah, and Wesmorlyn had been forced to step in to keep the two from spending too much time together over the last year, while Hannah was in mourning for her mother, but Randell was a vast improvement over his father, who had been dissolute and dangerous. Most importantly, Lyulph Randell had never tasted human blood, and that, for a werewolf, was a feat of great self-restraint.

A werewolf. An *animal*. Wesmorlyn had never been able to conquer the disgust he felt knowing Lyulph for what he was, though the man could not help his heritage. It comforted him that he had never shown the other man his repulsion. That would be cruel and impolite. He paced along the hillside and gazed into the distance. Where was Lyulph Randell?

CHRISTOPH swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat staring at the triangle of faint dawn light left by the partially open draperies. His first morning in London. He scrubbed his eyes with his fingers and yawned, stretching out his shoulders and trying to push away the last shadows of the awful dreams he had experienced all night, dreams of running as a wolf and being netted, then speared. He couldn't imagine from whence such thoughts came.

However, it was true that the urge to transform and run as a wolf had overcome him in the ballroom, and he had longed for open space and freedom with a fierce, ripping need in his gut. The confinement of the ballroom, so stifling hot it was like being smothered, the tension, his uncertainty about how to behave toward Lyulph Randell, Charlotte's unusual behavior, the roomful of ladies and gentlemen staring at them: it had all felt like a weight on his shoulders. The cool, green, fragrant forests of Wolfram Castle had never seemed so distant as in that crowded ballroom. The nightmare of being netted was nothing more than a metaphor for society, and his sense of imprisonment in the city.

But today, he decided, standing and stretching, going to the window and throwing back the draperies and gazing out

over the misty scene of chimney pots and angled, slate-tiled rooftops, was a new day, and this city his to explore. He did not intend to leave London, though he truly had meant his threat for one brief moment. It had seemed the simplest plan, to take Fanny and Charlotte back to Germany, and then go off on his own with no responsibilities.

He had more fortitude than that, though, and the letter he was writing to Frau Liebner was just to inquire if she had safely arrived at her relatives' in the north of England. He had written a second to his uncle to let him and his wife, Elizabeth, know that everything was satisfactory in their new London home, and a third to the inquiry agent who was searching for Fanny's mother to apprise him of their arrival.

So yes, today was truly a new day. The haze of coal-fire smoke over the city was growing into a soupy miasma, with the humidity in the air the remnant of the rain the previous evening. But the weather, judging from the pearly dawn light creating a roseate glow over the rooftops, was vastly improved. They would not leave, but would stay and see if they could mend the relationship with the Earl of Wesmorlyn, whom Christoph had found a solid and comfortable sort of fellow, ideally suited to take care of his flighty sister. And perhaps marriage and children would calm her down, settling her inappropriate wildness. So, while Fanny and Charlotte went to the dressmaking shop, he would see about box seats to the theater, make an appointment with a renowned music master, and use his family's name hopefully to gain a meeting with a famous violinist and fellow countryman he had heard of as residing in London and taking students. He needed the fellow's help on some violin concertos he had written and wished to perfect.

Siegfried, his valet, entered the room with a terrified look on his young face. One of the sons of Heinrich, his uncle's valet, Siegfried had been trained to follow in his father's footsteps. His uncle Nikolas had thought they might have need of a German servant while in London, and since the boy had expressed an interest in going, he had been added to the party. Rapidly, in German, the young man expressed his fear that the other servants were trying to poison the master.

"No, Siegfried, they are not trying to poison me. What gave you such an idea?"

As the fellow bustled around, preparing his master's toilette with shaving implements placed just so on the nearby table, he spewed a long story about how he had caught the cook sprinkling something in the master's morning coffee, and how he had then tried to stop him, but the ferocious fellow had almost come to blows with him.

Laughing to himself and greatly cheered, Christoph clapped Siegfried on the shoulder. "Calm yourself; I promise you I will get to the bottom of this, but I have a feeling it is a misunderstanding only, and the barrier of language is responsible for the two of you having such a quarrel. I will take care of everything."

That explained why there was no tray by his bedside and no morning coffee, though he had ordered that it be waiting for him at first light.

Siegfried shaved him, then Christoph bathed himself with the hot water provided by a frightened-looking maidservant. As he dressed, he wondered how Charlotte and Fanny were faring. He would have to straighten out the staff situation, and make sure the ladies were comfortable before beginning his day. And he would need to speak with Charlotte. Perhaps he should have the night before, but he had been far too angry at her behavior, and had wanted her to feel his ire. But now he thought he was perhaps too harsh. She was dealing with even more than him, in a way, meeting her fiancé for the first time and finding out he was somewhat of a cold prig. As fine a man as the earl no doubt was, he was also a very cool character, not the kind of romantic fellow young ladies seemed to long for. Perhaps Wesmorlyn needed a little hint to Charlotte's impulsive but generous and loving character.

He gazed at himself in the mirror, putting his cravat to rights. His damp blond hair shone, showing streaks of copper and russet. Yes, he mused, he would straighten it all out this morning, and they could begin anew.

The butler, who had been engaged along with the rest of the staff before they arrived, tapped on the door, entered, and bowed. "Sir, my apologies for my staff and their confusion this morning, but your German valet has thrown them all into

disarray. I will straighten them out. It has come to my attention, though, that something is amiss."

"What is it?" Christoph said, carelessly, turning away from the mirror toward the portly and dignified fellow. A loud rapping at the front door echoed in the hallway and up the stairs.

The butler held out a folded piece of paper. "This note was found in Countess Charlotte's bedchamber this morning, on her pillow."

"On her pillow? Is she not still in bed?" Christoph took the note, only half attending as he unfolded it, listening to the commotion downstairs of some guest being admitted. Who would call this early on the first day after their arrival in London? He glanced at the note; it was in Charlotte's hand, and it was in German. He caught a phrase that leaped off the page to him.

"We are gone to find Fanny's mother," Charlotte had written, and he forced his attention on the rest of the note, feeling as if the breath had been sucked from his body. Fanny and Charlotte had, it appeared, left London in the night and were off on an expedition to some unknown place to find Fanny's mother, Eleanor Dancy!

A footman came upstairs and accosted the butler in the bedchamber doorway; the fellow listened intently to his underling, and then turned to Christoph. "Sir, I beg your pardon," the butler said, "but it is the Earl of Wesmorlyn. He sends up his compliments, makes his apologies for the early hour, but he has something to tell you that cannot wait."

Christoph crumpled the note in his hand, all of his plans for the day crushed along with the paper. "I cannot go down, I must . . ." He stopped and thought. *No*. If he wanted to avoid a scandal of epic proportions, then he had to appear just as if everything was normal. He would listen to the earl, respond appropriately, get rid of him, and then he would find Charlotte, pull her all the way back to London by the hair if necessary, and tie her down to one place so she could not embarrass him ever again. "I will go down and speak with the earl."

Wesmorlyn awaited him in the cold, dreary sitting room off the equally grim main hall. He turned and bowed at Christoph's entrance. "I must apologize for the uncivilized hour of my visit, Count von Wolfram."

"I admit I am surprised, my lord."

"I must trespass further on your good graces by asking to see my fiancée."

"Sir, I do not know about your own sister, but Charlotte, I can assure you, would never arise this early." A neat evasion.

"Ah. Yes, of course. I wished merely to inform her that I had visited the field of honor, and done my duty to her."

"I can give her that message. What was the outcome of the duel? I trust you were not forced to do damage to Mr. Randell? That would be a most shocking outcome."

"No, as a matter of fact," the earl said, with a frown on his handsome face, "Lyulph Randell never showed up at the duel site."

Christoph felt a grave anxiety begin to churn in the pit of his stomach. "Randell never appeared?"

"No. May I see Countess Charlotte a little later? I could come back in two hours. I truly do wish to speak with her, for I feel I have an apology to make to her regarding my behavior last night and some hasty words I said that may have hurt her."

Christoph, with the crumpled note burning in his palm, was rapidly conning over the possibilities. The note had not said so, but was it possible that Charlotte had impetuously eloped with Randell? Or could she have allowed him to accompany her and Fanny on this mad dash to visit Eleanor Dancey? He was no longer certain of anything, and his one instinct was to preserve her good reputation any way he could.

"As a matter of fact, Wesmorlyn, I am told by the maid that Charlotte awoke this morning with a . . . uh, head cold, and I fear she will be in bed for most of the day. Perhaps if we could allow her to rest today, and . . . well, I'm not sure how quickly she will mend." That was terrible; he had stammered through his swiftly concocted excuse with no assurance at all. He took a deep breath and said, "I will not bore you with the details, but the journey was extremely wearing on the ladies, you know."

"She seemed in fine fettle last night," Wesmorlyn said, with a frown pinching his face.

"Just give her time. She'll be well in a couple of days, I warrant. May I see you out?"

Wesmorlyn was soon staring at the knocker on the door of the rented townhome, and feeling the first snarl of what would likely become a festering knot of anger. How dare they ignore him? The count had ushered him out as if he was a tradesman. And to be put off for days, with no idea of when he would next see his fiancée?

Something was wrong. But what?

He returned to his carriage, where Semyaza awaited him. "Something is wrong, Sam, and I want to know what. Watch this house, and if you can, make friends with the staff. They will not have had time to gain any loyalty to their new masters. Something is amiss, and I will know what it is, for I will *not* be played for a fool."

## Chapter 5

THROUGH THREE wearying days on the road, staying in inns on both intervening nights, her English money beginning to dwindle, Charlotte worried constantly that they had done the wrong thing. Poor Christoph must be anxious, she thought, over and over until the phrase was like a flail with which she lashed herself. As angry as she had been at his behavior toward her, the hours and days passed, and that feeling mellowed. Everything had been left for him to handle, including making her excuses to the earl. That was wrong, for she should have sent a note to Wesmorlyn herself, ending their engagement. She hadn't thought of it. The only thing that soothed her conscience on that head was the resolution that once they were at Eleanor Dancey's residence she would write a letter. She would simply tell the earl that it was clear they would not suit.

She had certainly had hours to think it over and come to that opinion even if she hadn't already been determined on that course of action, because Fanny was proving to be unexpectedly poor company. She was fussy and particular, not enjoying the food at the inns at which they stayed, and turning

up her nose at the linens, saying they smelled musty. It was true, they did, but bad food, poor service, and moldy linens were small inconveniences in exchange for an adventure. With the right companion she would have enjoyed the escapade; she longed to talk to Fanny about it all, but got only sighs in reply to her observations. Their driver was taciturn and unhelpful, beyond making sure they were safely stowed in the inn at night. He apparently spent most of his time drinking, for each morning he looked grubbier and smelled worse, reeking of alcohol.

Their advance into Cornwall had been a revelation. The countryside was barren at times but for "tors," craggy, rocky hills that exhibited a taciturn nature equaling that of Burgess at his worst. And yet it deeply thrilled Charlotte, who found the windswept hillsides and distant views of dark, threatening clouds exciting, almost as much so as her native forests. She longed for the freedom to wander those distant hillsides, unfettered by the bonds of society and its expectation of perfect behavior. Someone with whom to share her thoughts and impressions would have been a boon, but she knew she must be tender of Fanny's feelings, for the girl had other concerns than just the wild beauty of England's most westerly county.

Finally it was evening again, and one more night only would be spent on the road, Charlotte had ascertained, before they would be at their final destination. Mr. Randell, who was supposed to join them at Salisbury to accompany them the rest of the way and introduce them to Miss Eleanor Dancey, had failed them, sending a note by the incredibly speedy English postal service to say that he had been held up in London, but would join them in Cornwall in time to introduce them to Fanny's mother. This had sent Fanny into a gloomy mood of doom that left Charlotte irritated and unable to speak to her civilly, but now, as night fell and they were drawing close to Bodmin, where they were to stay the night before going on the next morning to Moor Cottage, she could no longer maintain silence.

"We're almost there," she remarked, trying to rouse Fanny from her torpor. "Tomorrow you will meet your mother. Aren't you the least bit excited?"

"I suppose," Fanny said, grudgingly, from the gloom.



"If I were you, I would be hopping with anticipation!"

"I've often observed that for sisters we are remarkably unlike. Night has fallen," she fretted, cupping her hand around her eyes at the glass, trying to see out the side window. "Aren't we going to stop in a village at an inn?"

"Yes. We just haven't arrived in Bodmin yet."

"But isn't it rather late? Shouldn't we have stopped somewhere else? Why did we not stop for the night at that place we paused at in Launceston, the Jamaica Inn? That was hours ago! I haven't seen anything outside the carriage for ever so long. Where are we?"

"Good heavens, you are a gloomy puss today," Charlotte said. "Burgess knows what he's doing. Has he steered us wrong so far?"

"Would we know if he had? I don't like him," Fanny said, primly. "He smells of drink, very often."

The carriage halted, and Charlotte sighed in relief. "Thank goodness! We must be at Bodmin."

The door banged opened, and Burgess loomed in the doorway, his surly expression illuminated in a ghostly manner by the interior lanterns.

"Have we arrived, then? Where is the inn?" Charlotte asked, trying to see around the sturdy form of the driver.

"Out," he grunted. "Got a bad wheel, and you'm getting out," he slurred.

"What do you mean?" Charlotte glared at him without moving. "I didn't feel any trouble. If you must get help for the wheel, we shall wait here."

"Out," Burgess said. He reached in and grabbed her by the sleeve, pulling her so hard the material tore.

"What are you doing? Stop it, you drunken fool!"

"Drunken? Ain't drunken, tha gockey mort! Get outta my carriage!" With that he grasped her wrist and wrenched it hard, pulling her forcibly from the vehicle.

She tumbled down to the gritty road surface, crying out at the rough handling. Fanny, giving a wail of fear, needed no such encouragement and jumped out after Charlotte, kneeling at her side and trying to raise her up.

"How could you treat her in this uncouth manner?" she

cried, her voice squeaking in her outrage. "Mr. Randell will hear about this."

"Ar, well, thou hast zealed thy fate, zaucy mort!" Burgess reached into the box in back, pulled out their traveling bags, and tossed them down beside them in the dark. "Thou can fend fer thine oon zelves." He said not another word but jumped up and clicked to his horses, pulling away at a smart pace.

"Burgess!" Charlotte cried, getting to her feet and racing a few paces after the carriage. "Burgess, come back here! You cannot leave us in the dark. What shall we do?"

But he was long gone, just the *clop clop* of hooves on the hard-packed road surface fading in the distance to signal that he had ever been there.

"Oh dear," Fanny said, wringing her hands and sobbing. "Did I say the wrong thing? Why did he leave us here?"

The damp evening air misted on her cheeks, and Charlotte, still stunned, stared down the road into the dark. It made no sense. Burgess had told them something was wrong with a wheel, and that was why they must climb down, but then he had driven down the road smartly enough once they were out. She went back to her sister and put her arm around Fanny's shoulders. "It was nothing you said, Fanny. Either he was drunk, or . . . I don't know. I can think of no other explanation."

"What are we to do?"

Night had closed in around them, the last vestiges of day disappearing in a hint of purple on the western horizon. Fanny shivered, and Charlotte roused herself. "You're cold. At least the villain left us our bags, though my Brunswick is still inside the carriage. Let us get our shawls out of our bags and decide what we should do and where we shall shelter for the night."

"I'm frightened, Charlotte," Fanny sobbed.

Not willing to admit that she, too, was scared, Charlotte, rooting around in her large carpet bag for her warmest shawl, said, "Nonsense. There is nothing of which to be frightened. We are on a main road. Nothing can happen to us."

"But when we were at the inn last night, I heard two maids

speaking of h-highwaymen! What shall we do? Where shall we hide?"

"Aha! Here it is," she exclaimed, pulling out her shawl. "Now, Fanny, you must get something warm for yourself. Here, let me help." Charlotte knelt on the rough shoulder of the road and began searching in Fanny's bag, hampered by the darkness and her sister's lack of attention. "Fanny, calm yourself!" she said, standing and putting her arm around the other girl's shoulders. "It will do no good to snivel now. We must decide what to do, whether to hide by the hedgerow and wait for morning light, or try to make some progress."

"I think we should hide," Fanny said, timidly.

That was Fanny; she would always decide for the safer-seeming of two choices, or the one that required the least decisiveness. "Now, listen to me," Charlotte said. "For all we know we're a mere mile or so from some habitation. I say we walk for a ways down the road and try to find some village, or failing that a farm. Even a barn or shed would be better than the hedgerow, do you not agree?"

"You're right, Charlotte," Fanny said, sounding calmer.

"Of course I am." Charlotte knelt again and pulled out Fanny's warmest shawl. She handed it to her, fastened the bag again, then stood. "We were headed in that direction," she said, pointing down the road, faintly illuminated by the rising moon. "And so I say we continue that way, since we know that we traveled quite far since we last saw civilization behind us. Forward, I say."

They walked, their bags seeming heavier and heavier as they became more weary. The dark was eerie, with sounds in the hedgerow by the road causing Fanny to cry out and dissolve into near hysterics, until Charlotte was close to snapping at her. What good was allowing terror to overtake one, when reason said they were unlikely to be molested by any creatures so small as to hide in a hedgerow?

Exhaustion weighed heavy on Charlotte, doubly so since Fanny insisted on clinging to her, pulling her arm until it felt as if it would come right out of the socket. Fanny started and cried out at every sound, and yanked on Charlotte's arm until it ached. Her bag felt heavier than she would have thought

possible, despite its holding only one dress, underclothes, and accoutrements.

Surely even on this lonely moor there must be some sign of habitation soon? She cursed Burgess under her breath, and satisfied herself with everything that she would say to Mr. Randell about his choice of trusted drivers when next they met. Why the fellow had abandoned them, she could not imagine. The puzzle would stay a mystery until they heard from Mr. Randell, but first they must get through this long night and find a village or some place to stay.

Another half hour passed. They had made very little progress, and Charlotte began to feel the first trickle of desperation. Fanny whimpered constantly, and complained that her feet hurt, that she was hungry, and that she was cold and scared. As much as Charlotte loved her sister, adversity did not make her stronger, it only made her complain, and that was becoming worse than annoying.

She let her mind wander instead, trying to defeat the anger she felt toward Fanny for being so fainthearted. Mr. Randell's note at Salisbury had said nothing about his duel with the earl. How had it gone? she wondered. Had the earl been in any way justified in his actions, in challenging his longtime friend and neighbor?

And what was Christoph doing? She felt a pang of bitter remorse. Her brother had been through so much in the last year or so. He had been drugged, abused, and tricked into having a shameful affair with their likewise drug-addled aunt. He had survived losing the woman he had fallen in love with to a rival, and all of the turmoil had culminated in finding out that he was a werewolf, something he told her he had never suspected about himself. At last he was coming to terms with it, finding that it explained much about himself that he had never understood, including why he and his uncle, Count Nikolas von Wolfram, could not live in the same house without constantly arguing and battling over every little detail.

"I don't see any village or town yet, Charlotte," Fanny complained, "and I'm tired and hungry. What shall we do? What if some villain accosts us? Or what if morning comes and we still cannot find any town? What shall we do? I wish

we had never made this journey. I wish we had waited for Christoph to—”

“Fanny, do shut up and let me think.”

In silent resentment Fanny withdrew her arm from Charlotte’s and stopped. She dropped her bag on the road and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I’m sorry, Fanny, but—”

“You needn’t snap at me like that,” the younger woman said, her voice trembling with weariness and thick with tears.

“I am sorry,” Charlotte said, and put her arms around her sister, gazing out over the lonely moor. She hugged Fanny and patted her back in what she hoped was a comforting way. But, what was that flickering light dancing on the moor? She watched the light appear and disappear. Was it some ghost or phantasm come to plague them? Charlotte, weary too and stretched to the limits of her endurance, shivered and watched. But the dancing light, only sometimes visible, did not come any closer. She patted Fanny on the back, then pushed her away and said, “I see something, in the distance. It could be a lantern, or . . .”

Fanny turned and gazed, saying, “I don’t see anything at all. Oh wait, yes I do.”

“It could be a house.”

“Or it could be the campsite of brigands!”

“But it could be a house,” Charlotte persisted, straining her eyes to try to see the source of the light.

“I think we ought to continue along the road, or hide in the bushes.”

Charlotte thought about it. She gazed down the road into the distance and saw nothing. There was nothing from whence they came. As long as it felt like they had been walking, in her heart she knew that between Fanny’s timidity and her own exhaustion, they had actually covered very little distance, perhaps only a few furlongs. “I think we ought to at least creep closer and see. It could be a farmhouse. Think, Fanny, farm-fresh eggs and a rasher of bacon! Bread and butter, perhaps jam! Hot water and a bed to sleep in.”

“Or all of our belongings stolen from us and our throats cut or worse!”

"You have the most astonishing bloodthirsty streak," Charlotte commented.

"I read that pirates came from Cornwall and Devon, and that they are all smugglers and wreckers and highwaymen here! And there are ghosts, too. I read about ghosts that will drive you mad."

"Good heavens, you really will have to read some books other than horrid novels, little sister." Charlotte sighed. "Then stay here, if you are afraid, and I will go."

"No!" Fanny said, ending on a shriek. She clung to Charlotte. "Don't leave me on the road alone."

"Then come with me."

"No! Don't go, please Charlotte!"

Taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly, Charlotte chose her words carefully, gazing into the dimness at the faint paleness that was Fanny's face. "So, your plan is to remain quivering exactly where we are until we are rescued, by some fortuitous circumstance?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Then you will have to accompany me, because I'm going closer to see if it is a house or farm." She hiked her bag up on her shoulder and left the road, lifting her skirts and scaling down the raised embankment. She approached the hedgerow, looking for a break in it, then took her own bag and shoved it into a thicket, feeling around, finding a thick stick and thrusting it out of the hedgerow at an angle, to mark where she hid her bag. Fanny followed, whimpering. Charlotte took her bag and pushed it in, too. She felt along the hedgerow, found a gap, and pushed through it, dragging a reluctant Fanny behind her. After the bushes, the going was easier, and Charlotte crept forward over the grassy expanse, holding her sister's hand firmly, going carefully to avoid tripping on the rocky outcroppings that dotted the moor.

The light was coming from near a grove of trees. Were the trees hiding a house? It seemed unlikely, but what else could she think?

Moving forward with as much stealth as she could while being cautious of stumbling on rocks, she remembered long-

ago hunting expeditions. When she and her brother were young, they would take off for the whole day and hunt, staying out sometimes until long after dark. They had even, on occasion, camped out overnight, making a bed of pine boughs and talking all night while gazing up at the stars and the moon.

It was a rough-and-tumble childhood. As she grew older, her Aunt Adele decided it was not suitable for a young lady to be roaming about the countryside; her adventures were over, even as Christoph was still allowed his freedom. But he didn't go. It would have been dreary, he said, to go without her. She missed Christoph terribly. Tears prickled her eyes, but she squeezed them out and fiercely quelled them. Dropping Fanny's hand, she whispered, "Stay behind if you like. I need to get closer and see what we are dealing with just beyond these trees. I cannot yet tell."

She crept forward, staying in the dark shadows among the brush, her hands out before her to protect her from branches. Voices. Laughter and a musical instrument of some sort; was it a guitar? Someone sang a snatch of song in some language Charlotte did not understand. Who was this? What were they doing on the moor?

The pleasant smell of woodsmoke drifted toward her, and with it the rich scent of food bubbling over a fire. Rabbit stew; the smell of it was familiar from her youth. Her mouth watered. She was so hungry and thirsty! Parting some bushes, she finally saw movement and people. It was an encampment of some sort. There were odd, brightly colored wagons set at angles around an open area where the fire burned brightly. Men sat in groups around the fire, and one did indeed have a guitar, which he played, while laughing and talking with the others.

She felt a tug on her dress, and Fanny whispered, "What do you see? I smell food."

"It's some kind of encampment, but . . ." She didn't want to say that she saw only men. They could not enter an encampment of men, for who knew what would be their fate? But there: bringing a bowl of food to one of the men was a

woman, very plump, her hair tied up in a scarf and full skirts flowing around her rotund figure. The man plunged his spoon in and began to eat ravenously. Charlotte's stomach grumbled. The scene was domestic and peaceful. What should they do, approach, or go away?

"Who are you and what do you want?" a voice suddenly cried behind them.



## Chapter 6

CHARLOTTE STIFLED a cry as she whirled. Fanny scuttled away into the dark, whimpering at the brambles that tore at her skirts, but Charlotte faced her interrogator, who held up a lantern. It was a young woman, dressed much like the older woman she had already seen, in colorful voluminous skirts and a scarf over her dark hair.

“Who are you?” she said, her melodic voice holding more curiosity than suspicion. “Why are you spying on us?”

“My apologies,” Charlotte said, carefully. “I did not mean to spy.”

“Then what are you doing creeping up on us like this?” she asked, examining Charlotte’s face in the flickering light from her lamp.

“Pardon, but who are *you*? Why are you camped out here?”

“I think you should answer *my* questions first,” the young woman demanded, with a proud shake of her head, dark ringlets dancing where they escaped from the scarf. “Why does the other one hide from me?”

“She’s frightened. We’ve had rather a difficult evening,” Charlotte answered, keeping her tone even. Fanny had crept

back to them, and now was holding onto her hand and squeezing it tightly. "We were on our way to Bodmin to stay the night when our driver abandoned us on the highway. He made us get out of the carriage on the pretext that there was something wrong with the carriage wheel, and then he drove away."

"How odd," the young woman said, with a perplexed frown on her pretty face. "This is a terribly lonely place to be abandoned. The nearest house is some distance away." She examined them for a moment, still holding the lantern high, and then said, "My name is Tamara. You must stay the night with us, for you cannot wander the fields or you will get into trouble."

"We don't wish to impose," Charlotte said, stiffly.

"Oh, you will not impose," the girl said, with a swish of her skirts. "You may pay for your lodging and food. I daresay you have money for that, if you were going to stay in an inn."

Charlotte thought of her bag pushed into the hedgerow. Foolishly, she had left her money in the bag, and it seemed a long way back. She could not tell this stranger her dilemma, though. "We certainly can pay," she said. "But not until tomorrow. Not until we are about to leave."

"Do you think we will keep you hostage?" the young woman said with a harsh tone. "We are gypsies, not brigands."

"Gypsies," Fanny whimpered. She tugged at Charlotte's hand. "We shouldn't stay here. I don't mind sleeping by the hedgerow, really Charlotte, it won't be so bad."

Tamara raised the lantern again. "I promise you," she said, with a gentler tone, one finger raised, "that not a soul will molest or disturb you. You may have my bed in the caravan, and I will sleep by the fire."

Shamed, Charlotte said, "We accept your generous hospitality, Tamara. My name is Charlotte, and this is my sister Fanny." Fanny ducked her head in greeting. "Please, don't mind our ignorance," Charlotte continued. "Where we come from gypsies are . . . um . . ."

"You have *heard* that they are thieves and cutthroats, though you have never met one yourself," Tamara said, with another haughty shake of her head, a few more dark curls escaping the colorful kerchief that held her hair away from her oval face. "How well I know the tales, but that is all they are,

tales, told to frighten little children into behaving. Follow me." She whirled, her skirts flying around her.

Charlotte pulled Fanny along behind her and followed Tamara, who led them to the fire, which was mostly deserted now. She approached an older, swarthy man who contentedly smoked a pipe and stared at the flames, and said something to him. He answered, and gestured to the caravan directly behind him. He pointed at Charlotte, said a few words, and Tamara replied in an odd foreign tongue. The man nodded to Charlotte and she returned his polite, wordless greeting.

The younger man with the guitar, the only other left at the fireside, swiftly stood up, set aside his instrument, and approached them, sweeping his cap off his head. "Tamara, who is this?" he asked, speaking softly.

"They are two young ladies who are lost, Romolo. I told them they may stay the night, and I now take them to Mother Sarah, who I think has retired to her caravan for the evening."

The young man bowed. Tamara smiled back at Charlotte and Fanny and said, "This is my brother, Romolo. Romy, this is Miss Charlotte and Miss Fanny."

"Blessings, maidens," he said, with a low bow and a wide, brilliant smile.

"Come along," Tamara said, with a grin. "Do not let my flirtatious brother keep you. Before you have some supper, we must go to Mother Sarah."

"Who is Mother Sarah?" Charlotte glanced back at the young man, but he was watching Fanny with a thoughtful look on his dark, handsome face.

"She is our leader. Come." Tamara led them to one of the caravans, really simply a cart with a tentlike structure erected over it, and circled to the back of it. She pushed aside a brightly colored curtain and gestured for them to climb up.

Charlotte led the way, pulling Fanny behind her, up into the caravan. Ducking her head, for the interior ceiling was not high enough for her to stand, Charlotte crept in.

At the far end of the caravan, which was hung all around with brilliantly shaded and patterned material, sat a woman by a small coal heater. She was swathed in many skirts and shawls, and appeared to be sleeping while sitting. The heat was welcome at first after the misty air outside, Charlotte

found, taking a seat along the side of the caravan where a low divan was situated, but soon became unbearable, intensifying the odors of spices and food and sweat. Tamara crept in behind them and shimmied past to approach the old woman. She murmured something and the old woman's eyes flew open.

The first thing Charlotte thought of was Uta, her ancient and venerable aunt who had just passed on in the spring. This old woman had the same small, beady eyes, though the gypsy's were black and set deeply in wrinkled flesh, like currants peeking out of a bun. Also unlike Uta, who was almost blind, she could see, and examined first Charlotte, then Fanny, with piercing interest.

"It is Mother Sarah you may thank for me finding you," Tamara whispered, taking a seat opposite them. "She has the sight, and sent me toward the highway tonight with a lantern. I have been walking for hours trying to find you! She knew someone was coming just after sunset, someone who would be lost and need our help."

"Then why did you question who we were, if you knew you would find us?" Charlotte asked.

"I had doubts," she murmured, shaking her head in dismay. "I had walked all the way to the highway before seeing you both wandering across the field, and I was surprised and uncertain. I should have known; Mother Sarah can see the future!"

Charlotte stared at the old woman in surprise. "She's a fortune-teller?"

"Sometimes. Is there something you would like to know?"

"Yes! Both of us," she said, taking Fanny's hand and squeezing it, "have questions."

"Ask, then. She understands English, though she does not like to speak it often."

"Pardon, but what language were you using? I didn't recognize it."

"It is Romani, the ancient language of my people. That is what we speak among ourselves, for no matter how long we live in this country, still we are Rom. We learn it as children. Now, your questions?"

"I would like to know, for myself," Charlotte said, gazing

down the length of the caravan at the old woman, "should I stay in England or go back home?"

"Where is home?" Tamara asked. "I cannot place your accent."

"We are German, from Hannover. I have thought of leaving England almost immediately." Charlotte bowed her head. "I'm not sure I like this country."

"It is a difficult country to like," Tamara said, gravely. She lowered her head, the lamplight shadowing her long-lashed eyes. "Being island dwellers, these people are narrow-minded, inward-looking. Like a horse that is blinkered, they only see the road ahead of them, and are disturbed by that which does not fit their narrow vision of life. Our people are only tolerated here, and too often not even that."

"It must be a difficult life," Charlotte said, thinking of all the terrible tales she had been told about gypsies, and her family's long enmity with them. What if the old stories weren't true, or were, at the very least, one-sided?

Tamara sighed and smiled. "I should not complain; the English are not alone in abhorring us. Sometimes I wonder if there is a place in the world where we might go and be welcome." She shook her head. "But enough of our woes. How terrible that I am so burdening you! Your questions will be answered." She turned to Mother Sarah and said something in Romani.

The old woman nodded and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, it was to examine Charlotte closely. "You have had a difficult time since landing on these shores," she said, her voice low and her tone ominous. "I see passion, a quarrel, two men fighting. Over you!"

Charlotte gasped and stared.

Fanny squeezed her hand, trembling, and whispered, "How is it possible that she knows this?"

Charlotte cleared her throat. "What else? What am I to do, Mother Sarah?"

"First, you must make an offering," she said, holding out her hand. "Cross my palm with silver."

"I don't have anything right now," Charlotte said. She met Tamara's grave gaze and shrugged. "As I said, I will have money tomorrow, but this moment, nothing."

The young gypsy spoke rapidly to Mother Sarah in Romani, and the woman nodded.

"What did you say to her?" Charlotte asked.

The young woman hesitated, but then said, "I told her to trust you, for I think you are honorable."

"I will tell you more," Mother Sarah said, her voice harsh and grating, "but you must make amends at the first opportunity. I see a quest; you are here for a purpose, but after you fulfill this, it will be death if you stay in this country for any reason but one who loves you more than life itself."

Charlotte gasped; those were almost the exact words in Mr. Randell's letter to her, that he loved her already "more than life itself." Foolishness, but pretty words and flattering.

"Your future," the old gypsy woman said, then fell silent for a long few minutes. Finally, in a sepulchral tone, she said, "You will marry a dark man, black hair I see, and green eyes, or no man at all, unless you wish to die!"

"I do not understand where they can have gone," Wesmorlyn said, as he approached Semyaza, who held their horses in the lamplit inn yard. He looked back at the building, the most prominent inn in Bodmin. "The innkeeper, who seems an honest enough fellow, says he has no such lady in his inn tonight. And yet they left Taunton early this morning headed for Bodmin, and were heard to mention this place. When we stopped at Launceston I was told they had paused to water the horses, but had moved on immediately to Bodmin.

"It is a long stretch, but the innkeeper said given the excellent weather they have had and the moonlit night, they should have been able to make it, certainly by now. But nothing, no sign of them, as if they dropped off the earth. Where have they gone?" The earl took the reins of his mount, leaped up to his saddle, and stared thoughtfully at the inn, bathed in moonlight as it was, a homely scene with golden light in the windows and a crowd of thirsty farmers in the taproom singing a rowdy song in Cornish, the ancient and almost dead language of the area.

"I have no answers, Simeon," Semyaza said, gracefully mounting his gray gelding.

Wesmorlyn nodded. Semyaza had done as much as he could by talking to the servants of the von Wolframs' rented London town house; the staff members, with no loyalty to their new employers, were happy to gossip with the impressive fellow about the strange goings-on, how the two young ladies had gotten into a carriage late at night—the butler was a wakeful and curious sort who seldom slept, and had seen it from his top-floor bedroom window—and how the young German count had ordered a horse saddled directly after the Earl of Wesmorlyn's visit, and had his servant provided with a mount as well.

From there it had been little trouble to follow the progress of the carriage with the two young ladies in it to all of the spots where they had changed horses. Wesmorlyn had just missed them, it seemed, at the two inns where they spent the night on the way to Cornwall, but it still puzzled him that the paths of the two sets of travelers had now diverged.

"We have lost Count von Wolfram, too; I thought he would certainly have headed here, since we have traced the young ladies so far, but he seems to have vanished. I wish he would have confided in me, rather than dashing away from London after his sister while giving me that story of her being ill. It will not wash, Sam," he said, glancing over at his companion. "It will not do to ally myself with a family of such erratic character. I have worked too long at redeeming my family's reputation to have it lost over one young lady with no common sense and little moral fiber."

Semyaza cleared his throat and looked up at the waxing moon.

Wesmorlyn considered what he had just said. "Terribly condemnatory I sounded just now, didn't I?" He sighed. "Still, I wish Christoph had just talked to me."

"He has little reason to trust you, Simeon. He is his sister's guardian and feels a responsibility toward her. It speaks well of his character that he would not expose her to your disapprobation, even when he seems to have good reason to be sorely angry at her himself."

"True. I have done the same, shielding Hannah from the consequences of her own conduct this last little while, haven't I? Well, I don't know what to do." Wesmorlyn flexed his

shoulders, feeling the itch between his shoulder blades fiercely. He needed to stretch and relax, take off the constricting jacket and breathe freely for a change. He longed for his estate and the miles and miles of uninterrupted space in which to roam, but he had not planned to return there until late October this year. Normally he would be there for harvest, but Hannah was to stay in London to bespeak her wardrobe for the next spring season, her first officially on the marriage market, and he was supposed to be spending the time getting to know his fiancée.

His fiancée. The vision of her lovely face, with the adorable dimple in the middle of her chin was before him, but he pushed it away. No mere physical attraction would determine his path. The decision to marry was one that would affect not only him, but generations of Wesmorlyn offspring, and he could not afford to make it casually. His agreement to the marriage had been based on careful consideration of the countess's antecedents; her family line was faultless and unblemished from all accounts. Count Nikolas von Wolfram was a steady and sober man, he had learned, and their family connection to the new Princess of Wales was desirable politically, or had been when he made the agreement.

And yet, from what he had seen so far, Countess Charlotte von Wolfram was as unlikely to be a suitable countess to him as the Princess of Wales was a royal helpmeet to her beleaguered husband. He had been misled as to the young lady's character, but as loath as he was to ally himself with folly, Wesmorlyn was committed to the marriage if she wanted it. He supposed in truth that was unlikely, as odd as that seemed to him. How could the girl throw away the most eligible of men with such ease? If he truly wanted out of the marriage, her running away would seem to be the ideal opportunity to disengage himself, but it was not how he chose to end the betrothal. He would face her and hear it from her own lips. If he was completely honest with himself, he was curious. It was a puzzle, a dreadful tangle, and one he must undo, knot by knot.

Semyaza cleared his throat again, and Wesmorlyn was brought back to the present, the dimly lit stable yard. They could not stand their horses so long in this misty night air, but what else was there to do?



A stout fellow, the innkeeper Wesmorlyn had just spoken to, waddled out the door of the inn and bowed low. With great deference and a painfully proper accent, he said, "Honored lord, if you will spend the night here, I would be most grateful. I have a room ready for you, clean and fresh. My good wife has seen to it herself."

Wesmorlyn sighed. "I suppose that is what we will do. Let us find our repose here, Sam, and tomorrow we can try to find out what happened to the countess and her sister."

"SIEGFRIED, I don't know where they can have gone after Taunton," Christoph said, addressing his young valet in German as he paced in the narrow confines of an inn bedchamber in Plymouth. The salty sea air drifted in through the partially open window, and it smelled of freedom and travel and everything the constricting confines of the ballroom and bedchamber stifled. The wildness rose in him, shivering through his body, urging him to run, to succumb to the animal urgency that surged through his body. He took a deep breath, stifling the sensations and choking back every natural part of his mind and heart. "If they did indeed come looking for Eleanor Dancey," he said, carefully, "the last address we had was in Plymouth, at an aunt's home, but the woman appears to have disappeared! Why or where is a mystery, and now my sister . . . *sisters*, are wandering about the countryside in a strange land in who knows what company?"

Young Siegfried, Christoph's only confidant now, had a thoughtful look on his pale face. He sat in a straight-backed chair with his long-fingered hands folded on his lap. "Perhaps, count, we should go back to Taunton, where they were last sighted, and you could pick up their trail, if you understand my meaning." The young man turned a brilliant scarlet, for though he was one of the few serving staff from the castle to know of the family's hereditary ability to transform, he still was not comfortable speaking to his master about it.

Christoph gazed at him steadily, nodding. What a joy a sensible young man was! He clapped him on the shoulder and squeezed. "You are a very good servant, Siegfried, and a good man and perhaps a better tactician than I. You're right of

course. We cannot stay in this inn, though I know how tired you are; we must go back to Taunton, and it must be this very night. I will need your aid in my search, and this is how we must work."

He outlined for Siegfried how the search could best be accomplished, given what he knew about himself. He needed to strip down completely and run as a wolf, but for that, he needed a faithful servant to be ready with his clothing at a pre-arranged spot, so he could reassume his manly form and clothe himself. That night would see no rest for them. He needed the nighttime for his unique abilities—though luckily not a full moon, contrary to hoary legend—and he dared not wait another day and night, not with his sisters alone in the English countryside. He would find Charlotte and Fanny if it was the last thing he did, and then he would haul them both back to Germany and deposit them on his uncle's doorstep as too troublesome to manage.

LYULPH Randell staggered up his London terrace home's front step and stumbled through the door. Foster, his butler, waiting up for him as was his custom, caught him and guided him to a bench in the hallway.

"Young Diggory has arrived back, sir," Foster said, "and awaits you in your study."

Lyulph shook his head, then clutched his hand to his forehead as a bolt of pain shot through it. "Damn! Should not have had that last brandy. Bring me some seltzer water," he slurred, "and be quick 'bout it."

In the chilly dimness of the hallway Lyulph waited. Foster brought the drink, and Lyulph downed it and handed the cup back to the butler, then stood again. Good, he was less wobbly this time, and could find his way to the study. He took the steps carefully, though, and headed upstairs, then down the long hallway to his study.

Diggory stood by the fire and looked up as Lyulph entered. He bowed, wordless.

"What news, Diggory? Did you deliver my messages? How were they received?" He cleared his throat and headed to his desk, grateful that he had a good recovery time.

"It will be as you wish it, sir, them's her own words."

"Morwenna's?"

The fellow nodded.

"Did she try to interfere with you in any way? Did she try to get you to take off the charm?" Lyulph watched the younger man's pale face in the flickering light from the fire. Morwenna was a deep planner, and one could not be sure she was going to do what she said she would do.

"No, I don't believe so sir. She were very accommodating. But . . ." He trailed off.

"But what?"

"She offered me her maidservant, sir, for a tumble. Said the girl would do whatever I wanted."

"Hmmm, yes, and then the girl, once she got you into her bed, would ask you to take the charm off, for it would interfere in some way."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes."

"Sir, why do you deal with the witch if you cannot trust her?"

"I find in life, that if you assume you cannot trust anyone, then you do very well." Lyulph sat back in his chair. "And so you delivered both letters?"

"Yes sir. Both messages received and understood."

"Good. Very good. Morwenna is not going to like the change in my plans, perhaps, though her part in my life will remain the same. I haven't dared tell her the whole truth, of course, not with what I have in mind. *If* she will just be content with it, things will go very well, but that is what I'm not so sure of, for she has a tendency to make her own deep plans." Lyulph sighed. *Witches*. As much as a witch was a natural match for a werewolf, they were unreliable and defiant, not heeding their proper place in the scheme of things. If he had not needed her help, he would have discarded her long ago as more trouble than she was worth.

"But now our work in London begins," he went on, to Digory. "I have a few things to accomplish before I leave. Wesmorlyn has behaved even better than I expected, and has taken off for the country after the countess, though he will not find her easily. At least I hope not, for I need a few days' interval

to do what I must. That leaves little Lady Hannah, sweet child, all alone except for her harebrained companion and doddering dowager cousin, the marchioness. My original intention was to use the first opportunity of finding her unguarded by Wes to take her and head to Scotland, but everything has changed." He stared over at the fireplace for a long moment, thinking of golden hair and a dimple in the middle of a sweet, pointed, independent chin. *Countess Charlotte von Wolfram*. "Everything has changed."

After a long silence, his faithful servant said, "Sir?"

Lyulph bent over his desk and pulled his writing instruments toward him. "Go get some sleep, Diggory, for you must be weary. But first thing in the morning I will have some errands for you."

"Very good, sir."

WHEN they left Mother Sarah's caravan, Tamara took them back to sit by the fire and gave them tin bowls of fragrant and delicious rabbit stew. Their seat was a thick log that the men had dragged from the grove. At first Charlotte found it odd to be sitting outside by a fire, and yet once her hunger was satiated and she was able to relax, she recalled how on their short hunting trips into the forest around Wolfram Castle, she and Christoph would build a fire in a clearing in the woods and make up adventure stories as they stared into its crackling depths, relishing the darkness and the night sounds around them. They didn't fear wolves or any other animal, both of them at home in the forest. Her younger cousins, Jakob and Eva, had been sent off to school, but neither she nor Christoph had ever left Wolfram Castle. It was all she had ever known, and it had tied her and her brother together in a bond so close it would never be severed.

With the stars sparkling overhead, and the quiet sound of Romolo's guitar, peace stole into her soul. As much as she missed Christoph, and as badly as she felt about deserting him, she knew she had done the right thing. Moor Cottage, where Eleanor Dancey resided, was within quick walking distance, Tamara had told them as they ate, once she became acquainted with their quest, and they could go there first thing

in the morning. They were, in fact, on Lyulph Randell's property that very moment; the gypsies were allowed to camp there by his express wish, Tamara said, and they were grateful for his kindness.

"What do you plan to do with your life, Tamara?" Charlotte asked, as Romolo began to sing. Fanny was intently watching and listening to him, and Charlotte was overjoyed that her sister had something to occupy her mind, for she was understandably nervous about what the next day would bring.

"Do?"

"Yes. Do you plan to marry? Or travel?"

The young woman, her olive skin made ruddy by the flickering flames, appeared pensive. "Gypsies do not plan, we live. What God chooses to give us will do for today, and tomorrow? That will take care of itself."

Romolo had moved to sit next to Fanny, who was blushing and giggling at something he was whispering to her. Charlotte watched, smiling. But then she turned back to the other young woman and said, "But don't you have things you would like to do?"

"Do you?"

"So many things!" Charlotte stared into the flames, red, orange, and gold licking at the logs, embers glowing and popping. "*This* is good," she said, "this experience, I mean. I spent so long thinking I never wanted to leave Wolfram Castle, and then I did leave, but only because I wanted Fanny to meet her mother and I knew I was the only one who could help her accomplish it. But now I understand something about myself." She paused and glanced around her. Most of the gypsies had retreated to their caravans and tents, and the sleepy sound of children talking as they were tucked into bed and the soft murmur of the women's voices, the grumble of men's deeper tones, the night sounds of an owl in the grove all satisfied her deeply.

"What do you understand, Charlotte?" Tamara asked.

"I was stifled for so long, and never understood why I was agitated and restless and angry so often. It was a little better as we traveled, but even then, I despised every city, and having to be prim and proper. It was much worse when we got to London, but it evaporated once Fanny and I left that awful city

and I found I could love this," she said, waving her hands around. "I don't mind hardship, I can tolerate any amount of dirt and mold and smelly linens. I adore traveling and seeing new places. And meeting new people," she finished, putting one hand on Tamara's smooth-skinned arm.

"I'm so glad you came to us," the gypsy girl replied, deep feeling in her tone, as she put her own hand over Charlotte's. "I've never had a friend my own age before."

Charlotte bit her lip, thinking of Melisande, her friend of two years, now married and living in Russia. She missed Melisande terribly, for no amount of long letters and good wishes from a distance could take the place of talking face-to-face and a warm, companionable hug. "Then consider me your friend, now," she said. She took a deep breath, calming herself. "And Fanny, too. She's a very sweet girl, but shy, and I hope you will come to feel she is your friend as well."

"My brother is certainly taken with her. I have never seen Romolo so intent."

Charlotte watched them, the way he bent his head and spoke to her, the way she blushed and gazed up at him, wide-eyed. "She's very innocent."

"And he is very tender-hearted," Tamara said, softly. "Don't worry about him. He is as much a gentleman in his actions as any lord of this land."

"I meant nothing else," Charlotte reassured the young woman, understanding immediately Tamara's quick defense of her brother, for it is just what she would have said about Christoph.

Finally it was time to retire. Tamara tried to give up her bed, but Charlotte would not hear of it, so all three girls curled up together in a bedroll protected from the elements only by a heavy blanket draped over the side of a cart. Despite deep weariness, they talked long into the night. The differences in their stations in life and in their backgrounds melted away in the face of their youth, good spirits, and willingness from both parties to set aside such vast differences in the interest of friendship. Fanny, though, fell asleep earliest, so the conversation was mostly between Charlotte and Tamara.

"How kind of Mr. Randell to allow you all to stay here," Charlotte whispered as she stared into the velvety darkness

and remembered the handsome face and valiant behavior of the man as if he were before her in that moment. It had not escaped her notice that the future husband Mother Sarah had reserved for her exactly fit Mr. Lyulph Randell's description. The universe, it seemed, was conspiring to thrust them together in every way.

"I think there is some ancient tie between our band and his family," Tamara murmured, turning on her side toward Charlotte. "Mother Sarah said it goes back two hundred years, as long as gypsies have lived in England."

"Do you spend a lot of time with Mother Sarah?"

"Yes; she has no children, and my mother is gone, so I think she takes an interest in me. She wishes to teach me the old ways, she says, for the other women are too taken up with caring for the children and cooking."

"The old ways. What are the old ways?" Charlotte could just make out the dull gleam of Tamara's tousled curls in the dark, but couldn't see her eyes.

"Just the old ways, the old language and prayers, that sort of thing."

It was an evasion, but after the young woman's kindness to them, Charlotte did not wish to pry. The day had been long and exhausting, and she felt sleep steal through her. "Thank you, Tamara," she whispered, as she drifted off. "Thank you for everything you have done."

## Chapter 7

IN THE morning, after a breakfast of bread and eggs by the fire, Tamara offered to guide them to Moor Cottage. Fanny finally evinced considerable agitation as the three young ladies walked together over the moor, scaling a hill and pausing at the top.

“That is Moor Cottage,” Tamara said.

Charlotte stared down the slope at the dwelling and shivered with apprehension. It was not a large building; built entirely of gray, moss-draped stone, it was low with a sloping roof. Separate from it were a couple of small outbuildings, both tumbling down and crumbling in the corners, showing the destructive force of years of moorland storms and wind and rain. The sun had gone behind a cloud, and in the gloomy shadows the cottage squatted in the valley like a toad, malevolent and watchful, waiting for them to approach, daring them to enter.

She shook herself and took a deep breath. *What nonsense!* She had never thought herself imaginative, but supposed the strange events she had experienced in the last months had taken their toll and made her see evil where it did not exist.



"Come, Fanny," she said, taking her sister's arm. "Your mother awaits!"

The girls descended together, but the cottage did not improve on closer inspection. What windows there were overlooking the neglected front gardens were overgrown with thorny bushes that made Charlotte long to take a saw to them. The walkway was mossy and damp, slippery underfoot. Treacherous. They approached carefully.

Fanny was silent, her large blue eyes clouded with trepidation, but whether it was the gloomy aspect of the house that alarmed her, or the idea of meeting her mother for the first time, Charlotte could not tell. "Courage, Fanny," she said, and advanced boldly toward the front door, knocking loudly, a few flakes of peeling paint fluttering down to the stone stoop.

"I have on occasion seen the lady who lives here," Tamara whispered, "though I had not understood her relationship to Mr. Randell to be that of a stranger renting the cottage."

"What did you think their relationship, then?" Charlotte said, glancing sideways.

The young woman blushed, the pink of her cheeks offering a becoming rosiness to her olive-tinted countenance. She merely shook her head, but Charlotte could imagine what she thought and was amused at how wrong things could appear to an outsider who did not know the entire truth.

Fanny twisted her hands together over and over, and Charlotte forgot her amusement at the folly of half-known tales in concern over her sister's agitation. "Fanny, don't make yourself ill," she murmured, taking the girl's hand and squeezing it. "I'll stay with you."

"What if she doesn't want anything to do with me? Maybe I'll be a miserable embarrassment to her. I shall just sink into the ground if she is brisk with me."

"I know it's awkward, but if she is unhappy to see you, then I promise you we will leave immediately, return to London, and leave England." Charlotte swept a few stray curls up under her straw bonnet and said, "At least you will have tried." She patted Fanny's hand, released it, and knocked again.

Tamara stepped back and stared up at the windows of the second floor. "I wonder why there's no answer?"

"Perhaps we ought to go away and come back later," Fanny said, breathlessly.

Just then the door opened and a young girl with vacant eyes and a listless air curtsied before them.

"Miss Eleanor Dancey, please." Charlotte knew Fanny's voice would be too weak to speak.

The girl curtsied again and stood back. "Come in to the parlor, if you please," she said, her voice breathy and soft.

The three of them entered the hallway. It was dark and narrow, the paper peeling and blotched with stained patches where dampness crept up the walls and spread like a canker. Charlotte moved blindly into the dank interior but her toe caught on something and she staggered, hitting the wall with her shoulder. Growling and hissing, a smoke gray cat clutched at her leg with all four paws and sank its fangs into her ankle. She cried out and stumbled, righting herself only a second before she would have tumbled to the floor.

Fanny shrieked as Charlotte kicked the animal out of the way, bending down to rub her injured ankle. "Fiend!" she yelled. "It bit me!"

The maid took no notice of the commotion and had gone on ahead into a parlor, where she held the door open and blankly stared at them, waiting for them to pass her. It was exceedingly peculiar, Charlotte reflected, as if the girl was an automaton, like a clockwork figure she had seen once when a traveling circus came to Wolfbeck.

She turned toward her companions, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in her ankle and hoping it wasn't bleeding. "Have you ever been inside this place?" Charlotte whispered to Tamara, as they passed the girl and entered the indicated room.

"No," the gypsy girl murmured, looking around with a wary expression. "Gypsies do not like houses so much, you know. Four walls, floors, ceilings, they confine you so."

"If you had ever seen Wolfram Castle you would not think it confining," Charlotte said, dryly, about their cavernous home.

The parlor was a little better than the hall, with some attempt to ameliorate the gloom of the cottage with brighter paper, but it still was poorly lit, the tiny window overlooking

the front of the building overgrown with thorn bushes, as Charlotte had observed from outside, which even crept in through a crack in the glass, the thorny bud stealing along the sill like a malevolent creature intent on invasion.

"I'll get the mistress," the girl said, and drifted away, leaving them to their own devices.

Fanny wrinkled her nose and looked around. "This place smells awfully."

Charlotte opened her mouth to retort that Fanny always said that, and had complained of it all along the way in every inn, but this time she was right. There was a dank odor of decaying greenery that invaded every corner of the place, and overlaying it was a stench of fetid, aging meat. It was almost enough to make her dizzy.

The dark gray tabby slunk in after them and sat in the doorway, glaring at Charlotte. She stuck her tongue out at it but it stared, unmoving, until she looked away uneasily. There was something unnatural in the green eyes of the cat, something knowing and sly.

"Don't mind Hellebore," a woman said, strolling into the room. The cat wound itself around her feet and threw itself on the floor, rolling over on its back and looking once again like any normal cat. "He's really harmless and quite playful."

Charlotte stifled a retort, that if violence was mischief, then the cat was indeed playful. She refrained from mentioning the attack in the hallway at all, but she would certainly avoid the creature.

"Now, what can I do for you? Anne was vague about your purpose in visiting, as she always is. I cannot seem to make her understand that she should ask visitors their reason for coming so I don't have to question them. She's rather doltish, as are all of these West Country dullards."

Charlotte stared at the woman before them. Her skin was pale and waxen, smooth as marble and unnaturally flawless. Hair the color of walnut coiled in perfect curls and gleamed in the dull light from the window. Her eyes were blue, as were Fanny's, but Eleanor Dancey's were the indigo of the storm-tossed sea they had crossed as they sailed from the continental lowlands to England; the color was cold, but had intriguing green flecks in the depths. She was clad simply in a round

gown of soft rose-colored material and was very beautiful, blessed with full lips and arched brows that rose at Charlotte's scrutiny. "I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I need to ask a couple of questions of you."

"Certainly," she said, advancing into the room. "Please be seated, though; as humble as this cottage is, I would have you be comfortable."

Tamara and Fanny sat on a settle near the grimy, unused fireplace, but Charlotte took a chair facing the door, trying to ignore Hellebore, the cat, which crouched under a table now, staring at her with chilling intensity.

"Now, then," the woman said, taking a chair opposite Charlotte's, "I suppose I should ask your names, and what it is you wish to know?"

Charlotte was loath to accede to the request; offering the von Wolfram name right away might startle or offend her. So this was Fanny's mother; Charlotte had been a young child when the lady was an inhabitant in the castle. Christoph had a vague remembrance of Eleanor Dancey as a visitor at Wolfram Castle, and of her playing with him and his toy soldiers. But this woman was so youthful. Could she possibly be the *correct* Eleanor Dancey? "Ma'am, if you will be patient for just a moment, there is a reason I am being circumspect. Before I reveal too much of our circumstance, I would like to be sure that you are the Eleanor Dancey for whom we are searching. First, have you traveled outside of this country at any time in your life?"

"What an odd question," the woman said, sitting on the very edge of the straight-backed chair.

Fanny was trembling and would not look up. Charlotte reached over and took her hand, squeezing it. "Please, ma'am, be patient with me. Have you?"

"Well, yes. I did travel on the continent briefly. I was very young." She stared out the obscured window for a long moment, and then returned her gaze to the group opposite her. "It was an unhappy time for me, and when I returned I never left England again." The woman bit her lip, the gesture driving the blood from her rosy mouth. She calmed her expression, cleared her throat, and sighed heavily. "Though I may soon

leave forever," she murmured, staring off toward the fluttering curtains.

"Ma'am, excuse me for prying so, but did you stay for a time in Germany before returning to England?"

"Yes, I did," she said, turning her gaze back to the three young ladies. "Who are you? Your accent . . . are you German?"

"My name, ma'am, is Countess Charlotte von Wolfram."

The other woman rose and backed up to the door, her hand over her heart. "You are . . . oh, my, you're little Lotte, as I called you then, a pretty child with blond ringlets."

Charlotte felt a pang in her heart. So, this was the woman for whom her father had forsaken her mother's bed. But Eleanor Dancey had been no more than an impressionable and perhaps lonely girl at the time, younger than Fanny was now. She must not hold against the adult version of Miss Eleanor Dancey the follies of her youth. More important than her own sensitive feelings was that this was Fanny's mother.

"But why are you here?" Eleanor Dancey said, her voice faint. "After all of these years, why come here? Is your father . . . is he . . . ?"

"No. If you're asking if he's still living, ma'am, no, he died long, long ago." Charlotte bowed her head, not willing to relate all of the tragedies her family had endured, beginning with the long-ago terror that took her father and mother within weeks of each other. Fifteen years or more had passed since then, and the reason for being there was Fanny. She stood and pulled Fanny to her feet and over to stand in front of the other woman. "Miss Dancey, this young lady is my half sister, by my father. This is Fanny."

"Fanny? I don't understand."

"Fanny is your daughter."

The woman gasped and fell insensible to the floor in a graceful swoon.

"THERE is some mystery here, Sam," Wesmorlyn said over breakfast in the taproom of the inn at Bodmin. He leaned across the rough board table and spoke quietly, not wanting to share his conversation with the nosy innkeeper, who lingered

nearby dallying with a broom while trying to listen in. The rotund fellow had appeared scandalized that the man whom he had evidently pegged as some kind of superior servant was sitting with his lordship, but Wesmorlyn never explained Semmyaza to anyone; he wouldn't have dared try, and it was none of anyone's business. Because he was an earl, it was likely written off as an upper-crust quirk, though Wes didn't know and cared even less. "Near dawn I couldn't sleep and came down to ask the landlord what the noise was all about. He was not around, and the taproom was still full of drinkers. I was about to tell them all to quieten down when I heard a couple of fellows laughing together. One of them, a fellow with a very broad Cornish accent, was quite drunk, and he spoke of leaving a couple of young foreign ladies stranded by the side of the road with just their bags and no way to move on. At twilight, he said he did this."

"Do you think it is the young ladies for whom we search?"

"I was doubtful at first; I hesitated, turned away for a minute, and when I looked back, thinking to question him, he was gone. I went outside and looked, but couldn't find the fellow. I don't know whether he saw me staring at him and took fright, or if it was just a coincidence, him leaving when he did. I tried to go back up and get some sleep, but was restless, and the longer I pondered the more certain I became. Surely there cannot be another such party of two young foreign ladies roaming in Cornwall? It is too much to imagine, that there would be another so harum-scarum as Countess Charlotte."

"Do you really think her foolish?"

"I hardly know, Sam. I had so little time with her, and one can make no judgments in a ballroom, you know." He thought about it and drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "I don't believe I made a very good impression on her, as she did not on me. I may think her a flirtatious chit, but she likely thinks me a priggish, crashing bore." He kicked at the table leg.

"Possibly you both deserve another chance to make a better impression?"

"You may be right," Wesmorlyn said, standing and stretching. "Indeed, I think you are, but for that I must find the young ladies and pray nothing has happened to them. I shall never

forgive myself if my behavior at the ball drove the countess from London to a bad end."

"The young lady made her own decisions, Simeon. You cannot take credit or blame where it does not belong to you."

"No, perhaps not, but I contributed to the circumstances that may have made her unhappy enough to do such a thing."

Semyaza nodded. "Very well. Then how shall you accomplish this search?"

Wesmorlyn stared at the man. Semyaza knew where the young women were; he knew everything. But his place was not to give Wesmorlyn the easy way out of dilemmas even when there was danger to someone involved, but to observe how he did on his own. The earl's whole life had been spent with the watchful eyes of Semyaza on him. "If this braggart who spoke of dropping the ladies off on the road was indeed their driver, and I strongly feel he must be, then the countess and her sister must, perforce, have found lodging for the night somewhere, and this morning will have found the main road, or an inn. He said he left their bags with them, so at least I can assume they have their money and clothes. In this insular county the wanderings of two well-dressed pretty young foreign ladies will not go unremarked."

"Then we shall wander the countryside after them and search?"

"I have a better idea with which to start, one that will utilize my own particular talents," Wesmorlyn said, feeling the itch between his shoulder blades intensify.

"MISS Dancey," Charlotte said, rushing to the swooning woman, who was crumpled in a heap.

Fanny cried and wrung her hands while observing the scene, but Tamara, resourceful and quick, called out to the maid to bring sal volatile and a glass of water or spirits. Charlotte knelt on the floor and raised the woman's head, and was rewarded by her eyelashes fluttering; finally she regained consciousness.

"What happened?" she said, putting one delicate hand to her forehead.

"T'was my fault. I shocked you to insensibility."

The woman sat up abruptly and stared around her, then rose and fixed her gaze on Fanny, who wept uncontrollably. She crossed the floor even as the maid, Anne, came with the unwanted smelling salts and water. Charlotte stayed the maid with one hand and watched the unfolding drama.

"You are Fanny, my daughter?" Her voice quavered, but the color was still in her cheek and a smile trembled on her lips.

Fanny nodded, and her sobs calmed even as tears still ran down her pale cheeks.

"My dear, I never thought I'd see you! I have suffered these long years, wondering if I did the right thing in leaving you behind. Oh, to see you now, so grown up and a lady!" Miss Eleanor Dancey then took Fanny in her arms and folded her close to her breast. "My own child, my baby. Home at last!"

THE day had turned out to be brilliant after the misty haze burned off. Charlotte strolled back over the moor toward the gypsy encampment with Tamara, leaving Moor Cottage to allow Fanny and her mother to have time together alone. In truth, she was happy to get out of the cottage; it was gloomy and smelled of damp and rot, but Charlotte would not have left her sister if she hadn't felt strongly the two needed time to get to know one another. The woman was clearly still wounded by the events of the past, for she would not speak of her affair with Johannes von Wolfram. Of course, the entire subject must be considered to be very delicate, given the events of that time, the affair's illicit nature, and the unfortunate outcome, so it was hardly odd that Eleanor Dancey was circumspect on the subject, and indeed turned the topic away whenever it reached her time at Wolfram Castle. It was awkward for all of them.

To her credit, she seemed much more interested in Fanny's life and habits. She was somewhat indignant to find her daughter was raised to be a maid to the household, but a little less so when she learned what pains had been taken to give her an education, how light her duties always were, and how



much time Fanny was given as an intimate of the family members to whom she was so closely related.

Fanny had been raised thinking her last name was Sander-son, Charlotte told the woman, and that she was the child of the elder Count Jakob von Wolfram's English valet and his wife, a cook's helper in the household, a woman who died the year Fanny was born. It was only in the last few months that Fanny had learned her true paternity, and that she was not Johannes von Wolfram's only illegitimate daughter. If it was a hard fact to learn, it was equally difficult for Charlotte and Christoph to learn they had at least two sisters, Fanny and another girl, Magda, the daughter of a village woman, because of their father's philandering. Magda, at least, was now happily married, but Fanny had no one else but Charlotte and Christoph.

Ameliorating Eleanor Dancey's poor opinion of the von Wolfram family was Charlotte's own stout insistence that Fanny was her and Christoph's sister, would be recognized as such, and would be treated as such for the rest of her life. Charlotte had noted how gratified Eleanor appeared to be to find that it was no difficult feat for her and Christoph to accept Fanny as a sister once the truth was revealed.

Charlotte, as well as wanting to give the mother and daughter time together, was also eager to retrieve their bags so hastily thrust into the hedgerow the night before. She had an awful fear that in the dark she had not been so careful in the concealment, and they might indeed be easily visible from the road by the light of day, and so open to filching by any passerby. She wished to repay the gypsy band for their kindness, too. Without them, she and Fanny would have spent a miserable night shivering, huddled in some woody grove somewhere, alert and frightened of every noise, and finding Moor Cottage would not have been nearly so easy without Tamara's help.

Charlotte breathed in deeply. "This is surely the most beautiful part of England," she said, in an excess of high spirits. She had accomplished what she had come to England for, and was now in charity with the entire nation. As they topped a rise, she paused. Clouds scudded across the broad sky, shadows chasing after them across the scrubby grass of the

moorland plains. In the distance a dark line of spiky hills loomed, and before them the ground was broken up by outcroppings of jagged rocks. "What wild and lonely country," she said, surveying it. There was not a dwelling in sight. "Refreshing after the stifling confines of London. One night in that city was too long for me." She turned to her companion. "Were you born here, Tamara?"

"I cannot say where I was born, except not in Cornwall. My father is vague about such matters, and my mother died long ago."

She examined the young woman, who returned her gaze with calm assurance. "Your father was the man by the fire last night, smoking a pipe. Romolo looks a lot like you, the dark curls and dark eyes, and he plays the guitar so beautifully; you must both take after your mother, and she must have been a very beautiful woman." She paused, thinking of their chance encounter and good fortune. "Do you know, I have never seen Fanny so entranced as she was by your brother."

"Nor have I ever seen him so taken with any girl before."

"Do all of you play instruments?" Charlotte asked.

"Most, yes, but Romolo is truly talented. He is brilliant as a violinist, and equally so on the guitar. My talents are modest, confined more to singing and dancing."

Charlotte smiled and led the way onward. "My brother also plays the violin, and I sing. Is that how you all make money?"

Tamara glanced over at her in amusement. "How delicately you seek an answer to your questions about how we live! I had not thought Germans so tactful."

"Then we have learned much about each other's culture this day," Charlotte said, pulling her shawl more closely about her shoulders as a wind came up and tugged at it. "And perhaps mostly we've learned not to judge. I speak for myself, for I have been very wrong about many things in my life."

Tamara nodded in silent agreement. "In answer to your question, music is how we make money on occasion," she said. "But my father and some of the other men are good at mending metal, too, being tinsmiths by trade. Also, we sell things we have bought in other towns, or trade them for food-stuffs."

"But no steady employment?" Charlotte glanced over at the gypsy girl, wondering at a life that seemed without purpose. "That can't be an easy way to exist. Could you not be a maid? And your brother; he's good with horses I believe you said last night. He could work in a stable and perhaps one day become a coachman."

"Ah yes, your people are very industrious, are they not?" Tamara said, with a fleeting smile that robbed the comment of any sting. "But you were born to wealth and privilege; what do you know of real life?"

Charlotte gazed out over the land and pondered the question without rancor. What *did* she know of life? She had been sheltered within the walls of Wolfram Castle, and though life had never been trouble-free, no struggle for mere existence had troubled her. "But my way of life *is* real life for me. And yet, being here," she said, sweeping her hand around in an arc to indicate the Cornish countryside, "I am feeling that perhaps the essence of myself has been suppressed by my family. Now I begin to understand myself a little better. And as much as I long for the security of my home, I know in my heart I've done the right thing in coming here. Come, let's forget serious topics on such a beautiful day and walk on."

But Tamara said, as they strolled again, "It cannot have been easy, what you've done, breaking away from your family, and even your brother. I can only think that it would be, for me, like being abandoned by my tribe." She shuddered. "That is too awful a fate to contemplate." She frowned and thought for a long minute. "I don't know how to explain my people. Our feeling of safety comes not from having a secure position and a roof over our heads, but from the knowledge that not one of our band would see another suffer. Always, we can depend upon each other. Employment, as you call it, being at others' beck and call, is like death, just like being confined to a house or cottage. We could never live in a city, for we have traditions and beliefs that are different, and would not meld well with *gorgios* ways."

"*Gorgios*? What's that mean?"

"*Gorgios* are all those in this country who are not of the Romani blood."

They climbed to the top of the hill overlooking the grove

beyond which was the gypsy encampment. Charlotte paused to take it all in. "We are still on Mr. Randell's land, true?"

"Yes. He is a vast landowner with an ancient family history, I understand."

"How long have you been camped here?"

"For some time. Mother Sarah has a connection with his family and worked out some sort of exchange with Mr. Randell. We are fortunate to have stayed here this long without being driven away."

The clouds had disappeared and the sun shone brilliant and hot as it rose in the azure sky. Beyond the gentle knolls over which they traversed, on the horizon, was a sharp-edged line of dark, low hills, tors in the Cornish language, Charlotte had learned. It was so different from her home, where the dark forest surrounding the Wolfbeck River gave way to a sharp rise beyond Wolfram Castle, and thence to jagged cliffs and foothills that southward led to the Harz Mountains. It was like living cradled, protected by mountains and dense forest, hemmed in on all sides. Here everything was so exposed and raw, yet she felt a thrill of wayward energy surge through her, an urge to run down the long rocky slope. She suppressed her inappropriate yearning, ruthlessly subjugating it just as she had almost her whole life. "And the Earl of Wesmorlyn's home is near here, I understand."

"So I have heard. Are you acquainted with him?"

"Only briefly." She turned to Tamara, and said, "I need to go up near the highway. Fanny and I, when we were stranded, could not carry our bags all over the place. They're heavy, so I thrust them in the hedgerow, and that is where my money and all of my clothes are."

"I wondered," Tamara said, with an understanding smile. "I misjudged you at first last night, and I'm sorry. I thought you were lying about not having money because you feared being robbed."

Though circumspection was not her natural bent, Charlotte knew enough to keep quiet and not confess the thought did occur to her. The brilliant sun of late summer beat down on them as they slowly made their way toward the highway. When they finally reached the thicket that bounded their side of the road, it took a while for Charlotte to find the spot, since

in the dark it had looked so very different. But at long last she found the marker she had left and pulled the bags out. They were intact, and she breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"I'm so weary!" Charlotte said, after their arduous walk. She longed to sit and drink something cool.

"Why don't we go to my camp right now? We can get something to drink and rest before you make your way back to Moor Cottage."

Charlotte gratefully agreed, and Tamara took Fanny's bag. As they began down the slope toward the gypsy encampment, she felt a trickle of perspiration roll down her back. "It's so warm here!" A tiny cloud covered the sun for a moment and offered a very brief relief, but then the heat of the morning sun blazed down on them again.

"I like it," Tamara said, turning her face up to the sun and squinting. "Already the evenings are turning cooler, and soon enough it will be cold. The winter seems so long!"

Charlotte turned her face up toward the sun, too, and squinted. Another cloud passed, and a shadow raced across their faces and over the yellowed grasses. Dazzled by the sun, her vision was blinded momentarily, but when she could see again the cloud had evaporated, as quickly as that. She sighed. "I suppose you're right; we should relish the warmth while it's here."

"I never wish for winter to come."

"It must be difficult," Charlotte said, as they continued on their way toward the camp, "to live in the caravans over winter. I noticed Mother Sarah had a heater last evening."

"She feels the cold and the damp. She is very old, and it bothers her arthritis, she says, and the heater helps."

"Is she truly a seer?"

Tamara nodded. "She is. I don't know how she knows what she does, but she's never wrong about things. As I said last night, it was she who sent me looking for two lost girls. She said I should go toward the highway at dusk; I did, but missed you and had to double back, for you were already on your way to our encampment."

"And we were lucky to see your light. I suppose it must have been your lantern I saw bobbing around in the dark. How remarkable that she should know such specific information!"

Charlotte reflected that it was not unheard of in her own life, though, for her friend, Melisande Davidovich, formerly a guest at Wolfram Castle after escaping the Terror, had developed such talents and had known much for which she could not name a source. She was a healer, too, and a practitioner of magic, though only so much as was beneficial to those for whom she cared. It was heredity, for her grandmother was another such as she. Everyone seemed to have special talents except herself, Charlotte thought.

They circled the grove of trees that the encampment snuggled up against. In daylight the little camp looked cheery and quaint, with carts o'erstretched with tents and makeshift shelters. Tamara took Charlotte to see her father, who was a quiet, dark-eyed older man, and while they had a cool drink in the shade, Romolo played the guitar. He really was very good, with a rich voice and sweet tone, and he poured his heart into a melancholy song of love. Then he asked after Fanny, falteringly but with much meaning. Charlotte saw that he was infatuated, though he never said a word to hint at it, even.

She gently replied that Fanny was very well, but would likely not be coming back to the gypsy camp, since she had found her mother at Moor Cottage, and that, after all, was her sole objective in coming to Cornwall. The young man nodded, his expression sad but accepting.

"I must go to Mother Sarah for a few minutes and help her with her morning toilette, and bring her something to eat," Tamara said. "If you will wait, I will help you take Miss Fanny's bag back to Moor Cottage."

Charlotte, happy to linger awhile, agreed. She sat for a few minutes longer watching the bustle of the industrious women as they gathered wood from the grove for the cooking fires, stirred a pot of stew, and peeled vegetables for it. Charlotte swiftly realized she was being watched. Two tiny dark-eyed children with tousled black curls peeped at her from behind a shelter.

She covered her eyes, pretending not to see them, and then uncovered, gasping in surprise that they had crept closer. She repeated the game, and soon there were more than just the two children, there were seven or eight, and all were drawn into the play. The eldest, a beautiful girl with a blue and green ker-

chief over her dark curls, named them all for Charlotte, and gave her own name, Tully.

"Come, miss, and play with us in the meadow," Tully said, taking Charlotte's hand and pulling her up from her seat.

One of the dark-eyed women nodded and made shooing motions, so Charlotte obeyed, willing to be distracted from her serious and sometimes gloomy thoughts. She danced off, followed by her merry band of children, and they played in the grassy meadow beyond the grove of trees as the sun rose high in the cloudless sky.

STRAIGHTENING his jacket, the Earl of Wesmorlyn approached the gypsy encampment from the direction of the highway, as if he had arrived on horseback. Countess Charlotte von Wolfram, his runaway fiancée, was here somewhere, but where? He heard laughter over a rise beyond the camp, and strode through the long yellowing grass, skirting the grove of trees and so remaining hidden from view. Scaling a low, rocky hill, he saw an extraordinary sight.

Dark-haired, dark-eyed children, seven or eight of them at least, all dressed in the colorful garb of gypsies, danced around; he couldn't keep track of their numbers because they never stayed still. His own land closely neighbored this rocky, hilly estate, that of Lyulph Randell, and he had heard from other landowners that Randell had allowed a group of gypsies to camp on his land. They were unhappy about it; gypsies were unwelcome almost everywhere, tolerated at best, persecuted at worst. Wesmorlyn had wondered if Randell felt an affinity for them, the wildness of their reputations matching the wildness of his heritage, the wolf in him finding an answering untamed spirit.

The children were running in a circle, and at the center of that circle, whirling, skirts flinging out and hair unbound, loosening, and falling in golden waves down her back and over the straw bonnet that hung by ribbons, was Countess Charlotte von Wolfram. Her head was thrown back and her eyes were closed, and she was laughing, the joyous peal like music on the drifting breeze.

Wesmorlyn watched, entranced. Gone was the stiff, un-

happy young lady he last saw, and gone even was the coquetish woman who so infuriated him in the ballroom. Here was a golden child of God, a happy girl, arms outflung, rippling hair floating on the wind and tangling with the fringe of her shawl. One little gypsy girl raced at her and tackled her, and they fell in a heap on the ground, with the other laughing children piling on, giggles and hilarity ringing out. She wrestled with them, tickling and laughing, but finally, she cried out that they were wearing her out.

"Stop! Stop, you little ruffians!" she cried, pulling her bonnet over her head and tossing it aside. "Let me catch my breath."

"But no, sing us a song, Miss Charlotte!" one little boy shouted.

"Only if you stop," she groaned, panting.

Wesmorlyn watched. Should he approach? They had not noticed him yet, for they were turned mostly away from him now, and he lingered just over a rise, crouching down in the grass by a boulder, watching. Charlotte caught her flowing hair and twisted it back into an untidy bun, from which golden curls escaped and floated down over her shoulders. She put her bonnet back on, tied the ribbon under her chin and sat in the grass; the children gathered around her, sitting and lying in various attitudes of attentiveness.

"I'll teach you a song," she said, and began to sing, in German, a *lied* that Wesmorlyn recognized as being an old folk song.

Her voice was soft and lovely, tremulous at first, but it gained strength as she paused and taught the children different parts. They struggled with the unfamiliar language, and she laughed and started them again, patiently leading them through the winding story of love and loss, the words to which they would never know the meaning. It was a maiden's lament that the man she loved had gone off to war, and would never come home again, but for the children it was simply a pretty song in a foreign language.

Through it all Charlotte's lovely voice trembled with feeling and throbbed with sweetness, the honeyed notes calling to him, twisting and turning through his heart until he could feel the connection and wondered that she didn't turn from her



students and find him there, watching her, entranced and riveted. He should abhor the raw emotion she betrayed, for it revealed far too much, and he had spent his life ruthlessly quashing even the merest hint of passionate feeling, and yet he was enchanted by her impassioned performance. As she sang on, the children trailing off to listen and watch her, the golden sunshine warmed him and without thought, Wesmorlyn began to sing the lower part, in harmony. One child pointed at him standing upon the rise, and Charlotte staggered to her feet and turned toward him as he started down the hill toward the clustered group.

"Wesmorlyn," she cried. She stiffened, and the children gazed up at her, and then, with resentful expressions, at him, as they rose, too.

All naturalness had fled the moment she looked at him, and his heart throbbed. Was that what he had done? Had he stomped every natural sensation out of her? Well of course, and hadn't that always been his intent with himself and everyone around him? He was speechless, but what he wanted to say was, *Sing . . . sing again, and dance and let your gorgeous hair flow in the breeze and let me watch you, let me feel for one more moment the pure joy of your sweet expressiveness.*

"I was worried for you when you disappeared from London," he said, haltingly, instead.

"Well, as you can see I am just fine."

"Among the gypsies?" It was the wrong thing to say, and he saw it in her eyes. He hadn't meant to sound censorious, but he did. What was wrong with him that he seemed so determined to stamp every sweet and artless expression from her lovely face? "I'm sorry," he said hastily, as she opened her mouth to retort. "I am sorry, Countess, for *everything*."

"Everything? What do you mean?" She warily watched him, and the gypsy children crowded around her, clinging to her waist and surrounding her. Her arms around the closest and smallest, she held them to her.

"Everything," he said. "I'm sorry for everything I did to upset you. I was wrong, in London, to treat you as I did. You were weary from a long journey, and I was harsh and demanding. I was rude to your sister, Fanny. But I only did not want

to dance with Miss Fanny because it was Hannah's first ball, and she couldn't dance with anyone beyond my own party. I so wanted to be her first partner, for she was very nervous of making a misstep." As he talked it all flowed out, his words jumbled in his haste to explain himself. "And I'm sorry I drove you away and was so jealous and hasty and I should never have embarrassed you and hurt you that way. I'm truly sorry." He took in a deep and trembling breath.

When had he ever apologized to anyone? He was accustomed to believing himself right in every action, so this was a new sensation, and he was not so sure he liked it. But then she smiled, and he would have apologized for another thirty minutes to keep her looking so.

"You knew the song I was teaching the children," she said, her head cocked to one side, the sunlight sparkling in her blue eyes under the bonnet brim. "How is that so?"

"My music master was fascinated by folk songs from other countries and so taught me *lieder*, as well as folk songs from Italy and Spain." He smiled self-consciously. "I had a ridiculously thorough education."

"Then help me teach them," she said.

"There is a dance that goes with the song," he said. "Do you know it?"

"Of course."

And so for the next half hour of his life he was a teacher of gypsy children, of all things. The little girls attended well enough, but the boys became distracted and began to rough-house. One little fellow, racing around in circles, became dizzy and fell down, skinning his knee on one of the rocky outcroppings that dotted the moor. He wailed and wept, and not even Charlotte could convince him that he was unhurt, until Wesmorlyn knelt by him and whispered in his ear, telling him that Miss Charlotte would think him a very brave boy if he would stop crying. The child took a deep, shuddering breath and stopped, and Wesmorlyn then was able to examine his knee—he was wearing short pants, as were all of the little gypsy boys—and pronounce it not too bad, but needing cleaning with a damp cloth.

"Perhaps you could take him back to camp and let his mother look at it?" Wesmorlyn suggested to the eldest girl,

Tully, who nodded wisely. As the leader of the children, she rounded them up and, with one shrewd look at Wesmorlyn, she led them away, through the meadow, around the trees, and over the rise toward the camp.

They were alone, and he gazed at Charlotte. Self-conscious suddenly, she looked down at her dusty dress and hands and patted her skirts down.

“Will you walk with me?” he asked. Everything he had meant to do and say, all of the angry words, the complaints, had flown from him, and for that moment he just wanted to be in her company and to understand who she really was.

Shyly, she said, “All right.”

## Chapter 8

WESMORLYN TOOK Charlotte's arm, and she felt the connection like a thread pulled tight within her. In their half hour of play with the gypsy children she had seen a side of him that she never would have suspected existed from his stiff demeanor at the ball. His big hand was warm on her skin and a prickle of attraction snaked through her, shocking her with its intensity. Nervous and wary, she looked up at him, wondering what he was thinking, suddenly very aware of her grimy hands, tousled hair, and dusty skirts. She straightened her bonnet on her head and retied the ribbon with a proper bow.

"Do you accept my apology?" he asked, gazing down at her, a grave look in his gold-flecked brown eyes.

Apology; what was he talking about? But yes, he had apologized for his bad behavior, and said it was provoked by jealousy. *Jealousy?* Breathless at his steady stare, she gasped, "Of course." Then, thinking back, she stuttered back into speech. "I didn't realize it was Lady Hannah's first ball. I'm sorry I misjudged you."

"And I'm deeply regretful I was so clumsy as to offend you, but more unhappy if I hurt Miss Fanny's feelings at all."

She felt the tension ease from her at his perspicacious words. It pleased her that he said he would be more sorry if he hurt Fanny, for it meant he truly did understand what angered her most. "I think I was more upset than she," Charlotte admitted, leaning on his arm as they wandered across the sunlit moor. "I'm afraid I don't understand my sister very well."

"Nor do I understand mine, but that may be because I am twelve years her senior and a man."

Charlotte laughed; that was as close as she had ever heard him come to jesting.

"I am very fond of how you laugh," he said, suddenly and fervently, squeezing her arm to him.

She glanced up at him, watching how a random breeze lifted his russet curls off his broad forehead. Most of her anger at him had evaporated with his heartfelt apology, but she was left feeling shy, for he was a stranger to her. "I wish I could say the same, but I'm afraid I have never had the honor of hearing you laugh, sir."

He smiled, and over his solemn face the expression burst like sunshine illuminating shadows. "Do you know, I don't remember the last time I laughed."

"How awful! Life is not so serious that we must spend all of our time frowning over it as though it was a sin to see the humor."

He didn't answer, nor did he respond.

"You think that, don't you?" She observed his face, thinking how different he looked when he smiled and wishing he would smile again. Searching her heart to understand him, she slowly said, still watching his face as they strolled, side by side, "You feel that life is terribly serious, and that it's nothing to joke about."

"I was raised to believe that we are given one opportunity to make a success of life," he said, stiffly. "And that there is so much that needs to be done, so much that needs to be set right, there's no time to make light of it."

She stopped, let go of his arm, and turned to face him. "Life is more than the task at hand, my lord. It is so much more than a race to be run, the goal the only thing worth watching. If you keep your eyes fixed on the horizon, you miss all the beauty and wonder around you. Life is . . ." She

trailed off, at a loss for words, then shook her head, gestured around, and swung away from him, twirling in a circle, arms outstretched. "Look at this glorious day!" she cried, closing her eyes and feeling the sunshine on her upturned face and the mossy moor under her feet. She breathed in deeply and opened her eyes, spinning in the sunlight until she was breathless and laughing. "How," she gasped, "can you look at all of this beauty around you and not be moved to laughter or tears. How can you not be joyous?"

He didn't respond, and when she looked over it was to find him staring at her, his eyes wide and an expression of yearning on his face. She stopped, the breath sucked from her lungs. "What is it?" she asked, in a faltering voice.

He shook himself and looked away. "I think we had very different upbringings."

"Perhaps." The dark moments of the past year came back to her, times when she had feared for her life, times when confusion and pain had overwhelmed every other thought and hope was blotted out like sunshine erased by cloud. "That is certainly true, but our experience of life has been different, too. Though you have likely had your share of pain, as have we all, I doubt that you have seen the utter darkness of the soul that I have witnessed."

"What—"

She held up one hand. This was not the time, nor was he someone in whom she could confide. "It is personal, my lord, and painful, but not something of which I wish to speak. Someday, perhaps. But I walked so long in the shadows, my lord, and now, to feel the sunlight and know joy is like heaven on earth."

"Heaven on earth," he echoed, but then shook his head. "Countess, I cannot imagine finding this life to be like heaven on earth."

She searched his eyes. "Then what are you living for, the hereafter?"

"Is that not what we're supposed to do? Our life here on earth is so temporary—"

"And I intend to enjoy it!" she cried. "Every moment of every day. And I will take chances and explore what life has to offer me while I am here."

“Countess, that is not—”

“Please, call me something other than countess,” she said, interrupting him again. She watched his face; it reminded her of how the sky, on a cloudy day, would sometimes show glimpses of sunlight peeking through. He was so somber, but was there more beneath that sober demeanor? For the first time she wondered what his life had truly been like. Men were raised differently from women. They were raised to think of duty and honor and responsibility, ideals he evidently valued above all else. Did that have to make one humorless and solemn?

All of the duties and expectations of being a woman seemed like a book she knew by heart, but which she had set aside as irrelevant to her. In her life she was supposed to be silent and submissive and quiet. That was a woman’s role, and she understood well the expectations of her and how she failed them, no matter how hard she tried. She was to listen to the men who were to guide her, and accept their decisions about her life without fuss. She should be demure, dainty, docile, and deferential. She’d rather be dead.

Perhaps if her mother and father had lived to raise her she would be just such a young woman: quiet, obedient, and sweet-natured. Much like Fanny, raised in a servant’s compliant role. She shuddered at the thought. It was not for her. She did her best to be respectful and considerate, but could not suppress the fire within her forever. Life had been her teacher, and the lesson had been to seize joy with both hands, for one never knew what the next day would bring. Returning to his side and gazing up at him, she said, “If there is no joy in life, then what is there to live for?”

His eyes clouded with doubt. “Why, we live for duty. And to take care of those who mean something to us, and for whom we bear responsibility.”

“But none of that means we have to live without joy. Doing our duty doesn’t mean we have to do it with a heavy heart and a frown.” She gazed up at his face, the sunlight highlighting a faint dusting of freckles over his nobly proportioned nose. His thick chestnut hair was swept back from a broad forehead, but unlike in the ballroom, he was dressed for country pursuits and more handsome for it, in breeches and riding boots.

"But do you understand what it means to do your duty?" he asked, earnestly.

"I understand what it means for a man," she said, "but what does it mean for a woman?"

"Why, that you marry well, and bear children, and raise them to be dutiful to their father."

She felt the constricting panic again, the rising tide of fierce anger and outrage. Boundaries imposed on every side, hemmed in by expectations, it was no wonder she longed for freedom with such passion. She felt a wildness in her heart, an eager need to be free. Turning away from him and stepping up onto a rocky outcropping, she said, "Then I will not do my duty. Or perhaps it is more that I don't even believe that *is* my duty."

"But that is what is accepted! It's in the Bible, and in the homilies handed down through the ages." He shook his head, with a puzzled look. "Why, it's *life*," he continued, frowning up at her on her rocky pedestal. "What is your duty if not those things we have been taught from the cradle?"

He put out his hand to help her down from the rock, but she ignored it and jumped down on her own. "I don't know yet," she said. "All I know is I cannot abdicate the responsibility to understand my life and what it means to me. I can't give over the right to choose what I am to do, to someone else, no matter how much they love me or how well they intend. I just can't!"

Legs spread, feet planted firmly, and arms akimbo, he stood and stared at her. "What else did you come to England for, if not to follow your uncle's dictates and marry me?"

She stared at him in frustration. There they were, back at why they could never suit. She had been right all along; the earl was stuffy and overly correct, and she would die rather than bury herself in the role of countess to such a killjoy.

Wesmorlyn watched her, and it was as if a brilliant light had been covered by a smothering blanket; the joy went out of her expression and her blue eyes dulled. But her joy had a dangerous, intoxicating quality, so perhaps it needed to be tempered and calmed. *She* needed to be calmed, for she exhibited a wildness in her words and thoughts that was alarming. No one could go through life happy all the time. No one could



just dance in the sun, laugh and smile and be happy. Could they? Was it possible to do one's duty and yet have joy too? It seemed too much to ask.

"Shall we walk?" he asked, taking her arm.

"I do not need your support, sir," she said, jerking her arm out of his grasp, striding away, and ascending toward the rocky crest of a low hill. "I don't need any man's support." She was vigorous in her climb, as if pursued by the ghosts of future drudgery. When she reached the top, she shaded her eyes and stared out over the other side. Her mercurial mood shifted again, and she smiled. "How *beautiful!*"

He joined her, and gazed out over the rocky slope. Below them wound a sparkling stream and a road followed it, finally crossing the water with the aid of an ancient stone bridge. He glanced at her face and was riveted by her returned expression of joy, her azure eyes alight with a brilliance that rivaled the celestial blue sky overhead. So small a thing as a stone bridge could cause such joy? He couldn't imagine. And yet . . . a memory flooded his mind of Hannah, a child of ten or so, and her joy over finding a tiny gray mouse in the stable. She had cradled it in her hands and exclaimed over it, cooing in a sweet, childish trill of adoration. But he had knocked it out of her hands and stomped it with his boot, and the light had died in her eyes. Even though he explained that it might have bit her, and that they could not allow vermin to flourish in the stables, for they brought disease, he had felt as if he personally stomped the joy out of her expression that day.

Was that his fate, to be the one to kill the joy in feminine eyes? All he wanted was to do his duty, but did that mean being joyless for all the years of his life? He was suddenly afraid of the years ahead, years spent in the calm and plodding pursuit of redemption for the Wesmorlyns, staid, sedate, and devoid of any happiness save the deepest, the kind that came from doing one's duty. What of the other kind, the intoxication she seemed to feel just from nature and beauty? A sudden and blinding need to understand overcame him.

"Teach me," he said, in a desperate panic, his breath coming quick. "Teach me what it is that makes you exclaim over such a poor thing as a dilapidated stone bridge."

She turned to him and stared into his eyes. Her expression

was doubtful; perhaps she thought he was teasing or making fun of her.

"I have never comprehended the picturesque," he said, frowning and squinting into the distance. "Though it has been explained to me many times by despairing art masters, I still don't understand it. Teach me."

She shrugged helplessly. "No one can teach you that. It's in here," she said, touching her chest over her heart with the flat of her hand. "Not here," she said, touching her head.

"Then teach me about there," he said, touching her bodice with one finger, staring at her. He felt her heart pounding, and in that moment he longed to flatten his hand, to touch her and feel the vigor of life that she exemplified. Instead he drew his hand away.

She stared into his eyes and bit her lip. "It's like a foreign language to you, isn't it?"

He nodded, numbly.

"I don't know if you can learn it then. I sometimes wonder if some things are innate; we either experience them in our core or they will be lost to us forever."

"Don't say that, please. Try?"

She took in a deep breath. "All right. But you must listen to me and yet endeavor, at the same time, to hear what is in your own heart. Point your body in that direction and close your eyes."

He did as he was told, facing the scene below.

"What do you feel?"

"What? I don't understand. My eyes are closed. How can I feel anything?"

"I said, *feel*, don't look! What do you *feel*? Stop analyzing the words and just listen. Experience the world for one minute without sight."

He stopped trying to think and just let himself be, for a moment. The sun was warm on his face and a breeze chased up the hill and ruffled his hair. It felt good, like tender fingers brushing the hair back from his forehead. Without sight, he experienced the day in a different way, and heard a lark in a distant hedgerow singing, the rustle of the grass bent by the breeze, and then the gurgle of the brook from below came to him, a chuckle of sound more pleasing than the strains of a

violin concerto. Had he shut all of that out before? He would have sworn the day was silent, and yet there was a symphony of sound when one stopped to listen.

"Now," she whispered near his ear, "*Now* open your eyes and look."

He did, but if he expected a revelation, it was not to be. He glanced over at her and shrugged.

"Stop *thinking* about it!" she exclaimed, stamping one foot on the ground. "What do you see?"

He stared, and stopped considering the scene from the aspect of a landowner. He tried not to worry about the disrepair of the bridge—the crumbling stone and the anxiety of possible collapse—and just gazed at it, the mossy patterns on the pale gray stone and the sparkling water trickling beneath it, silver and glittering in the brilliant sunlight. The bank rose from it in verdant clumps of tender grass, and a tiny fish leaped to catch an insect hovering too close to the water's surface.

"You're smiling," she said.

"I feel as if I am at the edge of understanding." He glanced over at her, so close to him, and was caught by the loveliness of her pale skin shadowed by the straw bonnet, the rosebud delicacy of her mouth, and the delicious sweetness of the dimple in the middle of her chin. "You're so very pretty," he said, impulsively, "not what I expected at all when I corresponded with your uncle."

She colored, the pink blooming on her cheeks in the same manner that sunset pinkened the sky near twilight. "Do you really think I'm pretty? When you first met me, I sensed you were disappointed."

He *had* been disappointed . . . disappointed that she was so lovely. He couldn't tell her that, for how could he explain it when he didn't even understand himself? "No gentleman could ever look at you and be disappointed, especially after meeting you. I have never seen a lady who so accurately reflects the beauty and freshness of her character in her appearance."

She ducked her head in adorable self-consciousness. Her expression concealed by the brim of her hat, shyly she said, "I

have not had very much experience with male attention, sir, and I don't know what I should say in reply."

Her bashful honesty thawed every last bit of his reserve, for at least the moment, and he smiled over at her. "You needn't say a thing." He took her arm. "Will you walk with me down to the stone bridge? I feel oddly like a babe whose eyes are opened to the world around me, and I wish to see things more closely."

They walked and talked for a while, and all of the anxious tension he had felt for many days slipped from him. It was like mist burning off the moor from the heat of the sun; in the sunshine of her presence it just dissipated and finally disappeared. He told her about Cornwall, all the stories his father had told him, about pirates and merchant ships, and the ancient legends of King Arthur, for they were not far from Tintagel. He told her about ancient battles and how his family had come to gain their title, though he didn't delve completely into his family history. There were things in his family's ancient line he spoke of to no one.

Compromises had been made, battles won by foul means and treachery, despicable ancestors for whom to repent. Every moment of his life he had been raised and inculcated to believe that he was the one to set things right, no matter what it took, and no matter if it was the only thing he ever did. If his youth was often grim and cheerless, he had taught himself not to think of it that way, to see in every moment of duty one step up the long ladder to heaven. But now he saw that there was more, and he wondered if he had to miss out on simpler joys after all. With the right companionship it was, perhaps, possible to have everything. She had brought him so far in just an hour; could he trust her with the rest of his life?

Finally he spoke of the physical beauty of Cornwall. "You can see for yourself," he said, with a gesture at the expansive landscape, "though this is Randell's land, and not the best example of Cornwall's best aspects. But it is truly a magical place in every way. Do you know that while the rest of the country suffers through winter, we have an early spring here? Daffodils bloom, and warm breezes awaken the countryside."

She laughed at his unusually enthusiastic speech. "You

sound as though you are trying to sell Cornwall, and I am a prospective buyer!"

He turned and stared steadily into her eyes. "Well, in a way you are, aren't you?"

For the first time she acknowledged how different their expectations were of her arrival in England. It must have been confusing and disappointing to find in her such an awkward, quarrelsome girl when he had expected a gracious, accomplished lady. He had a right to be far more angry at her than he had yet shown himself to be. "You came all this way to find me, didn't you?"

"I was worried when Christoph said you were ill and could not come down to see me, the morning after the ball. I thought something had happened."

"Poor Christoph," Charlotte said, turning and walking again. She strolled along the riverbank, watching the flash and leap of silvery fish and how the sun sparkled on the bubbling surface. "Has he followed me, do you think?"

"He has," he answered, following her, "but for some reason has not come to Cornwall yet, as far as I can determine."

Her cheeks pinkened a deeper shade of rose, and she sighed. "I deliberately did not tell him where we were going, because I didn't know how long I would need for my quest. I knew he might come after us on horseback, and that is so much quicker than traveling by carriage." She paused and gazed back at the earl in consternation. "I feel terrible now! He's probably in Plymouth, knocking on every door looking for us."

"Why Plymouth?"

"That is where he likely thought we were going. I feel dreadful about frightening him, but he would not listen to me." She picked up a stone from the water's edge and tossed it in, watching it sink and a group of tiny, curious fish eagerly dart around the resulting bubbles. "After my appalling behavior at the ball he treated me abominably, and no matter what I have done, I will not stand for that."

Wesmorlyn took her hand. "Please, Countess . . . Charlotte, I'm sorry if my own awful behavior chased you from London."

She met his gaze. "It wasn't you, sir, please believe me. It

was a mixture of things, most of which have nothing to do with you."

"But where are you and your sister staying? Why did you come to Cornwall? I have been concerned about your safety, and then last night when we could not find you at the inn in Bodmin, I spent an awful night fearing for you. If I had not overheard your carriage driver laughing about dropping you off in the middle of nowhere, I would never have found you."

"That terrible man!" Charlotte said, a quick flash of anger coursing through her. "I wish I had him here this minute, for I would give him a piece of my mind! It was purest luck, and gypsy sight, that Tamara—she is a girl from the gypsy camp—found us and gave us shelter. But as you can see, sir," she said, dropping his hand and twirling, her dress belling out around her ankles. "I am not worse for the experience."

"You are remarkably resilient," he said, shaking his head. "Most young ladies would have swooned under the experience."

"I have never swooned." She took a deep breath and faced him squarely. "I *am* troubled, sir, about what occurred in London," she said, determined to have it out. "I am concerned mostly about your relationship with Mr. Randell. I dislike being a source of enmity between two old friends. Did you *have* to challenge him? And how did it turn out? I hope neither of you were seriously hurt."

"Friends? We have not really been that for some years, though there is no enmity on my side."

"But . . . your sister named him as a dear family friend," Charlotte said, with a frown.

"She feels more warmly toward him than I. Before the night of the ball I had no real anger toward him."

"But what happened, then, at the duel?"

"Randell did not attend the duel," Wesmorlyn said. "That surprised me. I had not thought him the type to let such a matter of honor slide like that."

"I'm glad he didn't meet you," she said. But if that was the case, she suddenly thought, then what had kept Mr. Randell from meeting them at Salisbury as he had promised? That was a puzzle. "But I must relieve your worry on one account, sir. My leaving London had nothing to do with you. When I came

to England, it was partly to find my sister's mother. The woman is still living, and I thought Fanny should have the chance to meet her. And then the very night of the ball I found out from Mr. Randell that not only was Miss Dancey still living, she was a tenant of his! How amazingly fortuitous, is it not?" she said.

His brown eyes were cast down in thought. "You found all this out while you walked in the garden with him?"

"No, it was later, when I was speaking to Fanny on the terrace. Mr. Randell happened to be near—he wished to apologize for kissing me and causing such trouble, which I thought was very gentlemanly—and he overheard the name Eleanor Dancey. He recognized it immediately as belonging to his recent tenant."

"And he understood all just from her name?" Wesmorlyn said, a frown darkening his expression.

"No, of course not," she said tartly. "I explained why we were looking for her, and he kindly offered us the use of his carriage and driver."

He shook his head in grave disapprobation. "And so you are going to go meet this woman and see if she is Miss Fanny's mother?"

"We have already done so, sir, and Fanny is now with her. The woman was overcome with joy at finding her daughter, you can imagine, for she was on the point of leaving England forever! Fortune smiles on my endeavor, it seems."

"How do you know for sure this is the correct Eleanor Dancey?"

"Do you not think I asked questions?" Charlotte sighed, exasperated. "You're just as trying as Christoph. You treat me as if I don't have a brain in my head. When we went up to see her, I asked her a few questions, the answers to which proved she was the correct woman. She even remembered calling me Lotte when I was but a child!"

"It all seems so fortuitous," he said, his dark eyes filled with doubt.

"What do you mean?"

He sighed. "You come to England to meet me, and bring Fanny to find her mother. The very first night of your arrival you meet the man, an acquaintance of mine and a close

neighbor in Cornwall, who not only knows her, but also has rented her a house recently, and can give you directions."

"And who provided the carriage for us to travel here," she repeated. She explained the original plan, and though it fell apart, and Mr. Randell did not, after all, meet them in Salisbury and the carriage driver abandoned them, it still resulted in success. "He understood completely about how Christoph would behave if I tried to tell him about Eleanor Dancey, and he made available his carriage and driver."

"Who abandoned you by the side of the road," he said, stiffly.

"It is hardly Mr. Randell's fault that his driver is a villain and a drunkard," Charlotte said hotly. How did it happen that she was defending Mr. Randell when she was angry with him herself?

"Nevertheless, it was a rash and risky thing to do!"

Though she understood what he was saying, he was being just as patronizing as Christoph and it sparked her fury. "Perhaps it seems so to you, but I only did it in such a manner because I was pushed by men who will not listen to me! I will *not* be chivvied and patronized as if I have no say in my life." She turned and started back toward the gypsy encampment. "And it all turned out all right in the end, didn't it?" she said, over her shoulder. "Though I am not a believer, perhaps I am wrong; perhaps there is such a thing in life as destiny, my lord, and it was Fanny's destiny to meet her mother. Now, I have been gone too long. I must go back up to the house, for Fanny will worry. She is such a fusser!"

"Wait!"

Charlotte turned back and stared at the earl.

His expression was serious. "Please listen to me; there is much here that I don't understand. I learned before I followed you that Lyulph Randell had not yet left London, and I don't know why that is so, if he was to meet you in Salisbury."

She shook her head. "I will certainly ask him those things when he comes. I understand his home is not too far from Moor Cottage."

"You don't intend to go to his home, do you?"

"What if I do?" she asked, though she had no intention of doing anything of the sort. She was raised properly and did as-



cribe to some rules of decorum, despite the English population's determined idea that Germans were barbarians. "What if I decided to pay him a visit in his home? Who are you to say anything about it?"

"You are an infuriating girl! I am your betrothed husband," he said, shaking his finger, "and have a right to correct your behavior."

That was it; there was that presumption of privilege. "You have *no* right," she ground out, feeling the iron restraints of male prerogative close around her once again. She stopped herself and looked up to the sky, then back down at him, holding back her temper with an effort. "I know I am not what you thought you were ordering." Her tone mocking, she continued, "Did the catalogue entry state one virginal German bride, dutiful and well-raised, available for delivery?" Her attempt at humor withered and her anger overcame her. "I am *more* than that. I am a grown woman with my own thoughts and opinions, and I will never exchange my feelings for yours. I will *never* use anyone's judgment but my own, flawed and faulty though it may be. Speak to me as if I am a rational being, or do not speak to me at all!"

"I will speak to you as a rational being when you begin to behave as one!" he spluttered, but then calmed, taking a deep breath. He approached her and said, taking one hand, "Charlotte, will you do me one favor?"

She stared down at his bare hand, so broad and long-fingered, encasing hers in his warm grip. "What is it?"

"Will you keep my arrival here a secret for now?"

"Why?" she asked, meeting his gaze.

"Please, I know I have no right to ask such a thing, but just trust me?"

She hesitated, but then nodded, speechless. Arrogant he might be, presumptuous and overbearing, but he was clearly also trustworthy and concerned, and there was every reason to believe that he would have a good reason for any request he made.

"And may I see you again? Here, near the gypsy camp?"

"You shouldn't ask such a thing. A clandestine meeting, a secret between a man and woman: Are not those forbidden?"

She taunted him deliberately, but he would not be drawn this time.

He smiled. "I know. I can't believe I am even asking it of you, for this is completely out of character for me. I have never done such a thing before, but there are things I wish to investigate. Please, do I have your word? I am speaking to you as one rational being to another. I understand if you don't wish to meet me here again, but just keep my secret for a few days?"

"All right," she said, and pulled her hand from his grasp. "But only for a few days." She walked away from him, looking back occasionally to find him staring after her, the expression of intense longing back on his face. What it truly meant, she was afraid she would never know, and she could not explain to herself why it touched her so deeply.

The walk back to the gypsy encampment seemed long; she hadn't realized how far they had wandered nor how long she had been gone. When she approached the camp she heard voices raised in anger.

She rounded the grove of trees and saw the sunlight sparkling off hair very much like her own, but a darker golden in hue. "Christoph," she shouted, overjoyed to see her brother. She broke into a run. "Christoph, you've come!"

## Chapter 9

“CHARLOTTE! THANK God!” He caught his sister to him, as she threw herself into his arms, and hugged her, burying his face in her hair under her straw bonnet. His agony of three days was relieved in one sweeping moment. Charlotte, his adored little sister. Through all of the misery and confusion of the last years, even when he could not speak of the terrible things he was going through, she was always there to support him in silence. More than any member of his family she was the one who believed in him implicitly, even when he couldn’t believe in himself. She defended him against any slur, and trusted him implicitly, or at least she had until their arrival in England. Their recent rift was more his fault than hers, he realized, and it had torn his heart in two.

He had tracked her as far in the night as the gypsy encampment, but in his werewolf form he could not approach and had been forced to reluctantly return to Siegfried, who followed on horseback with his clothing. And then, such a long night of running and searching, nose to the ground, hour after exhausting hour, had left him drained. Unable to move another inch, he had slept for a few hours before following up on his hunt.

But though he knew she was there at some point, the gypsies had been steadfast in their claims not to have seen two blonde young foreign ladies. What had happened to them? What had the gypsy men done?

His frustration and fury had just been reaching boiling point when Charlotte appeared from out of nowhere to ease his frenzied vexation. "Where have you been?" he asked, holding her away from him. She looked radiant and unharmed, her cheeks faintly sun-kissed as if she had been frolicking in the sunshine without her hat. He was almost angry; she had no right to look so jubilant when he had been suffering agonies of apprehension for the last three days.

"Oh, Christoph, I have so much to tell you! But first . . . you have probably terrified these poor people with your fierce questioning," she said, glancing around at the frightened faces of the children clinging to the women who stood near the shadowy protection of the caravans and the sullen, distrustful faces of the men. She looked toward a caravan at a young woman who was climbing down. "There is Tamara. You must meet her."

She raced over to the young gypsy woman and pulled her by the arm until they were both standing in front of him. Christoph gazed down at her. She was dark-eyed and voluptuous, with tumbled dark curls pulled back by an indigo and emerald scarf; her skin was the rich, warm color of honey.

"Tamara, this is my brother, Christoph; he has followed and found me. Isn't he clever? Christoph, this is Tamara, and she was very kind to Fanny and me last night. She gave us a bed, and made sure we had food. And then she knew where Eleanor Dancey lived and—"

"Wait! What is all of this? What's going on? Why did you leave London and how . . . where . . ." He shook his head, bewildered.

"It's a long story," Charlotte said, touching his arm. "And I promise to tell you all. But first, say hello, for Tamara and I are friends. She is a sweet girl, better than any of those awful English girls I met at the ball the first night we arrived."

Christoph gravely bowed over the gypsy girl's hand. She curtsied and stared up at him, wide-eyed and wordless, her cherry lips parted. An unwelcome jolt of attraction ripped

through his body. She was lovely, doe-eyed and lushly constructed, and he could feel her interest. He smelled it rising from her, a scent of attraction that pulled him, filling him with desire and need. He shut down his body, backing away from the spiraling sensation of arousal. It made him uneasy and uncomfortable, an awful reminder of past confusion and hideous shame.

He swallowed hard and cleared his throat. "Where is Fanny?" he asked, turning to his sister. "We must go back to London. I sent Siegfried ahead to get us a suite of rooms at the inn in Bodmin, but I would rather just hire a carriage and start back to the city today. You left me in a terrible position, Charlotte! I cannot believe how irresponsible you have been, to just run away and leave me to explain your absence to the earl."

"I have been trying to explain to you, Christoph," she said, stiffly, hands balled into fists at her side. "I won't be going back to London. If you would just listen to me you would understand, but you won't. You haven't lately."

He sighed and looked around at the gypsies. Uneasily, he wondered if he would be robbed. The men were glaring at him with distrustful expressions, but they made no move to attack or even to confront him. He took Charlotte's arm and pulled her away. "Take me to Fanny."

She pulled her arm from his grasp. "Stop behaving as if you have some right to tell me what to do. I am weary to the bone of men telling me what to do!"

"Don't be nonsensical! If you will just be more . . . more . . ."

"More what?" she said, her voice rising and her blue eyes glinting dangerously in the brilliant sunlight. "More ladylike? More malleable? More brainless?"

"More *sensible*." He glared at her, and saw the stubborn set of her dimpled chin.

"Listen to me," she said, speaking slowly and clearly making a great effort to be calm. "I'm sorry I frightened you, but you were in no mood in London to listen, and especially after that idiotic scene between Mr. Randell and me. I had to act quickly, or Fanny may not have met her mother. And you were writing that letter, about to take us away when we were on the

very brink of accomplishing my goal in coming to this dreadful island. I could not . . ." She paused, putting up one finger. "Wait a moment." Charlotte went and whispered to the gypsy girl, gave her a quick hug, and then turned away, after waving to the other people gathered nearby. Some of the little children waved back. She took Christoph's arm and led him away. "We can walk while we talk. Tamara is going to have one of the men bring my and Fanny's bags to the house later."

"The house? What house?"

"Moor Cottage. I'm trying to tell you if you will just shut up and listen."

So he did, though first he had to surrender to the inevitable and satisfy her curiosity about how he found her in such an obscure place as the gypsy camp. She seemed almost envious at his tale of tracking her movements through the night as a wolf, but he could have told her it had a price in a sweeping weariness deep to the very core of his being. He didn't wish to become distracted, though, and so was terse and to the point, simply explaining that he had then returned to Siegfried, who awaited him near the next village, reassumed his human form, and collapsed in his room at the tiny inn nearby until he awoke later in the morning to finish his search. He didn't go into it, but he had been hideously anxious, fearing she and Fanny were being kept captive, agonizing over the delay in getting back to the gypsy camp, furious over the necessity that had driven him to sleep when he should have been returning directly to retrieve her. Finding her safe and cheerful had been both a relief and maddening, but he knew his sister well enough to know that going into his irritation at that moment would just lead to a long argument. He wanted to know what had taken her from London first.

So at his urging, Charlotte told him a convoluted tale about the night at the ball in London, and how Lyulph Randell, overhearing her and Fanny talking about Eleanor Dancey, volunteered the information that he had rented a cottage to a woman of that name recently, but that the lady had spoken of leaving England for the Canadas.

"What would you have done in that instance?" she asked him, glancing over as they walked. "Be honest, Christoph. If I had told you all of this, with how you were feeling about Mr.

Randell, knowing he is a werewolf, and being angry at me for the scene at the ball, what would you have done?"

He took a deep breath and thought. They had always been honest with each other. "I would have refused to listen," he admitted, scaling a long rise as she easily kept pace with him. "Perhaps only at first, though. You *know* you could have convinced me eventually, Charlotte."

"But I *didn't* know that, and we didn't have time anyway," she said, leading him across the sun-dappled moor, around rocky outcroppings and down the other side of the rise. "I could not trust Fanny's future to my ability to convince you to leave London and head off to Cornwall. Nor would a letter sent by post do in this instance. Really Christoph, how would one frame such a letter? How would one ask the lady by post if she bore an illegitimate child nineteen years before in Germany?"

"And you say you really have found Eleanor Dancey?" he asked, reflecting on her tale. "And she was happy to see Fanny?"

"Ecstatic! Swooning, sighs, tears, just like one would expect." Charlotte gave a little hop of happiness.

He glanced over at his sister. "Is it not all an enormous coincidence, Charlotte?"

"Perhaps not," Charlotte said, pensively. "I have never believed in fate, but could everything that has happened so far be destiny?"

"I don't believe in destiny."

"Yes, well, a few months ago I didn't believe in werewolves nor in witches, either, but there we are," she replied in a dry tone. "Both exist. I am forced to concede that I may be wrong about the existence of destiny at work in our lives."

He experienced a pang at her mention of witches, for his darling Melisande, now blissfully married to a Russian count who also happened to be a werewolf, was just such a one, with breathtaking powers of protection for those in her circle. He had loved but lost her to a man he could not fault, yet the twinge he felt about losing her forever was duller than it had been just a month before. If only he had admitted his feelings sooner, perhaps he could have claimed her as his own, but he

couldn't dwell on the past. One day he would think of her without pain, as a friend he cared for deeply.

He turned his mind to his sister's argument. Could Charlotte have something in her determined argument that everything so far, even their trip to England, had been part of some divine scheme to right the past injustices that had separated Fanny from her birth mother? He could hardly discount the possibility that there was some kind of master plan, and they just cogs in the machinery of fate, even though in philosophical discussions about destiny and free will he had always come down on the side of free will. They were creatures of God, perhaps, but free to make mistakes, to forge their own way, he had always thought. What good was the werewolf's eternal struggle, to choose to stay on the path of good and resist the urge to walk on the darker side, if every action was foreordained by some higher power?

But he supposed he must keep his mind and heart open to possibilities. Life had shown him all could change in a heartbeat. "So you think it was no coincidence, but that destiny had some hand in everything that has gone on? If this truly is Eleanor Dancey—"

"It *is* Eleanor Dancey, Christoph, the *right* Eleanor Dancey. Who else could it be? She knew me as a child, and even told me she used to call me Lotte!"

"I don't remember that."

"You were very young; so was I, but she remembered me! And be rational. What motive would some strange woman have, when confronted with two girls at her door, to admit one of them was her illegitimate daughter by a German count? That is surely beyond the bounds of reason. No, she knew his name, Christoph. She knew our father's name, and though she will not speak of him—I fear she was very deeply wounded—she admitted the affair with shame and humility. You'll see." She stopped as they reached the top of the hill they had been scaling and pointed. "There. That is Moor Cottage."

Nestled in the bottom of the valley and with the sunlight beaming softly upon its stone walls and slate roof, it should have been an appealing, idyllic sight, but instead it looked brooding, squat, and gloomy. The gardens, riotous and over-run, gave it the look of a place abandoned and hopeless, de-



void of cheer. Two windows faced in their direction, and they looked like heavy-lidded eyes; he felt oddly like the cottage was watching him, waiting for him, anticipating his arrival with sinister satisfaction.

Charlotte was watching him, and he searched for something positive to say, but couldn't. She bit her lip, but finally laughed. "Admit it, Christoph, it looks even gloomier than Wolfram Castle in midwinter!"

He chuckled. "You're right about that. However, onward. Let's go and see this woman."

Charlotte had thought that Fanny and Eleanor would be closeted together catching up on each others' lives in the years since Eleanor had been forced, as a very young girl, to bear her child, leave her behind to be raised in the von Wolfram household, and sent to live in shame in England. But the woman came into the cottage from the kitchen garden beyond the back door, and said that Fanny was upstairs.

Hellebore followed her, as the cat always did, but it took one look at Christoph and hissed, its back arching, spitting with fury. It turned and tore from the house, yowling all the way.

"I apologize most sincerely," Eleanor said, her eyes wide as she stared at Christoph. "I've never seen Hellebore act like that, except when Mr. Randell's game master visited once with his pack of hounds."

Charlotte stifled a laugh. The cat hated her, but was clearly terrified of Christoph. Did it sense that he was a werewolf? "Miss Dancey, this is my brother, Count Christoph von Wolfram," she said, choking back her laughter. "Isn't he clever? He found us, even though he did not know where we were!"

Christoph gave her a warning glance and turned back to the woman. She welcomed him with a shy reserve, but warmly for all that, just as she ought to behave, Charlotte judged. And in fact, Charlotte could see that Christoph was charmed by the retiring, modest woman. Though he offered to go to the inn at Bodmin, she insisted he stay in her humble home, for she would not separate Fanny from the only family she had ever known, she said, her lips trembling with emotion. Charlotte and Fanny would have to share a room, she said, but that being done, he could indeed occupy the third

bedroom. She apologized for the modesty of the accommodations, but he thanked her, gravely, and said he would be grateful to stay. First, though, he needed to go to Bodmin and retrieve his manservant, Siegfried, who had gone on ahead of him to bespeak a room while Christoph hunted for his sisters.

Charlotte went in search of Fanny and found her up in the room they were going to share, sitting quietly, reading the Bible. She shared the news that Christoph had found them, and then asked, "So what did you and your mother talk about?" Charlotte plopped down on the high four-poster bed they would have to share.

Fanny looked up from the Bible, frowning into the middle distance, her blue eyes unfocussed. "Well, she did not wish to speak of our father. In fact she didn't wish to speak of Germany at all. She asked how much I knew about her life, and I told her the truth, that I knew very little, except that she was sent to live with a maiden aunt. That is all anyone knew except for Frau Liebner's very brief visit to her quite a few years ago, in her aunt's home in Plymouth. She said that her interest really was in me, and *my* life so far. I could understand her reticence, and did not press her."

Charlotte nodded in understanding. "She likely didn't want to shock you with details of her life best left unmentioned. It must have been so difficult for her when she came back to England, a young girl disgraced and unhappy. I had hoped she would speak of our father, for I remember so little about him, but I can understand her not wanting to remember that painful period in her life."

Fanny was silent, and then continued to read, or at least continued to stare down at the book in her lap. Charlotte watched her for a long few minutes, and noted that she never turned the page, but inevitably her mind turned back to Wesmorlyn, and their walk. He was infuriatingly complicated, offering glimpses of a charming, vulnerable man, easy to talk to, but then he would poker up into that dreadful, stiff caricature of an English nobleman. And the change took place as swiftly as a cloud shrouding the sun.

Why did he not want her to say anything about him being in Cornwall? It made no sense, but she had promised and didn't take that lightly. Perhaps she would see him again at the

gypsy camp. She would not soon forget the expression in his fine, dark eyes, the look of yearning as she walked away from him. It had certainly been directed at her, but what did it mean? She sighed, wishing the tangled mystery of the Earl of Wesmorlyn was as easy to unravel as it had been to find Fanny's mother.

## Chapter 10

THE MELLOW gold and gray stone walls of Wesmorlyn Abbey glowed in the soft afternoon sun as the earl trudged up the long open hill to his home. He was lost in thought but paused, as he always did, to notice how the stained glass of the Gothic windows glistened, the twin images of Gabriel and Uriel over the door, their hands outstretched in supplication, picked out in brilliant hues of scarlet and azure, emerald and gold. Even without looking he could have said how they looked, though, it was so familiar a sight to him. Every member of his family who had ever entered through the massive doors underneath had looked up, and remembered the old tales of how their eventual redemption rested in the hands of one of them, though *who* had not been foretold. Some, hoping to be the redeemer, had tried to keep to the right path and had failed, while others had not even bothered to try, relishing the power of their position and using it to satisfy their own mortal greed and lust. Centuries had passed in that cycle of sin and suffering and attempts to find salvation.

Semyaza, standing in front, awaited his return. How many generations of his family, upon returning to the Abbey, had

looked up to see Semyaza, tall and stern, watching and waiting for them to become worthy? Too far back to ponder, he reflected as he stopped and gazed up at the familiar figure. He slipped his jacket on over his loose shirt and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. The itch in the middle of his back was quiescent, and he was weary, for though his land bordered Randell's, it was still some distance from the gypsy camp to Wesmorlyn Abbey. He had much to ponder and more to discover. Somewhere, at the heart of Countess Charlotte's simple story of finding her sister's mother, lay a mystery.

"Sam," he said, strolling toward the abbey, shrugging his shoulders properly into his jacket and fastening the top button with one hand, "I found them. Both the countess and her sister Fanny are safe. But Countess Charlotte told me a strange tale, one that involves Lyulph Randell. I'm not sure if it is true or part of some scheme."

Semyaza didn't answer, and Wesmorlyn sighed. "I know; these things I need to discover for myself. I'm puzzled. If it *is* true, then it's the most amazing coincidence, or some sort of plan of which I am not a part. But if it is *not* true, then I have to consider that Lyulph Randell has embarked on a scheme that must, through its use of the countess, be aimed at me, and I don't want to think that, not after this many years of mending the enmity between our families. All these years and Lyulph has never once strayed from the right path, not even considering how great the urges are for him." He considered the awful burden under which the man labored, part man and part beast. The earth pulled him, tempted him, and every sense must urge him to become more of what was now only a small part of his makeup. For some reason Wesmorlyn had always been able to vividly imagine it, the excruciating enticement of the physical world, the lure of the seven deadly sins. He had even felt it that very afternoon; the countess's sweet and joyful essence had touched him, and he had experienced the urge to take her in his arms and kiss her until she was breathless.

Battling that impulse, he had begun to question his resolve to stay untainted by earthly lust, but quickly realized that was the danger. He must stay to the path he had determined in the coolness of sober reflection and not be swayed by the heat of

human weakness. Better to keep one's eyes firmly pointed upward, Wesmorlyn thought, gazing up at the supplicant angels. Uriel. Gabriel. Better to be working steadily, soberly toward redemption than enticed toward eternal damnation. He met Semyaza's steady gaze again. "I need to find out what Lyulph is up to. I will not have him lead that innocent girl astray."

"The innocent girl he was kissing in the garden?" Semyaza finally said, with a faint smile, moving to allow Wesmorlyn to pass through the wrought iron gates that were pulled aside always to expose the enormous oak Gothic doors.

Wesmorlyn thought about Charlotte's uptilted face in the Cornish sunshine that very day and said, more to himself than to Semyaza, "Temptation comes in many forms, and I must remember that, mustn't I? But also, being led astray can happen in different ways. She is innocent, Sam, in ways other than the corporeal, perhaps. I'll not have that ingenuousness abused by anyone." With that he entered, passing through the gates.

"HAVE some more of the carrots, Count von Wolfram," Eleanor Dancey said, passing the bowl to him with an encouraging smile. "They are from my own garden, and flavored uniquely, I think, with tarragon. It is a hobby of mine, to find unusual pairings of foods and herbs."

"Thank you, ma'am; they're delicious. Very unusual in their flavor."

Charlotte looked askance at the green-flecked carrots and took a bite of the trout instead. The dining room was dark and cramped and smelled, as the whole cottage did, of damp and mold, but the food made up for the inadequate surroundings. The woman was a very good cook, for she insisted on preparing everything, she said, with her own hands. Anne, Eleanor Dancey's maid-of-all-work, was useless for that kind of task. The gypsy men who had brought Fanny and Charlotte's bags had also brought with them fish caught in the stream nearby. They had Lyulph Randell's permission, Eleanor said, to fish and even to snare rabbits and other small animals, and they were kind enough to share them with her, often.

"Mr. Randell must be a very good man," Charlotte said, casting a glance at Christoph as she spoke, "to allow you the rent of this cottage at the nominal rate you said, and to allow the gypsies to not only camp, but also hunt and fish! What other landowner would do such a thing?"

"Without him I would be in a very poor state indeed, for there are those who would drive me to desperation, and all for some imagined slight." This was said with feverish intensity, but Eleanor did not look up from her plate when she said it. "And the gypsies," she added, looking up finally, her eyes moist with emotion, "are so misunderstood! People revile them without reason, even while they make use of their services, enjoy their music, and covet their women. It is shameful the way they are abused for nothing more than their heritage!"

"I feel the same," Charlotte said, eagerly. "No one should be disparaged for the simple accident of where or how they were born. In London, at that dreadful ball, the English girls were so spiteful and horrible, and all because I was German!" She had already spoken of how she had met Mr. Randell at the ball at Lady Harroway's, and his kindness to her.

Christoph sent her a warning look, perhaps because she was being too open, but she didn't care. She was determined to like Eleanor Dancey, despite something odd in the woman's manner. She couldn't put her finger on what it was about Fanny's mother that struck her as peculiar, but thought it was something about her eyes; there appeared to be more beneath their placid surface than she was revealing. But who could fault her for putting on something of a show and for being reticent with her real history? She didn't know them at all, and was feeling the strain of meeting her long-lost daughter for the first time. It was awkward, more so for her, who had so much to regret in her past. Nonetheless, Eleanor Dancey had been kind and welcoming to them, and that was more than Charlotte had felt from anyone in London.

Silence had fallen as everyone ate, so Charlotte continued. "I had never thought of it before, but just so cruelly as we were greeted in London, with sneers and spiteful words, that is how the gypsies must be treated everywhere they go. Reviled for their heritage."

"It is hardly fair to condemn all English girls," Fanny

demurred, "because of the behavior of a couple of representatives."

Eleanor rose and hastily sprinkled some herbs on Christoph's fish. "Please, Count, you do me honor; try this fennel as an enhancer of the mild taste of the fish. I very much fear you will find it bland after such excellent cooking as you must experience in your home."

Charlotte watched in amusement, and noted that Eleanor's concern over the taste of the food only seemed to extend to her brother. He, being a man, likely made her more nervous and she clearly felt the need for his approval. "How do you happen to know Mr. Randell?" she asked of the woman.

"I don't, exactly," Eleanor said, taking her seat again. "My plight was described to him by an acquaintance, and he, always vigilant to do a good deed from what I understand, gave me this cottage very reasonably for however long I needed it, while I decided my destination."

"Are you still determined to leave the country?" Fanny asked, fork poised in midair, a piece of fish on it.

Eleanor reached out and put one hand on Fanny's shoulder. "Your arrival has changed many things, you must know that. For the moment, consider me settled here, in Cornwall."

"And what was your plight? You have never exactly said," Christoph said, taking a bite of the fish and nodding at its improved flavor.

"Christoph!" Charlotte reprimanded. "You must not question our hostess after her kindness to us," she said, giving him a look. Now who was being forward? "It is not our concern."

"No, Countess, please," Eleanor said, color staining her cheeks as she looked down at her hands. She nervously worried the edge of the tablecloth, rubbing it between her fingers. "The count is only worried about my fitness to be a companion to my daughter, and I honor his protectiveness. It is just what I would have wanted for her in a brother." She picked up her knife and fork and continued cutting her food, though she had eaten very little.

Charlotte stared at her, thinking how beautiful she was, and how young she appeared for someone so close to forty. Her skin was smooth and unlined, her figure lithe and youth-



ful, her dark hair glossy. How had a life of care and worry, as she was supposed to have lived, left her so young-looking?

After a pause, the woman laid her fork down beside her plate and said, "The truth is, I made an enemy in a very powerful family."

"How?" Charlotte cried, concerned at the trembling she witnessed in the woman's hands.

"I dared cross a man with great power and many connections," she whispered, fiddling with the tablecloth again, a plain white one with a small embroidered design of green leaves around the edge. "I will not say more. In fact, I cannot say more. I am sworn to silence on another's behalf. It is enough to say that there was a girl," she said, looking up, moisture welling in her eyes. "Perhaps I fancied I saw in her a little of the daughter I had given birth to and had been forced to give up. When she was in trouble, when a man of great power was harassing her, I stepped between them. I gave her sanctuary when she ran away.

"Now I stand accused of aiding this girl—she was the man's ward—to escape his tyranny. It is an offense under law, though I was not aware of that. No matter; it wouldn't have changed what I did. She is back in his care and I can do nothing, but at least I know she is now in London and safe, under the guidance and protection of a woman of excellent reputation and well-known kindness. I feel sure that is my doing, and I can rest satisfied, even though the cost to myself was great. If he knew I was here . . ." She trailed off and sighed.

"Who is the girl?" Fanny said, her blue eyes wide.

Eleanor shook her head. "I promised her never to say her name, and I will not break that promise. My safety rests in obscurity now."

"So that's why you considered emigrating!" Charlotte said. "To escape his influence." Eleanor did not answer.

The group gathered in the sitting room after dinner, but all were weary, for it had been a long day. Charlotte was grateful that night to have a bed, even though she had to share it with Fanny.

The next morning dawned misty again, but the mist burned off quickly, just as it had the day before, and Eleanor suggested they all go down to the gypsy camp for a walk. It was

agreed upon, and after a lazy morning spent separately, Christoph writing letters and Charlotte and Fanny walking in the overgrown garden, they had lunch and then set out.

"Did you sleep well, Count von Wolfram?" Eleanor asked, leaning on Christoph's arm as they climbed the hill above Moor Cottage.

"I suppose," he said. "It seems I was restless, for I awoke to find myself by the window."

"You've never sleepwalked before," Charlotte said, glancing over at him in surprise. His pale face did appear haggard, with circles under his eyes. She hoped he was not still suffering the dreams that had plagued him after their awful experience in the spring.

It was one of the reasons she had agreed to come to England, though she would never tell him that; she had hoped the change of locale would rouse him from his looming depression. He needed distance from the setting of so many painful scenes. But right now he looked worried.

"I was just a few feet from my bed. Siegfried came in and found me resting on the window seat."

"Perhaps it is fortunate you have a small room," Eleanor said, gently.

They spent some time with the gypsy children when they arrived at the camp. Eleanor disappeared for a while with a large paper package she carried, saying she always made a habit of visiting the old matriarch of the band out of respect. Mother Sarah was a venerable and wise woman, able to see the future and so protect her people from harm, Eleanor had told them on their way to the encampment. That accorded with what Charlotte had already learned from Tamara. Though Mother Sarah was proud and independent, vegetables and herbs from Moor Cottage garden and eggs from the hen-house were a welcome addition to the tiny tribe's meals; that was what the paper parcel contained. The gypsy men brought Eleanor game and fish to pay her back in some small way. Fanny and Charlotte played with the gypsy children, while Eleanor, having finished her visit with the old gypsy, strolled about with Christoph and showed him the men's handicrafts and the women's intricate and colorful sewing. She explained, too, their cunning travel kits; they were often on the move and

so were seasoned and experienced travelers, able to pack up and move in a single hour. Charlotte caught sight of Tamara once, but the young woman stayed in the shadows and did not approach, and then disappeared completely. Charlotte, torn about her role and what she should and shouldn't tell her brother and sister, was somewhat relieved when she saw no sign of Wesmorlyn, and so she did not need to decide if she was going to slip away to find him.

Finally, as the sun began to descend past its zenith, and the shadows of the grove of trees lengthened, they started back toward Moor Cottage. Charlotte had been watching Christoph all afternoon, and knew something was troubling him. It was as if a shadow hung over him, a dark cloud, and it cast her back to the awful old days that were really not so long ago, when he was suffering from the effects of herbal poisons that clouded his judgment, made him hallucinate, and caused him terrible grief.

She had thought it all waning, the awful effects of that time. She had hoped that new surroundings and a fresh start would help him forget. Perhaps it was not to be that simple.

The next day promised to be identical to the one before, and Charlotte was already growing bored and restless. So many things troubled her, and she had not slept well. Christoph was withdrawing again. Though she tried to talk about what was bothering him, he would not speak, merely shaking his head mutely. Eleanor continued to drop hints about the influential family she had offended, going so far as to say they were a Cornish family, very powerful, and holding the title of earl. When Charlotte blurted out the name Wesmorlyn, she had appeared frightened and did not deny it, but would not say anything more. It was irritating to hear only vague insinuations with no confirmation. Fanny, too, was behaving strangely, to Charlotte's mind. Although she professed contentment and gratitude that they had found her mother, she did not go out of her way to spend time with Eleanor, and in fact seemed just as happy to stay in her room and read or sew.

Incomprehensible! Didn't she want to get to know the woman? Why was she not spending every moment of the day with her, drawing her out, getting to know her, and planning for the future?

In a fit of pique, Charlotte donned her straw bonnet and set out after lunch; everyone else had decided to nap or read, but she chose to walk alone down to the gypsy camp, though she didn't tell anyone else that, not even Christoph. *Especially* not Christoph. He was becoming moody and solitary again, but with his protectiveness, he would insist on going with her. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts and free to wander if the occasion demanded it. The cottage, with its damp, dank atmosphere and oppressive darkness, was adding to her fretfulness. Perhaps she could pin Tamara down and find out why she had avoided them the day before.

The walk lifted her spirits and the gypsy camp was picturesque in the midday sunshine. Two women chatted in their incomprehensible language while they washed clothes in a half barrel, their sleeves rolled up past their elbows, and another tended to the fire, stirring a large pot hanging over it. A thin thread of smoke rose from beneath the pot and a tiny child clung to her indigo-dyed skirts. When the woman spotted her, she summoned another child, Tully, the intelligent girl Charlotte had made friends with. Tully listened to the woman, and then raced over to where Charlotte stood, observing the domestic scene.

"Hello, Tully," Charlotte said, feeling more of her edginess ease just from the welcoming smile of the child. "Do you have something to tell me?"

"Yes, miss," the girl said, taking her hand and leading her toward the camp. "Mother Sarah, she wishes to speak to you."

"Ah, I promised to cross her palm, and no doubt she wishes to make sure I follow through with my promise."

"I don't know miss, but we were told to watch for you and bring you to her."

The old woman sat by a small fire in the shadow of her caravan. Tully motioned for Charlotte to sit on an embroidered rug on the grass by her, and she did so.

"My people and yours do not have a happy history," the old woman began, examining Charlotte's face.

"True. But that is history. Between you and I," Charlotte said, steadily gazing into the her beady eyes, "there is no need for enmity."

The gypsy woman nodded. Her hair, still shot with black

among the gray, was confined in a brilliantly dyed scarf; her dark eyes never left their examination of Charlotte. "You are wise beyond your years, child."

Charlotte smiled. "Perhaps, though if my brother heard that he'd say you were being overly kind. Tell me, ma'am, where is Tamara today? I wish to speak with her."

"She has gone to town with Romolo and their father."

"Oh," Charlotte said, disappointed. She stirred restlessly, remembering something from the first night she had come to the camp. "Ma'am, Tamara told me when Fanny and I came that you had known we were coming and had sent her out to find us. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"And that first night you told me I had a quest to fulfill, but that I must not stay in England."

"Unless," she said, wagging her index finger, "you marry a dark man, remember, one with green eyes?"

"But I came to this country already engaged to a man, a man whose hair is not so dark, and whose eyes are brown."

"Ah, but there is another," the old woman said, leaning toward Charlotte. "Another who cares for you, whose lips you have touched, whose heart you have felt touching yours; is this not so?"

Charlotte's heart pounded, remembering the night of the ball and Lyulph Randell kissing her. Was that truly who the gypsy meant? It was just days before, but felt like years, for she couldn't even remember what possessed her to kiss a man she had just met, though in fairness, he had kissed her. She had not offered resistance, but neither had she cooperated with any enthusiasm.

"You do not answer, but it is true, I see it!" The woman closed her eyes and swayed. "I see a moonlit garden, and this handsome man, he kisses you because he feels so much for you, though he has only known you briefly."

"Then where is he? Why did he not follow as he said he would?" Charlotte cried, bewildered.

"He was . . ." The old woman paused, still swaying back and forth in a rhythmic, trancelike state. She hummed while she did so, atonally, but the sound came in waves. Then she stopped abruptly and her eyes flew open. "He was held back

from coming by something that happened, something he could not control. Someone is against you. Someone wishes to keep the two of you apart." Mother Sarah leaned toward Charlotte again, and with one long finger laid near her eye, she murmured, "I see someone else, someone who will fill your head with lies, and if you believe him, he will lead you astray. Heed my warning!"

Out of the corner of her eye Charlotte caught some movement from beyond the gypsy camp, just past the grove of trees. A man . . . it was Wesmorlyn! He caught her eye and beckoned to her. This was why she came down to the camp, after all, she thought, acknowledging her own desire to talk to him again, to figure out what it was between them, and if he was the villain she was beginning to fear he was.

"Thank you, Mother Sarah," Charlotte said, rising quickly and getting some silver out of the small coin purse that was tied in to the skirts of her dress.

"Heed me well, girl," the woman said, her tone ominous. She took the silver coins and rattled them together in her bony hand. "Someone wishes to destroy you and your family. Someone tells lies. Be very, very careful who you trust."

# Chapter 11

MOTHER SARAH'S words rang in her ears. Eleanor's fearful confidences whispered to her. *Wesmorlyn*. Was young and nervous Lady Hannah the girl that Eleanor had taken in? Was Wesmorlyn the man Eleanor had angered, so much so that she faced prosecution and had run away as a result? Was he the man Mother Sarah warned her against, the one who would tell her lies?

Looking both ways and confident that she was not observed, Charlotte slunk around the elderly gypsy's caravan and ran past the grove of trees to find the earl, who walked, his jacket slung over his shoulder in the midday heat, in the tall grass on the other side of the woods. She stopped and gazed at him.

"Charlotte!" he said, his face lighting up at the sight of her. "I was afraid I wouldn't find you. I came prepared with a note to take to Moor Cottage, to ask you to slip away and meet me."

She stared, silent. His brown hair glinted shiny and clean in the brilliant sunshine and his white shirt was open at the neck, exposing tanned, smooth skin. He must walk his own

acres in just that manner, open-shirted and relaxed, for the skin of his throat to be so tanned. And what a tiny, nonsensical observation that was for her to make, she thought. Instead of staring at him, admiring the set of his shoulders and wave of his hair, she should be questioning him. Was he to be trusted? She felt no menace from him, and yet were her own instincts reliable in every case?

"Why the secrecy, sir?" she said, hating how stiff her voice sounded but still disturbed by the gypsy's comments and Eleanor's fear. "It is unconscionable that you would think of meeting me in such a way."

"We're engaged, Charlotte," he said, watching her uncertainly, ducking a little to see her eyes beneath the brim of her bonnet. "It lessens the sin, surely?" And she didn't object to it two days before, his steady gaze seemed to say. "Walk with me?" he asked.

She hesitated, but then nodded; they may as well walk while they talked, and she had many questions for him. First, though, she told him, as they walked away from the gypsy camp, about Christoph's arrival, and his installation at the cottage. She fell silent, as that brought her mind back to Eleanor's dark hints, and her own conclusion that it might be the earl of whom she spoke. But surely, she thought, calming her own fears, he was exactly what he seemed to be, a very moral, upright, and faintly priggish peer of the realm.

He spoke again as he took her arm and left the shadowed protection of the trees to walk in the sunlight up a hill away from the gypsy camp. "I received a disturbing letter from Hannah, my sister, who remains in London."

"Oh?" His nearness was unsettling, she found, his tanned, gloveless hand curled around her arm as he supported her in their walk.

"Yes. She is staying at our cousin's right now, Lady Harroway, with her companion, but through some other girls she knows she has heard disturbing rumors, and they concern you, Charlotte."

"Me?" she said, gazing up at him in surprise.

"I dislike being the bearer of bad tidings, but it is being bandied about town that you ran away from London with a man."



"With a man?" she cried, stopping and staring up at him. "How could such a vicious rumor make its way about?"

The earl shrugged. "I don't know. It was whispered to her that you had eloped with some man, and that I, furious at your deception, had stormed off to find you. She did her best to deny it, but fears that may simply be taken by the ill-natured as confirmation."

"Who would say a thing like that?"

"Can you think of anyone you may have upset or injured in your short stay in London?"

"No. Heavens, I was only there for the one evening, and I certainly hadn't time to make friends or acquaintances. Or enemies." Confusion clouded her mind. How could anyone even know of her departure, much less conjecture she left with a man? What man? In the back of her mind hummed the refrain from the old gypsy woman . . . lies . . . someone would tell her lies and try to cloud her mind. But Wesmorlyn would have no incentive to tell her such a thing if it were untrue. And really, she didn't care about rumors in London. They couldn't hurt her because she had no intention of staying in England, and would never even see that awful city again.

She glanced up at the earl. He saw them as still engaged. She had never broken it off officially, though she had expected that running away from London would end the engagement. Wesmorlyn was not the kind of man to marry a girl who would do such a thing. It was too confusing, for if she was right about that, then he would certainly not be the kind of man to follow her all the way to Cornwall, would he?

For the moment she gave up thinking about it. It was beyond her control anyway. London was long ago and far away, she thought, lulled by the heat of the day and the pleasantness of the moor into a more relaxed state of mind, and no decision about her future had to be made that very second. They strolled together up a long rise punctuated by clusters of gray, mossy stone. She breathed in deeply and could smell the sunshine freshness of Wesmorlyn's shirt, the honest, musky male scent of him filling her nostrils. The muscles of his forearm flexed beneath her fingers where they rested lightly, and a fascination with minutiae filled her: the clear note of a lark that soared above and the grassy smell that rose from under their

feet where they trampled the grass as they wove around the rocky outcroppings that dotted the moor. They topped the rise and began down the sloping other side. The tender touch of the gentle wind lifted her curled locks under her bonnet and tickled her neck.

"I hesitate to ask this, Charlotte," he said, finally, as they began to descend the hill. Soon they would be completely concealed from view of the gypsy camp. "But I must. I can't stop thinking about it. Why did you kiss Lyulph Randell in the garden at the ball? I still don't understand."

There was something in his voice, some suffocated anger, still. It was disturbing to her enjoyment of the day. "I'd rather not speak of that," she said, sharply.

"Why not?" His hand gripped her arm. "Tell me honestly; did he force you?"

"No! I would have said so immediately if that was the case."

"But then why? Why did you kiss him? You had just met him, and were at the ball to become acquainted with me. What were you thinking?"

He was walking faster downhill, and she had to trot to keep up. "I don't know! The whole evening was confusing. I was tired, and you upset me. He was kind to me and then he kissed me. I didn't kiss him back, I just let it happen." Finally she pulled her arm away from his grasp, stopping. "I don't wish to walk anymore," she said, out of breath, bracing herself against the steep slope of the hillside. "You're walking too fast. Don't you ever just enjoy the day, instead of making it a footrace?"

He stared at her, the breeze ruffling the tumbled curls over his forehead. He swept back his hair, raking his fingers through it with an impatient gesture. "I'm just trying to understand."

"Don't. Don't try. Just let it be." She gazed at him, exasperated. Now that the peace of their stroll was destroyed, there were many things she wished to ask of him, but would it be betraying the confidence of Eleanor if she did? She had already told Wesmorlyn the woman's name and he had shown no sign of recognition, nor any hint that he was connected to or had any past dealings with her at all. What did that mean?

Should she just ask him? And how would she frame such a question . . . *Did your sister run away, and was she harbored by Eleanor Dancey, and did you threaten the woman with jail or worse?* She couldn't ask that, obviously. Instead, she said, "Your sister seemed so frightened and nervous at the ball. Is she always like that?"

He frowned at the change of subject, but answered, "No. The ball was a new experience for her, and she found it a little overwhelming. She has lived a sheltered life until recently. She didn't go away to school, but instead had a governess at the Abbey."

"Nor did I go away to school. I lived my whole life at Wolfram Castle until we left to come here."

"I didn't know that," he said, staring into her eyes, lost in the blue shadowed into azure flecked with cobalt by the deep brim of her bonnet. "You had never been away from home before. Then you traveled all that way, and only arrived the very day of the ball in London," he murmured. "Do you know, I have always thought myself a considerate fellow, but I had not even given that a moment's consideration until now. You arrived that very afternoon and moved into your new home, and then, out of good manners, you attended the ball, though you must have been bone weary." He shook his head. "I should have sent you a message. I should have told you that if you were exhausted, not to come. I didn't even think of it."

Her expression softened, one corner of her lovely mouth turning up with a trembling smile. "It would not have been so bad if on my way through the crowd I did not hear so many nasty things."

Her eyes clouded even as he looked into them. "Someone dared insult you?"

"I shouldn't be so sensitive!" she said, trying to keep the smile, her lips quivering. "I don't care what those girls think!"

Her valiant attempt to keep the tears at bay touched him, and yet deeply wounded feelings prompted them. "It's natural to feel hurt by an insult, especially," he said, "since you had a right to expect better. What was said to you?"

She pushed her hat off her head and let it drop by its ribbons to hang down her back. Sunlight sparkled on her coiled blond hair, and a few strands escaped her hairpins and danced

in wisps around her delicate features. "In the normal course of things I am of a stalwart nature," she said, sighing deeply. "I suppose, as you say, it was just that I was tired. But I was already nervous, and then some girls said spiteful things about my hair, my clothes, and . . ." She stopped and shook her head, looking off into the distance.

"And? And what else?"

"About poor Fanny." She met his eyes, and anger sparked deep in the blue of hers. "They said she looked like a maid. Until recently she was, poor girl." She explained, then, about how Fanny was kept in the dark, as were they all, about Johannes von Wolfram being her father. "Since her paternity was discovered I fear it has been a terrible journey for her to make from maidservant to daughter of a count. So when I heard that despicable *voice* saying she looked like a maid, I was overcome with fury on her behalf. I only hope she did not hear them or did not understand."

After that experience and his own haughty behavior, Wesmorlyn reflected, Lyulph Randell's kindness coupled with his natural charm must have seemed a pleasant change. *Then I refused to dance with her.* He glared off into the distance at a bank of clouds gathering on the horizon above the dark line of the tors. Looking back, his lack of sensitivity toward a woman he was supposed to take care of astounded him. He had only been thinking of himself that evening, clearly, worried about appearances, concerned about how things looked to others. "You must have thought me an utter boor, along with the rest of the English." He stepped toward her, and with the tip of one finger he touched her trail of tears. How far she had come, to England from her home, all she had ever known. She was not well-traveled, had never even stepped foot away from Wolfram Castle. If Hannah was sent as bride to some unknown man in a foreign country, how would he want her treated? Surely the very least she could expect would be kindness and understanding, with allowances made for differences in behavior and culture.

"Come," he said, gently, "walk with me, and this time I promise I won't make it a footrace."

They strolled for a time in silence along the slope of the hillside, but he glanced over at her occasionally. Charlotte was

not what he would have chosen as a wife; she was far too pretty and vivacious, dangerous qualities in a wife from his own observation of marriages among his circle of friends, for those very traits made her the prey of a certain kind of man who was only interested in young, pretty, bored wives. And yet her appeal lay not just in her loveliness, though that was impossible to ignore. Her heart was tender and open; she was guileless, courageous, energetic, and vivacious.

He stopped and turned toward her. "You know, if those girls at the ball were available in late summer, then it means they did not 'take' in the spring and did not, to be blunt, find a husband." He stared at her; she was watchful, her wide blue eyes alert, searching his, bow lips inviting. "Then you arrived," he whispered, "so lovely, glowing, a golden girl. The remarks you overheard were the screeching of jealous cats." Without thinking he leaned toward her, tipping her head back with his finger under her chin, and kissed her cheek, tasting the salt of her drying tears warm on his lips.

She closed her eyes and sighed; he dropped his jacket on the ground and took her in his arms, lost in a new sensation. Feeling the softness of her lips pouted against his mouth and urged on by his racing pulse, he kissed her chin, the tiny dimple in the center tempting him beyond endurance. She put her arms around his shoulders and kneaded his neck as she leaned into the kiss, and then her hands went down his back and he moved away, panting slightly from the unexpected and unwelcome throb of arousal that pulsed through him, a faint dizziness accompanying it and a pain like a lightning bolt through his backbone.

Her eyes fluttered open and she gazed at him steadily, the dampness of tear trails still evident on her cheeks, and her lips plump from his kissing. Her golden, silky hair was adrift around her face, and she was utterly, adorably unself-conscious. He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry, the taste of her skin still lingering like brandy on his lips.

"You know," he said, forcing his thoughts away from her lithe body and sweet lips. "I sent a note to my solicitor in London, and he says there are other Danceys . . . one or two even in London."

"I don't suppose it is an extremely unusual name," Charlotte said, watching him, puzzlement clouding her blue eyes.

"And there are some variations in spelling, too. Often it is spelled without the *e*."

"What exactly are you trying to say, my lord? We have already established that this woman is the real Eleanor Dancey. Why would anyone admit to an illegitimate child that was not theirs? What would be the motive for such a ruse?"

He took a deep breath. "I just find it hard to believe in such a coincidence as would bring you to the ball and have you mention the woman's name to Randell, who just happened to rent this same woman his cottage!"

"You begin to sound like Christoph," she said in an exasperated tone. With a swift, agitated movement she put her bonnet back on, her face shadowed by it, the sunlight slanting across and touching only her dimpled chin. She tied the ribbon. "What would be the motive for pretending to be Eleanor Dancey? How would she even know the name? Fanny has no money to tempt tricksters. By German law she has no title, nor is she recognized as a part of our family, the poor girl. My uncle has talked about settling a small competence upon her, but nothing has been finalized and nothing is certain; Miss Dancey is all she has in this world, beyond Christoph and I." Her blue eyes glinted like sapphires as she lifted her chin and the sunlight caught in their expressive depths. "I find it incredible that you spend your time trying to find a way to discredit the woman. What for, sir? What does it gain you?"

He didn't like the note of suspicion in her voice, nor the gleam of distrust in her eyes, and was distracted. "What are you asking?"

"Do you have a personal reason for not liking Eleanor Dancey?"

"What? Whatever do you mean?"

She was silent, simply staring at him.

"I don't know the woman, nor had I ever heard the name before you first said it." He was stunned by the suspicion in her eyes. "I will turn the question, Countess; what reason do you have for doubting me or asking such a question as that?" She was still silent. He examined her shadowed face, trying to read her expression but finding her closed to him. Never in his

whole life had his motives been questioned, and he found it unnerving in the extreme.

"I think we both know, my lord, that I am not in any sense what you thought you were affiancing when you agreed by mail to a marriage," she said.

The change of subject threw him off balance. "Don't go on in that thread, Countess, I beg of you." He could see in her eyes a determination to end their engagement, but as unsuitable as she was, as maddening, as independent and forward, and as inappropriately lovely, he was not willing to let her go just yet. The single moment touching her lips with his had left an odd rend in the fabric of his self-assurance. More time with her would either rip the fabric in twain, or mend the tear.

"I think it is simply right to say what must be on your mind," she said, with a haughty tone. "I am not suitable to be your countess. Admit it, at least, Lord Wesmorlyn."

Her manner was coldly formal, at odds with her wind-tossed and adorably sun-kissed appearance. He stood watching her, aware that his hands opened and closed into fists. Why was he so unsure of himself in her presence? He was a leader of men, an employer of hundreds, master of a grand estate, well-known even to the Prince of Wales and his parents, the King and Queen, who approved of him as a confidant, thinking him a steadying influence on their capricious and melodramatic eldest son. And yet this young lady had him unsure of every morally upright, proper, and decorous instinct he had ever had.

He felt as if she had judged him and found him wanting, inadequate to please a lively, intelligent, and vivacious young lady. He was stuffy, her critical gaze seemed to say: stuffy, old before his time, prim, proper, and more priggish than any Mayfair dowager. She could not be sensible and hold such a view—he was the most eligible man in England at that moment, and no one had ever been criticized for being too moral and too upright—and yet he found himself wooed and tempted by hints of her untamed nature to stop fighting the reckless attraction he felt toward her.

"Are you suitable to be my countess?" he asked, sighing and frowning down at his boots. "I just don't know. I begin to think there is much I don't know."

Her stern expression relaxed. "That is the first truly sensible thing I have heard you say, and the most honest."

Relief flooded him. "Then please," he pleaded, "don't break our engagement until you're sure, and I'm sure."

She hesitated, but then nodded. "All right."

He didn't want to say what he had to say next, but he was going to be honest and damn the consequences. "I am still suspicious of this Miss Eleanor Dancey," he said. "No, hear me out!" he swiftly added, seeing the impatient expression of vexation that crossed her pretty, sunlit face. "Hear me out, please, Charlotte. I have asked around, and the villagers of Bodmin say that there was a woman living at Moor Cottage last year, one whose description matches your description of Miss Dancey. But her name was Morwenna Maxwell, and no one was quite sure what relationship she was to Lyulph." He was pleased to see, finally, a look of doubt on her face.

"Is that true? Morwenna Maxwell," she repeated, frowning into the distance. "But a simple description could encompass many ladies."

"True. I'm looking into it. I still cannot imagine why Lyulph would send you down here, say he was going to follow, but then not."

"He may have been detained by circumstances beyond his control."

Wesmorlyn nodded. "True again. I will hope for the best. Lyulph is not a bad sort, though I cannot forgive him for kissing you." He smiled at her. "Though I understand his motivation in doing so; how could he resist?"

She blushed and turned away. "I must get back to the cottage. I've been gone far too long, and I didn't tell anyone where I was going."

He yearned for one kind word, one gentle brush of her lips, but it was unconscionable to think so, nor could he frame such a request in any honorable way. He had already taken advantage of her enough for one afternoon. "Meet me again? Perhaps tomorrow?"

"Maybe," she said. "I'll think about it." And she ran off, looking back just once before disappearing over the hill.

Wesmorlyn watched her, then glumly turned and headed on, away from the gypsy camp. Still too close, he walked on



until a couple more hills and valleys were between him and prying eyes. Then he strode out to a big open space where the wind blew briskly, and gazed up at the sun; it was already descending, so it hung about a third of the way down in the western sky toward the horizon. He took off his coat and shirt, rolling them into a bundle that made it easier to carry. It was time to go back to Wesmorlyn Abbey.

He shrugged, and the bony, flexible bundles that nestled between his scapula extended and arched, moving away from his body in a smooth, practiced motion, as the thin gauzy membrane that stretched between the jointed cartilage became taut, as tensely drawn as a drum skin. He folded his bare arms over his broad chest, holding his bundled clothes closely; taking two running steps on tiptoe he soared, magnificent wings beating and thrusting through the air providing unfathomable lift, enough to raise him straight into the heavens.

This was the moment, the infinitesimal instant in time when he understood the thrill of living. Family lore told him that only when they fell to earth did his ancestors understand the euphoria of flight, and the exceptional privilege they had been afforded but come perilously close to surrendering for eternity. Only through a degrading plea for mercy had they won the right to struggle to ascend back into the good graces of the maker. Wesmorlyn was ever watchful and ever vigilant of any taint that would destroy his descendants' chance at redemption.

But in that moment the thrill of flight superseded every other thought and he ascended to the clouds, dipping and swirling, heart pounding. The air was thinner with every furlong he rose, and a familiar, hazy bliss invaded his mind. Finally, though, he arrived at his destination; he approached the bottom of the hill that led up to the Abbey and began his cautious descent, unwitnessed by aught but the beasts in the field. An unwelcome thought occurred to him as his toes touched the earth. Was that heart-pounding euphoria he experienced while flying the same as the bliss that Lyulph and his ancestors felt every time they transformed into wolves and raced through the forests of Cornwall? And if they were akin to each other, how far was he really removed from the bestial Randedells?

## Chapter 12

SWEET, WARM blood dripped down from his teeth as they tore into flesh, and he savored the rich essence. His fur was bloody and gory, but a good roll in the grass and a long drink from the brook that sparkled in the moonlight nearby would take care of that. Then he would be fit to go home. Home. Where was home? How could he get there? Doubt clouded his mind as he looked down at the creature beneath him, his feast in the moonlight; the skin pale, naked, and furless, gleaming in the silvery light along the ragged edge torn by his teeth.

“Christoph! Christoph!”

Pain hit him in the gut suddenly, and he collapsed and howled, writhing in the agony of involuntary transformation brought about by the repetition of his human name. It shot through his body like a jolt of lightning.

“Christoph!”

Hands on him, shaking him, pulling at his fur; he fought, his paws becoming fists.

“Christoph! It’s me, Charlotte; stop hitting out! You’re having a nightmare!”

Christoph, panting with fear, awoke to find Charlotte, bonneted and smelling of open fields, staring down at him. The bedclothes were coiled around his limbs and daylight streamed through the window of his tiny bedchamber as a warm breeze fluttered the curtains.

"Christoph, are you all right? I suppose you were just napping and you must have been having a nightmare. Where is Siegfried? I can't believe he didn't hear you." Charlotte looked toward the door in concern as she sat down on the edge of his bed. "Christoph," she repeated urgently, her steady gaze settling back on him, "you were making such a noise! Growling and grunting at first, and then howling."

He rolled up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed next to her and scrubbed his eyes with his fingers, then covered his face. The lurid nightmare lingered as he realized the flesh he had been consuming in his dream was human. He retched and doubled over.

"Tell me what's wrong, Christoph!" Charlotte said, rubbing his back and staring at him as she wrenched her bonnet off with her free hand, letting it trail down her back by its ribbons. "*Tell me.*"

He shook off her hand. "It's all right. *I'm* all right. Forget it." He took a deep breath, stood, and walked to the window, gazing down at the sunny back enclosure, circled completely by a stone wall. Eleanor Dancey was out in her garden picking herbs; it was a tranquil domestic scene. Fanny sat on the stone wall staring off into the distance, swinging her feet. As he watched, Eleanor stopped, turned, and looked up directly into his eyes, as if she was aware that he was watching. Hellebore, her cat, stopped too, sat down on its haunches, and stared up at him. It was unsettling, the intensity of the human and feline stares, so similar. He stepped back from the window into the dimness and scrubbed his eyes with his fingers, feeling the grittiness of sleep still in them. "Siegfried went in to Bodmin to purchase some new neckcloths for me. He is concerned that I am becoming less than perfectly attired, for we left London with a minimal wardrobe."

"Christoph—"

"No, Charlotte, please don't fret about me," he said, gazing over at his sister. Her lovely eyes were clouded with

worry. "I'll be all right. Where have you been?" He gazed at her windblown hair and sun-brightened cheeks. "Fanny was asking awhile ago, but I had nothing to tell her."

She blushed and shook her head. "I walked down to the gypsy encampment."

"Alone? Charlotte!" He shook his head and sighed, strolling over to her and taking her hands in his. He squeezed them and released. "Promise me this instant that you will never do that again. It could be dangerous."

She stood and walked toward the door. "I'm not a little doll to be kept on a shelf out of harm's way. Once you shared at least *some* of your worries with me, but you haven't in quite a while. Perhaps it has not yet come to your attention, but I'm a grown woman now, and can take care of myself quite adequately. When you feel like confiding in me once again, I may see fit to share with you, but until then, I will do what I wish." She stalked out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

Confide in her? How could he tell her that he feared very much the encroachment of the dark temptation into his mind and heart? Hunger pulled at him, swayed him, and now entered his dreams. How could he confide how much he dreaded becoming everything that legend said was darkest and most appalling about his kind, about werewolves?

A shivering weakness entered his limbs; he collapsed on his bed and buried his face in his hands. He couldn't even face himself in the mirror anymore without seeing the sharp-fanged monster that was eating his soul alive.

CHARLOTTE stalked away from her brother's room to the bedchamber she shared with Fanny, tossing her bonnet aside on the bed and pacing the small rug in front of the hearth. She had gone to Christoph to tell him about Wesmorlyn's presence in Cornwall, feeling guilty about keeping things from her brother, but he was clearly suffering again, and yet was not willing to talk to her. Couldn't he see that the way to defeat his anxiety was to share it with a sympathetic person, and who was more sympathetic than she? She was not going to add to his burden, as angry as she was that moment, and so she would handle her problems herself.

At dinner she tried to wheedle information out of Eleanor Dancey about her life up until Lyulph Randell had offered her the house to rent, but the woman was reticent, and Charlotte was hampered by her own proper upbringing. One did not force another person to confide their life story; it was rude to push too hard. She did confirm that Eleanor Dancey had never stayed at Moor Cottage before, so that much she could report to Wesmorlyn when she next saw him.

Fanny, too, was frustrating Charlotte; she seemed singularly incurious as to her mother's history and why she did not share her life story with her only child! The questions Charlotte tried to ask would be so much more natural coming from Fanny, but the girl would not cooperate with any normal curiosity.

The evening passed in dull hours of desultory chat, and then an early bed.

Dawn was just graying the eastern horizon when frantic pounding on the front door of the cottage and a high-pitched voice calling out for help roused them. Charlotte, awoken from a restless sleep, was the first downstairs, doing up her robe with one hand as she flew to the door and flung it open.

Tully, the young gypsy girl, was standing on the step, tears streaming down her face and blood on her knuckles from how hard she had pounded on the door.

"Tully! Tully, what is it?" Charlotte said, pulling the girl in from the misty morning air.

Fanny had followed Charlotte down and crouched by the girl, pushing her tousled hair back from her face and trying to soothe her. Anne, the maid, had come from the kitchen where her pallet was; she stared at the scene, wringing her hands together and babbling incoherent questions.

"Go put on the kettle for tea," Charlotte said to the maid to get rid of her. "Now, Tully, what is it?" she asked, turning back to the child. "Calm yourself. Is someone in trouble? Hurt?"

The girl nodded.

"Who?"

"Tamara," she said, her voice reedy with fear. "She's hurt badly, miss, and the men didn't know what to do, so Mother Sarah said to bring her up here, but Tamara refused; she didn't

want to be a bother, miss, but finally Mother Sarah got her way, and—”

“What is going on?” Christoph said, bounding down the stairs into the front hall and belting his robe.

Beyond the front door a clattering noise became louder. Charlotte rose and again flung open the door. Romolo, his face red with strain and sweat pouring off his forehead, dark curls clinging damply to his neck, emerged from the mist hauling a handcart down the path toward the cottage door. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and his white shirt was stained with dark streaks. In that handcart was a bundle of clothes or . . . no; Charlotte realized from the whimpering moans that there was a person in the handcart.

“Tamara!” Charlotte cried and raced out the door.

“Her papa collapsed at the camp, miss, and couldn’t come,” Tully called after her. “He was clutching his chest.”

Charlotte barely heard as she reached the side of the cart and looked down at Tamara, who was curled on her side, a blanket around her. She *looked* perfectly fine, though her cheek was paler than usual, and the mist had bedewed it, clinging to the fine downy hairs along her jaw line. “What’s wrong?” Charlotte asked, her voice unnaturally loud in the foggy morning quietude. She slipped her arm under Tamara to help the sobbing girl sit up while Romolo, lapsing back into Romani in his agitation, tried to explain with an incomprehensible string of words.

Something warm and sticky coated Charlotte’s arm as she helped Tamara sit up, and she examined the other side of the girl’s face and neck. Even in the dull light of predawn she could see open wounds, raw flesh and blood that clotted in dark coagulated patches.

“Christoph,” Charlotte cried, seeing the blood and feeling it on her arm. “Help me! Carry Tamara into the cottage!” When she got no answer, she looked back. Christoph was standing near the open door, frozen, staring at Tamara with terror on his pale face. He was shaking all over and making unintelligible noises. “Christoph, help me!”

Romolo, finally calming himself, came to her aid and lifted his injured sister, carrying her over the threshold of the cottage just as Eleanor came down the stairs. Charlotte guided

him into the parlor and took off her own robe to lay under Tamara on the settee by the hearth.

"What's going on?" Eleanor asked.

"I don't know," Charlotte said. "All I know is Tamara has been hurt."

"Good heavens! Let me look." Eleanor knelt by Tamara and examined the wound, calling out orders; when Anne came back in the room she was told to get clean cloths with warm water and some strips of fabric.

Tamara was being looked after by the surprisingly competent Eleanor, with an anxious Romolo standing over her, so Charlotte pulled Tully aside. "How did this happen?"

"I don't know, miss. It was a while before dawn, and I still slept. All I know is there was some screaming, and then Romolo went out of the camp and found Tamara. She was hurt by someone or something. Perhaps an animal in the woods."

"*Away* from the camp? Why would she be away from the camp at that time in the morning, before dawn? Had she been gone long? Did he find her soon after the accident, or had she been lying out there alone for a while?"

Tully shrugged. "I don't know, miss."

Charlotte watched the scene for a moment. Where was Christoph? She glanced around and saw him by the door to the parlor, watching the scene, a look of horror on his sensitive face. She stood and put one reassuring hand on the child's shoulder. "Tamara is in good hands; you can see that," she said to the child. "Run back to the encampment like a good girl and tell them—especially her father—that she will be staying here at least today, and that she is being well cared for." Charlotte glanced back to the settee. Eleanor had the wounds cleaned, and it appeared that they were not as terrible as they had at first appeared with the blood smeared all around.

"All right, miss."

"Get a cup of tea and something to eat, first, though. You're shivering!" Charlotte pushed Tully toward Fanny, who was already guiding Romolo, in her kindly little housewife manner, to the kitchen. Tamara's brother still had tears running down his olive-complected cheek, but Fanny would no doubt make sure he was fed and had something hot to drink to calm him

and steady his nerves. He was certainly doing no good hanging over Eleanor and Tamara. They walked past Christoph, who still lingered in the doorway.

Taking in a deep breath, Charlotte approached her brother. "Christoph, what's wrong?" she said, her voice trembling. "You look awful."

He shook his head and turned away, heading back to the stairs in the hallway and bounding up them two at a time.

"Christoph!"

He didn't respond, nor did he pause.

Charlotte turned back to the parlor and knelt by the settee. "How is she?" she asked of Eleanor.

"She'll be all right, I think," the woman said with a worried frown.

"You *think*?" Charlotte gazed down at Tamara's pale face; the white cloth binding her neck wound contrasted only faintly with her normally olive complexion, paler from shock and loss of blood. "Tamara," she murmured, "Tamara, can you tell us what happened?"

"Mmm," she moaned. "Someone called my name."

"Yes, Tamara, it is me, Charlotte."

"No, someone from the woods called my name. I crept from my bed to see who it was."

"I think she means that is why she was in the woods, where they found her," Eleanor whispered, glancing at Charlotte, and then putting her hand to the gypsy girl's forehead. "She is cool, which is good. No fever has yet resulted."

"Tamara, what happened when you went to the woods?"

"Ahh! No, someone . . . something . . . and I cried out . . . hurt . . . I ran, but it caught me and . . ."

She began to thrash around, and Eleanor said, "No more questions now! She needs rest."

Romolo came in, bowed and said, "Miss, is my sister going to be all right?"

Eleanor looked up at him and said, "Yes, she will recover, but I fear she must stay here, quiet."

"We do not want to bother you, please, lady," he said, wringing his hands.

"Do you know what happened, Romolo?" Charlotte asked.

He crossed the shadowy room and gazed down at his sis-



ter, but shook his head. "I do not know. It was dark, still night. I heard screaming and got up from where I lay by the fire. The others awoke, too, and we wondered what to do—we did not know then that it was Tamara, you see—but Mother Sarah said we must go and search, so I did. It was dark, and I found nothing for a while, but then someone brought a torch and we found her. I carried her back to the camp, and we did not know what to do, so Mother Sarah said her wounds needed better care than she could give, and said to bring her here." Tears rolled down his face.

"You did the right thing, young man," Eleanor said.

Fanny entered and crossed the room, putting her slim arm over his shoulders. "Tell them what you told me, Romolo," she said, her voice trembling.

He shrugged. "It is nothing."

"No, it's important. Tell them."

"What is it, Romolo?" Charlotte asked.

When he didn't speak, Fanny gazed down at Charlotte and said, "It was an animal, something big. It ran past him in the woods snapping and snarling, but he could not catch it, nor could the other men. He said"—she stopped, took in a deep breath, and then continued—"he says it looked like a wolf."

## Chapter 13

“THERE ARE no wolves in England,” Eleanor said, gently. “There have not been for centuries. And Tamara just said that she heard her name being called from the woods. It must have been a man.”

Charlotte stayed silent, and would not meet Fanny’s steady gaze. She got up and bolted upstairs, going to Christoph’s room. If he had not acted so oddly about Tamara . . . she hated herself for doubting him in any way, but she had to know. She pounded on the door. “Christoph!”

“Go away.”

Siegfried came to the door and opened it, staring at Charlotte with worry in his blue eyes. In German he said, “The count says he does not wish to see anyone, Countess, not even you. Especially not you.”

She pushed past him and stormed over to Christoph, who was sitting in a shabby upholstered chair staring at the empty hearth of the tiny fireplace in his room. “What’s going on, Christoph? Why haven’t you come down to check on Tamara? Why didn’t you stay?”

Siegfried had melted away to the tiny dressing room off

the bedchamber. Christoph didn't answer for a long minute, but then he looked up at Charlotte and held up a scrap of cloth.

Charlotte snatched it out of his hand and looked at it. It was a bloody torn scrap of fabric. She had recently seen a pattern exactly like it, but the brilliant blue and green of it was tainted by dirt and a dark, sticky substance. She held it up to her nose and inhaled, the sharp metallic tang familiar and yet repulsive. Blood, fairly fresh and still damp. "Where have I seen this before?"

He hung his head, silent.

And then Charlotte remembered. She had last seen the pattern on the scarf that held back Tamara's dark hair. "Where did this come from?" she said, dreading the answer.

This time when he looked up at her, there was tragic fear in Christoph's brilliant blue eyes. His voice low and trembling with emotion, he said, "When I awoke to the noise, I was disoriented. I threw on my robe and came downstairs. That was when I realized that the bottom of my robe was damp, as if I had been outside in the dewy grass."

"That doesn't mean anything," Charlotte said, terribly afraid it did, in light of Romolo and Fanny's revelation.

"Yes it does, don't you see?" he said, bolting from his chair and grabbing back the hank of fabric. "This is from Tamara's kerchief," he said, shaking it in her face. "It was in the pocket of my robe. My robe is wet. I fear if you look out of my window, you'll see them, the footprints." He stared down at the floor. "God help me, there are footprints in the dirt beneath my window at the foot of a trellis. When I awoke, the window was open, but it wasn't when I went to sleep last night."

"That doesn't mean anything," she repeated.

"Yes, it does. Or it might." He passed one hand over his eyes. "I've been having bad dreams, nightmares, and a couple of times when I have awoken, I've been out of my bed near the window. I don't know why." When he met her steady gaze again it was with decision. "Charlotte," he said, reaching out for her hand. "You are the only soul in this world I trust completely. I need you to keep something for me."

"Keep something?"

He strode across the room to his bed and reached under the feather mattress, pulling out a cloth bundle. He unwrapped it and held out to her the contents, a scrap of fur. "Do you know what this is?"

"No."

"It is the wolfskin kirtle of our ancestors. Uncle said eventually I will not need it, but, as far as I know, I still need it to make the transformation from man to beast. If you wish to help me, you will hide it from me and never, *ever* let me have it again."

"You mean until this is over."

"No. *Never!* Please, I cannot bear myself right now."

"Oh, Christoph," Charlotte said, a sob rising within her. "No. I won't believe it, and you mustn't either. You can't truly think that you—"

"No!" he said, putting one finger over her mouth. "Don't say it. I'm afraid for it to be said aloud. I cannot believe I have done anything so heinous as what we fear, but Charlotte, I have had such dreams of late. What if I . . ." He looked around and leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Uta warned me that I would need to beware of the dark pull of evil. But what if it's bewitching me when I don't even know? Help me, I beg of you."

"Of course," she said, taking the scrap of fur. "Did you have this with you in the night?"

"I don't know. It wasn't in my robe, or on my person, but perhaps I hid it in my sleeping state, perhaps . . ." He trailed off on a sob, but regained control of himself. "I just don't know!" he said, grasping his hair and clenching his fists. "If the evil is taking me over, perhaps I'm unaware of what I do. I just don't *know!*"

"On my *life* I will guard this." She scrubbed it between her fingers and a few dark hairs fell loose. Curiosity overwhelmed the horror. "How does it work?"

He took a deep shuddering breath, helped by her calmness, perhaps, to regain his wits. "I don't exactly know. It is a connection to the ancients, to the first von Wolfram who transformed. Aunt Uta told me before she died that the first to use it killed the wolf whose fur it was, and the spirit of the wolf inhabited him."

"No, I mean, how does it work for *you*? What do you do?"

He shook his head and went back to the chair, slumping wearily and kicking at the rag rug by the hearth. "I don't know how to explain it. I hold it and I run. I feel the wildness well up in me, the pain hits, and I collapse, and then become the beast. Now I don't feel the pain so much as I did at first. The transformation is smooth while I run." He put his head in his hands. "And glorious!" he said, choked by a sob. "The wolf in me must be taking over. Listen; take it away, Charlotte, take the kirtle away and destroy it! It is a curse on us all."

She crossed to him and knelt by his side, pulling his hand away from his face and cradling his cheek in her free hand. "No, you listen to *me*, Christoph; you are a good man. I will not believe that what you fear is true. You are a good, kind man, and there is some other explanation for this tragedy. It's something else, I promise you." She stood, not telling him all that she had heard from Fanny and Romolo, for to do so would only make matters worse. She would discover herself what was behind this attack. For too long she had allowed the others in her family to rescue her, but now she was a grown woman and would take care of her brother.

She put one hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you lie down and try to sleep?"

"I'm afraid to sleep!"

"But I have the wolfskin kirtle now, and you can do nothing without it, you said so yourself. I'll tell Siegfried to bring you something to drink, and to stay with you, as you're not feeling well."

He nodded, still staring at the empty hearth.

She did what she said, and saw that Christoph's faithful servant was ensconced in a chair by the empty hearth, then went to her room and changed into a dress. She fastened the hank of wolfskin to her chemise, not feeling comfortable with hiding it in her belongings where it could easily be discovered. Then she descended, to find that with Romolo's help, Tamara had been moved to the tiny room off the parlor that Eleanor used as an office for doing her accounts and writing letters, and laid upon a chaise. She appeared to be sleeping in comfort.

When Charlotte returned to the hallway, Romolo was

preparing to leave, though he was lingering at the door with Fanny. Tumultuous thoughts tumbled through her mind. What was the animal Romolo had seen? What attacked Tamara? Nagging worry pulled at her, but she steadfastly refused to believe that Christoph could ever harm a woman. She had seen him in his wolf form kill another werewolf, but an awesome and dangerous one that had become so by a dark and terrible spell. That attack was to protect the woman he loved and other women for whom he felt responsible, herself among them. How could he even doubt himself?

"Romolo," she said, suddenly, "I'll return with you to the encampment. Fanny, will you go with me?"

She pulled her robe tightly about her. "I'm not properly dressed, Charlotte! And I would rather stay here," Fanny said. She gazed at Charlotte with concern. "But do you think it wise to go? Perhaps I *should* go with you. If you would but give me a few minutes to change."

"No," Charlotte said, making a sudden decision. "I will be perfectly safe; you don't need to go. And perhaps you can help better here with your mother. There's nothing to worry about. I wish to see the scene where this awful attack occurred, but it's daylight now, and everything will be fine."

PACING brought no relief and sleep wouldn't come, so Christoph sent Siegfried away. The fellow's sad expression was too much to bear. Even with the wolfskin out of his possession, Christoph was afraid of sleep now, afraid that the dreams were true and expressed his deepest desires. Was darkness taking him over him? He had thought from Uta's description, that evil was in the choices he would be forced to make, and that it would take him over in small increments if it was to happen. But to transform from someone—and something—who was the defender of his family into an attacker of innocent women, and all within a few days . . . how could that happen?

He threw on some clothes and descended, telling Siegfried he was merely going to walk in the garden, though he didn't really know his destination. But in the downstairs hall he paused, caught by a whiff of some sweetness in the air, an in-

tangible and yet alluring scent that drifted to him, pulling him, tangling him in magical relief.

He followed, through the parlor, to a door, and then through the door to a dim, tiny chamber and a dark corner. *Tamara!* He stopped and stared, caught by a desire so swift and intense his knees buckled, and his limbs trembled. Woodenly, he approached the sofa where she lay and sank to his knees beside her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry." He took her small hand in his and caressed the palm, watching her eyes, the lashes fluttering and the orbs under the lids moving. She was dreaming, her lips pursed and relaxed, and she shifted, her lush figure under the light cover unbearably alluring.

She looked fragile and tiny on the sofa, the paleness of the bandages on her slender throat shining white in the dim light from the door into the parlor. Dusky curls, unrestrained by her missing kerchief, spilled in riotous abandon over the pillow. Her fingers flexed and curled around his hand, and tendrils of protectiveness wound through him as he gazed at her. It was a relief to feel that warm connection, and he sat down on the floor by the chaise, a great weariness overtaking him. Resting his head on the edge of the sofa, his eyes became heavy and the dark, blissfully sweet forgetfulness of sleep overtook him.

THE dawn air was thick with foggy dampness, the sun just beginning to rise and burn off the haze. Progress was slow because Romolo was pulling the handcart, but finally they came to the rise overlooking the gypsy encampment. Charlotte gazed down at it, colorful caravans barely visible in the swirling haze that moved like probing fingers through the encampment. She watched for a long minute; figures moved about, but as the mist slowly shifted she could make out the women, going about their chores accompanied by their children, and puffs of smoke from the fire over which a pot hung, stirred by one of the older women. Charlotte looked beyond the camp, to the nearby grove of trees.

"You heard screaming, you say, those of you in the camp?" she asked Romolo, as they descended and approached the fire.

"Yes. Very loud, terrible. My poor sister!"

"Tamara said that she heard her name being called and went to investigate, and then was attacked. It's odd. Almost like it was set up."

Tully ran over to them and grabbed Charlotte's hand. "Will Tamara come back to us?" Some of the other gypsy women clung together and hung back, their dark eyes distrustful, but Romolo and Tamara's father approached, his cap in his hand, his dark eyes filled with worry and his moustache drooping.

"Tamara is in good hands," Charlotte said, loudly, so the words would carry. "She is sleeping peacefully at Moor Cottage. You all know Eleanor Dancey. She is a good woman who knows medicine, and she's taking care of Tamara."

Romolo's father looked doubtful and shook his head. "There is some magic here," he said to Charlotte. "Some *evil* magic. The devils caught my daughter. They lured her into the woods and attacked. Why, I ask? They never did so until you came to us."

Charlotte swallowed hard. "There is no evil and no magic. She was attacked by a wild animal, or perhaps a dog." She turned to Romolo. "Take me into the woods to where you found her."

The happy, sunny atmosphere of the camp had changed. The gypsies watched her with suspicion now, but Romolo guided her past the caravans and tents to a pathway through the grove of trees. "We come this way to gather wood for the fires."

Charlotte pulled her skirts close to her legs and followed him. The sun had not pierced the depths of the woods yet, and fog lingered along the path, clinging to the underbrush. The rustling sound of their progress was the only noise she could hear. No birdsong, no noise of small animals, not even the sound of a leaf turning broke the deadly silence when she paused and listened; no breeze stirred the thick vegetation. It was arduous clambering through the brush and soon Charlotte's heart was pounding and her breath was coming quickly. The woods smelled of damp and rotting vegetation, and a log disintegrated into damp hunks of spongy wood when she put down one hand to climb over it. She dusted her hands together, trying to get rid of the soggy debris, and followed Romolo. Finally he stopped.



"Here," he said in a whisper. "This is the spot where I found my sister."

The brush was flattened, and Charlotte crouched by the spot, tamping down a rush of nausea at the dark blotchy staining that showed where Tamara's blood had flowed freely. "She came all this way because she heard someone call her name? That makes no sense."

Romolo shrugged, his smooth young face twisted in grief. "I don't understand, either."

Charlotte examined the ground around the attack. There had been a struggle; branches were broken and leaves trampled. As the mist began to seep away and the sun to send fingers of light into the gloomy depths, her flawless sight caught dark blotches even on the trunk of nearby trees. How savage had the fight been for that to happen? And what attacked her, man or beast?

Caught on a tangle of underbrush was the scrap of kerchief Tamara had been wearing. Charlotte picked it up and examined it, noting the tear. But if Tamara was awoken from sleep, why was she wearing the kerchief? From Charlotte's experience the night she and Fanny spent in the gypsy camp, she knew that Tamara took it off and braided her hair before sleep. Where the piece was missing, the tear was almost square and looked deliberate. It didn't make sense. She folded the kerchief carefully and thrust it into her tucker.

"Romolo," she said, as she continued to scan the ground. "Have you ever seen dogs roaming near here?" Still crouching, she twisted and gazed up at him. "Dogs from farms, maybe, or from the village or beyond?"

"No, lady. This land belongs to Mr. Randell."

"But that doesn't mean dogs might not get loose and wander. Mr. Randell's game master has hounds, I've been told."

"Yes, miss, but they are kept tied up, and what I saw was larger, much larger than a hunting hound." He shuddered.

"What *did* you see?" she asked, gazing up at him over her shoulder.

He shook his head, his dark eyes wide. "It was still dark, so it was just something large and black; whatever it was, it was big."

"Miss Dancey said there are no wolves in England. Is that true?"

The young man shrugged. "I suppose."

Charlotte's sharp eye caught sight of something snagged by a thorny twig under where Tamara had apparently fallen. She reached out and from the shadowy leaf-strewn forest floor caught between her index finger and thumb a hank of fur. She lifted it to a finger of sunlight; it was dark, almost black, with only some brown near the base of each strand. If this was fur from the creature that attacked Tamara, then it could not be Christoph, for he was silvery when transformed, with darkness only on the outer tips of some of his fur. Who or what, then, did it belong to?

FROM above, the landscape looked serene, dotted with farms and groves of trees, rolling and undulating, green and verdant. No other had ever seen this particular view, Wesmorlyn reflected, and unless he had children, none ever would. There were many others in the world like him, with an ancestry as peculiar and tragic, dating from the fall from grace that had doomed his own family to their odd existence, but they were scattered far and wide over the earth. The intent of the plan set in motion by the ancient anger from the heavens was to keep them apart and make them work toward their reward in solitude and secrecy. They were forbidden contact with each other, condemned to spend forever yearning for the converse of similar spirits.

Doomed to solitude, they worked toward their reuniting with the rapturous glory that would set them free from a long and tedious sojourn on earth. A score of Wesmorlyn generations had not been able to succeed, but he had been determined from a young age that he would, and had bent all his energy, intelligence, and considerable willpower to achieving the reward he knew was only barely possible, held out as a tantalizing hope.

*Redemption.*

He soared and dipped in the dazzling sunlight of late summer, then came down from the sky near the gypsy encampment but out of sight of it, and with a shrug, folded his

gleaming, pearly wings to their resting position, between his shoulder blades. He shook out his bundle and pulled on his shirt, then over it the fawn-colored jacket he wore for walking about the countryside.

Would she be there? Would she come today? News from London had distracted him and held him up, but he had never stopped thinking about Charlotte.

It took a few minutes, for he had landed quite a distance from the gypsy camp, but he finally made it and paused in the shade of the grove of trees to catch his breath. To his surprise he heard a rustling sound from the woods, and voices. He ducked into the shadows and watched, peering into the gloom. Catching a glimpse of golden hair, he knew Charlotte was there, but what was she doing in the woods? Who was she with? He watched and saw her with a young gypsy man, deep in conversation. He followed their progress and crept along the edge, torn as to whether to call out to her, or to wait and try to get her attention. He hated this sneaking around; it went counter to everything he had ever believed in and how he had always conducted himself openly and with nothing to hide but the one central truth of himself.

But he was not done his investigating yet, into the gypsies and Eleanor Dancey. Though other things had pulled his attention away, he did have some information to share with her. His dilemma was resolved when she parted ways with the gypsy fellow and stood deep in thought on the edge of the wooded grove for a long minute, her head down, looking at something in her hand. He approached. "You look so solemn. Is anything wrong?"

"Wesmorlyn!" she said. She sighed and shook her head, balling one hand and thrusting it into her tucker, where it was fastened to her waist. "Yes and no. Something terrible happened last night. Tamara, the gypsy girl who was so kind to Fanny and me, was attacked in the night, we know not by what or whom."

"That's awful!" he said, moving toward her and taking her shoulders in his hands. "Is she all right? Is there anything I can do to help? I understand your concern, but why were you in the woods just now?"

"That is where the attack happened." She glanced toward

the gypsy encampment. They faced the back of the caravans and canvas shelters, but were still within sight of the camp. "Let's walk," she said, dusting off her hands. "I don't wish to go back to Moor Cottage yet."

"It seems that it was an eventful time yesterday and last night."

"Why? What happened?" she asked, looking up at him.

He sighed. Inexplicably, he trusted her. "It's Hannah," he blurted out, thrusting his fingers through his hair and raking it back off his forehead. "She tried to run away. Again."

## Chapter 14

“RUN AWAY? Lady Hannah?” Charlotte’s mind reeled. He had said Hannah had tried to run away *again*. Did that mean Eleanor’s story was true, and that the last time it had happened she was sheltered by the woman?

The earl shook his head. “I didn’t really mean to tell you.”

“It will stay between us, Wesmorlyn,” she said, meeting his gaze. “I hope you know that.”

“Somehow, though we have known each other such a short time, I do know that.” He took her arm and led her over a nearby hill. “It seems this is all we do, walk and talk.”

“That seems a good method of becoming acquainted. Tell me,” she said, keeping pace with him, “what’s wrong? Why did your sister run away before? And what happened?”

He didn’t speak for a long moment, leading her up to the crest of the familiar hill, then down the sloping side. “It has been a tumultuous year, since her mother died. I blame myself, really, for I have not given her the attention she needs, I think. As shy as she is, and as sweet natured, she trusts implicitly and she has been led astray on two occasions, now.”

“By whom?”

"I'd rather not say. I fear I'm not being fair. She swears it is all her own idea, and she's honest to a fault, so I must believe her." He kept his eyes forward. "Let us speak of other things."

"No, Wesmorlyn," she said, staying him with one hand on his forearm and making him turn. His brown eyes, sometimes warm, sometimes remote, held worry. She wondered if he really spoke to anyone, or if he always retreated and held his worries close to himself. She had Christoph to speak to, but then they were only two years apart from each other. There were many years between him and Hannah, so he was alone with his troubles. "Please talk to me. This just happened, you said? How did you find out about it if it just happened?"

"That isn't important," he said, hastily. He cleared his throat and took a deep breath, gazing off toward the horizon with squinted eyes. "What *is* important is that she is coming down to stay with me in the country until I can return to London."

"If you need to go back to London, or spend more time on your estate, please don't let me keep you. I have my own needs and my own ideas of what I have to do, but I would not have you change your schedule for me, if that's what you're doing."

He finally gazed at her, his brown eyes thoughtful. "You're very independent."

"For a woman, you mean to say," she said.

"Yes, for a woman. You make it a challenge, the way you add that."

"It *is* a challenge," she said, stepping away from him. A brisk breeze swept up the hill and tugged at the skirts of her gown as clouds began to form and chase each other in a mad dash across the sky. The windswept moor had become her favorite place so far in England, and she didn't think any fine castle or elegant drawing room could ever compete. The open country promised freedom and adventure. "Do you know," she said, gazing up to the top of the long slope they were climbing, "I have spent my life trying to figure out who I am. Perhaps that is not a womanly thing to admit and I know it must make me seem odd in your eyes, but the rules of society make no sense to me." She looked into his eyes; they crinkled

slightly at the corners as if he spent a lot of time squinting in the sunlight. "Wesmorlyn, why, because I am a woman, am I to have no sense of myself and who I am?"

"I don't understand," he said, moving toward her. "Who you *are*? You are Countess Charlotte von Wolfram, and my fiancée."

"I don't mean that in a literal sense," she said, impatiently, feeling he was being deliberately obtuse, "I mean who I am underneath. I've made mistakes, and I've witnessed tragedy. One thing I've learned is that my life is too short and far too precious to spend it doing something I will hate."

"And does that mean marriage to me?"

"That's my point, I don't know," she cried, exasperated. She strode away from him to the top of a hill and gazed off toward the far tors, now shaded by charcoal clouds. She would have liked to explore those rocky cliffs, but that was not a womanly ambition either. She should be more concerned with her dress, instead of being happy with wearing the same well-worn gown day in and day out, she thought, gazing down at the dirty hem and torn trim of her green muslin day gown. And she most decidedly should not be trying, on her own, to figure out who or what had attacked Tamara.

But she was just Charlotte, and no amount of fitting herself into a suitable mold would change that, not really. She had tried to be what her family wanted, and it had made her unhappy, so she had vowed to go her own way, finally, for all of their sakes. It seemed simple enough to her, and not too much to ask of life. She turned back and gazed at him, examining his thoughtful eyes and firm lips set in an unhappy scowl. "Don't *you* want to be very sure before taking such an irrevocable step? Marriage is for life, Wesmorlyn. Don't you wish to fall in love with your wife?"

He paused, sober and cautious as always, before he spoke. "It seems wrong, somehow, to be speaking of something so frivolous as love with so much trouble around us. And especially in relation to marriage, which I do take very seriously."

"There," Charlotte said, gazing at him, the lowering sky casting dark shadows across his handsome face. "That is a fundamental difference between us. You think of love as frivolous, and I think of it as something I desperately want, some-

thing terribly important to me." She took a deep breath and lifted her chin. "Within marriage or without it."

He stared into her eyes, searching, she almost felt, for her soul. She stepped over to him, reached up, and put one finger to his neck, feeling the heavy thrum of his life's blood through a pulsing vein. A rumble of thunder above them hastened her own pulse, and she cupped the back of his head, drawing his face down close as she watched his eyes. His body was stiff and taut, like a pulled thread that must snap to release the tension.

And then he did snap, pulling her to him hard and claiming her lips, kissing her with suffocating thoroughness. She felt her feet lift from the ground and he bent her back as the rumble of thunder rolled like a kettledrum in the orchestra, echoing against the cloud cover. She surrendered to the floating sensation and grasped him by the shoulders, desperate to maintain her balance, but losing herself in the soft pull of his lips and the delicious sensation of his tongue pushing into her mouth, the shocking intrusion exciting, thrilling her body with tremulous waves of longing.

The skies opened and a curtain of rain descended. He released her, took her arm, and pulled her after him. "Run with me," he said. "We must take shelter under the stone bridge."

He pulled her after him into the shadowy damp dimness under the bridge, but he didn't give her a single moment to think; he pulled her under him and kissed her again, roughly. Too roughly. She got her hand free and slapped his cheek, the sound echoing hollowly against the moss-covered underside of the bridge.

He stopped abruptly and pulled back, his cheek visibly ruddy from her slap even in the gloom. "Isn't that what you're looking for?" he said, gruffly, his expression dark and unlike anything she had ever seen on his face as he stared down at her. "Wasn't that passionate enough for you? Isn't that what I was lacking in your eyes?"

Squirming at his weight half atop her, she replied, breathlessly, "Perhaps that was passion, Wesmorlyn, but passion often exists apart from love; they do not equate to each other. How little you understand women. No wonder your sister ran away!"



"Do not *ever* say anything about Hannah!" he said, grasping a handful of her skirt in his clenched fist.

"I'm sorry! I meant to cast no aspersion on her, you must know. Get off of me!" Stones dug into her back and she shifted herself out from under him, shoving him away as she scrambled to sit up. "Is there no middle ground with you, between coldness and passion?"

"I just don't understand you," he said.

"You would understand better if you would listen to me!"

Resentful, his dark eyes stormier than the rolling waves of thunder around them, he drew his knees up and clasped his arms around them, stopping to wipe the rain from his brow. "I apologize, Countess, for my inexcusable behavior toward you," he said haughtily. "I cannot explain it." He shook his head, and then his voice softened as he said, "I am thoroughly ashamed." He put his forehead on his knees.

"Stop. Just stop!" she exclaimed, and the word echoed back, *stop, stop*. "For once in your life listen to a woman."

Startled, he lifted his head and stared over at her.

"That's better." She scooted around to kneel in front of him. "Look me in the eye when we speak, Wesmorlyn. You would give that courtesy to a man, and I demand it as well. If we are to understand each other *ever*, we must learn to listen. I know I am as guilty as you of wishing to speak more than I listen, but it will not do. Now is your turn to pay attention, though."

She took a deep breath. "I was raised in a home where my uncle and aunt worked together to raise us. He was master of the house, but he listened to my Aunt Adele. Though she is a very hard woman, she's also very intelligent, and neither held anything back from the other. When I was naughty—I blush to say that was quite often—my Aunt Adele told my Uncle Nikolas, and they decided together my punishment. He respected her, you see, and took her advice into consideration. I know that was not a marriage, but I will have the same respect from the man I would marry, or I will never wed. When my uncle *did* marry, just this year, his choice was a woman who would not let him ride roughshod over her; she insisted on sharing every worry he had, and if she was not so, he could not have truly loved her. I don't believe real love can exist

within the confines of such an unequal marriage as you would want.”

It was a new idea to him, she could see it. “Wesmorlyn,” she said, leaning forward, staring into his eyes and making her point directly, “I would not be a comfortable wife, one you could tuck away in the country to bear children and entertain the vicar, as I have heard English lords demand. You would be better to choose someone else for that duty. I cannot be easy to handle, I know that, but I will never be less than I am for any man.”

“And I cannot be less of a man just to cater to a wife who will not allow her husband to command her,” he said, his expression holding bewilderment. “You would have me behave as a woman.”

“Good God, Wesmorlyn!” She rocked back on her heels. “Do you think I would want a man who was less than himself?”

“But the two cannot exist together, can they? An independent woman and a manly man? We would fight all the time! *Someone* must be the master and *someone* must obey.”

“No. You are describing the relationship of a master and servant, not a husband and wife.”

“But the Bible says that a husband must have mastery over his wife.”

“It also says to stone a woman who lies with a man before marriage. At least in Germany we don’t do that. It seems to me that we *all* pick and choose which biblical verses to obey, and yet all who so choose make specious arguments about why theirs is the only correct interpretation.” She hung her head for a moment, deep in thought. How had she come to argue about marriage with him, when she had determined that he was not for her? It seemed ludicrous, and yet she felt something between them. “I don’t know what else to say on that account. I will not argue biblical text with you, my lord,” she looked up and said, with what dignity she could muster, “but I will not be a subject in my own home. *Ever*.”

“But a boat without a captain will founder and become lost.”

“Ah, and a carriage without a horse will go nowhere, and a bucket without a rope will draw no water, and a woman with-

out a keeper will go mad. Don't be ridiculous. I will *not* bow down to analogies or allegories," she said, staring at him. "Marriage is neither a boat, nor a servant/master relationship, nor anything else but a marriage. I know what I want."

"What is it? What do you want?" he said, still exasperated, still puzzled.

What did she want? Perhaps she had been hasty in saying she knew. She thought for a long minute, staring out at the curtain of rain that sheeted off the rocky bridge over their head. A sluice of water flowed down from the side of the bridge, creating a grimy stream that poured down to the creek below, joining it and muddying the water. Rubbing her arms, the dampness beginning to set in as a chill, she finally said, "Perhaps I don't know everything I want, but I do know this; I have seen what marriage *can* be. I want to be respected for my opinion, but not to the exclusion of your own. I want to be heard, but not necessarily heeded. I want you to argue if you don't agree with me, but to yield if I make sense."

"And that is marriage to you?"

"That is a part of it."

"What else? There's more?"

"Of course," she said, meeting his confused gaze. "There is always more, Wesmorlyn. I will grow and change through time, and so will you. If there were ever to be a marriage between us, there must be concessions made for that, negotiations."

"It sounds like a barter."

"Barter is give-and-take so both parties get what they want and need, and so is marriage."

"You make it sound like a business arrangement!"

"Did you not make a business arrangement when you agreed by mail to marry a female you had never met, and ascertained my dowry?" She sighed. "You must recognize that two people, if they are to live in harmony *most* of the time, need to be prepared for disharmony *some* of the time, and they must resolve to love in spite of change and differences of opinion and tragedy and fear and life. I'm not afraid of disharmony and turbulence. Life, Wesmorlyn, if we are going to use analogies, is not a stagnant pond, but a swift-flowing river, ever changing, renewing, moving quickly toward an

uncertain future. I will move with it, and so must any man I marry."

"You require so much."

"I know," she said. "Perhaps too much; is that what you think but will not say? I suppose I've spent far more time thinking of what I want than the usual young lady." She gazed out. "The rain's stopping." She made a move to clamber to her feet. "I had better take the opportunity to go back to Moor Cottage."

"Wait!" he said, and grabbed her arm.

His hand was warm through the damp cloth of her dress sleeve. "I have lived my whole life thinking one way," he said, bewilderment in his voice. "You cannot expect me, in the blink of an eye, to change my beliefs."

She gazed down at his hand, the thick, tanned fingers grasping the pale green cloth between them. "I don't."

"But if I don't agree to your ideal of marriage you will break the engagement."

"Wesmorlyn, even if you agree, I cannot say I'll marry you," she said, her voice echoing with a hollow, forlorn sound off the stone bridge overhead. "I'm not sure you even want to marry me, in truth. You're an honorable man and bound to me, you feel, by your word. I release you from that bond here and now."

"What do you want from me, Charlotte? What am I to do?"

She shrugged. "Be yourself." She clambered to her feet, scooted out from under the bridge, and scaled the muddy embankment with some difficulty, casting one long look back at the earl, who had also climbed out from under the bridge. He stared up at her, confusion in his eyes. "Just be yourself, Wesmorlyn, if you even know who your true self is."

She raced back past the gypsy camp and up over the moors to the cottage. Her dress was damp and grimy, and she was going to have to change immediately, or she would come down with some awful fever, no doubt. She thought affectionately back to Melisande Davidovich, her friend, now married to a Russian count and gone to live in Russia. Melisande would always dose her with herbal remedies and somehow it would bring her around. Perhaps Eleanor would do the same, for she spent a lot of time out in her herb garden, cutting and

drying and preparing her herbs, though they seemed more designed for culinary uses, from what Charlotte had seen.

The cottage was in view, but the skies again opened and a torrent of rain, carried on a furious wind, battered down on her. She ran the last hundred feet and flew into the front door, gasping for air. The door to her right opened almost immediately and there stood Eleanor Dancey, and beyond she could see, in the parlor, Fanny sitting demurely on a chair, and, rising from the settee by the fire, holding Hellebore in his arms, was Mr. Lyulph Randell.

"Countess!" Eleanor said. "You are soaked to the skin! We have the honor of a visit from Mr. Randell, but you are hardly going to want to come and sit in such a terrible state!"

She was speechless, pushing back her hair from her eyes, and miserably aware of dripping on the rug in the gloomy hall as Mr. Randell stood and approached, smiling. He was much handsomer than she had remembered, his green eyes sparkling with merriment as he approached the doorway.

"Countess," he said, bowing, "even a drenching cannot damage your loveliness!"

"Mr. Randell, you are making fun of me."

Hellebore hissed at her and jumped down from his hold. "No," he said, gently, "I would never dream of doing something so ill-natured, please believe me."

Fanny squeezed past the two into the hall and said, "Oh, Charlotte! I was so worried for you when I saw the rain come down. You're positively soaked to the skin!" She took her older sister's arm. "We must go up and get you something dry to wear!"

"We are about to have luncheon," Eleanor said, "so do not dawdle, girls. Mr. Randell has kindly agreed to stay."

Charlotte, dripping miserably, curtsied and raced upstairs, trailed by Fanny.

WESMORLYN, battling the winds and rains, donned his soaking shirt and jacket and trudged back up to his home. Entering and glancing around at the stark gray walls and somber décor, unchanged in hundreds of years, he thought how different it could be with Charlotte within it. She was like a

twinkling star, brilliant but out of reach. He had kissed her, and yet had no more idea how to attain her than he had before, or even if he should try. Would she make his life heaven or hell? What she wanted from a husband seemed impossible and ludicrous, but he had no doubt she would be steadfast in her determination to either get it or not marry at all.

Semyaza descended the steps.

"Is she here?" Wesmorlyn said.

The sepulchral fellow nodded, but put out a staying hand when Wesmorlyn would have bounded up the steps.

"Hannah doesn't wish to see you yet."

"What? Why not?"

"She is ashamed, I think, and afraid."

"Afraid? Of me?"

"Of your bad opinion. She knows she has done wrong, and I think is afraid to face you."

"She must face me sooner or later. And if she is ashamed that is good; shame has a beneficial purpose in keeping us on the right path."

Semyaza, his thin lips compressed, said nothing.

"Do you not agree?" Wesmorlyn said, stung and agitated. It seemed nothing he thought or said or felt was right to those around him.

The man sighed and looked toward the upper reaches of the vast hall. "Do you truly believe doing right out of the fear of shame and humiliation achieves the higher purpose you seek?"

Wesmorlyn, weary, was about to snap that it was better than nothing, but he paused and thought, hand on the carved finial of the staircase railing. He stared at the wood grain, the perfectly beautiful pattern of nature. If only nature was as reliable a signpost in life as she was a designer of lovely things. But his natural urges were not honorable ones, he feared, not toward Charlotte von Wolfram anyway, judging by the fever that lashed through him in waves of hunger as he held her down and kissed her violently under the bridge. What had possessed him? It was as if the pride and passion that had caused his ancestor's fall had flashed through his blood; the shame of his actions still stung. He looked up and caught Semyaza's eye. "What other guide to what is right do we have,

but the knowledge that doing something else will bring us shame?"

"Hannah surely is a good example of how the fear of shame does not always guarantee rectitude," Semyaza said.

"It has always worked for me," Wesmorlyn claimed.

"Have you not had other motives in all you have done?"

"Perhaps." He took in a deep breath. "But I'm no longer so sure."

"And that is your path right now. Examining one's motives on occasion is beneficial." Semyaza looked troubled, an unusual expression for him. "I've had eons to learn that difficult lesson. When I led your ancestor in the fall, I knew I was doing wrong, but I used every reason to justify myself, and failed to examine my motives with the clear eye of awareness. I will pay for my hubris throughout eternity, but you needn't. I think you should perhaps examine, too, whether there is ever an occasion when a person is truly not in control of their own actions, and so not to blame in the slightest."

"What do you mean?"

Semyaza sighed and was silent.

Wesmorlyn thought, hard. *Not in control*. "Do you mean, not in control because of some kind of drug or potion?"

"Or some other force at work. Think of all you know of Hannah, and imagine what, or who, could be behind her misbehavior. But first, give her a half hour to reflect and then go to her—not in anger and wrath, Simeon, but in the tenderness of a brother's love and concern."

He nodded, exhaustion rolling over him in waves. "Send up hot water, please, Sam. I'm filthy and tired."

Some time later he padded down the hallway in the modern section of the Abbey to Hannah's door. He tapped gently, and then entered her pretty, cozy, white-papered room, a reminder of her mother's gentling influence on the stern earl, Wesmorlyn's father, and on the austere household. She was curled up in a chair by the fire, which was lit against the chill dankness of the day. Autumn was on its way, and the rain made everything in the old Abbey feel damp. Hannah's eyes were swollen and red; she had been weeping, judging by the soggy handkerchief in her fist.

The anger he had been trying to defeat evaporated in an

instant and all he remembered was how much he adored his little sister and had from the moment, as a boy of thirteen, she had been placed in his arms hours after her birth, a squirming bundle. He went and knelt by her chair. "Hannah, are you all right?"

"No," she said, her lips trembling. "You must be very, very angry with me, Wes. Are you?"

"I cannot say I have not been very cross with you, but I promise I will not browbeat you, nor will I punish you if you tell me the truth," he said, touching her cheek gently. "Did he do aught to you? Did he tamper with you in any way?"

"No, of course not."

"But he did ask you to run away with him?"

"No. Not even that. It was all my own idea." She hiccupped, and took a drink from the teacup on the elegant little mahogany table next to her. She turned her tragic gaze to Wesmorlyn, and said, "It's over," her bottom lip trembling. "He doesn't care for me. I ran to him, begged him to take me away, but he doesn't love me. He's in love with another woman, he said, and he was leaving London to be with her. That is why I followed him; I couldn't help myself. I went to throw myself on his mercy, so I slipped out. Poor Miss Madison," she said, speaking of her hapless companion, "had no idea of any of it."

"Another woman? He said that?"

She nodded and the tears flowed. "Yes. Lyulph is in love with another woman, and he's going to marry her. What shall I do, Wes? My heart is broken!" She threw herself into her brother's arms and wept.

But as Wesmorlyn patted her back and muttered soothing words, his mind was traveling at lightning speed. All along Hannah had claimed that Lyulph had offered her no encouragement, that it was all her, and he was innocent of any attempt to lure her away from the safety of her family. With that assurance, what could he do in all fairness but tolerate his friend, who had purportedly done nothing wrong? It had been frustrating beyond belief. He had barred her from spending any time with him alone, which was as much as he could do, but even that had not been enough, clearly, to prevent the infatuated girl from making a fool of herself.

Perhaps now she would behave, now that she knew there



was no chance. So Lyulph Randell said he was in love and going to marry. *Who?* Wesmorlyn had never seen any hint that there was a lady in his life, other than catching him kissing Charlotte von Wolfram. His breath caught in his throat; he was stunned by the sudden certainty that Charlotte had to be who Lyulph meant.

Yet that made not a jot of sense. Lyulph Randell was shrewd and business-minded. He was dedicated to his family's legacy as much in his own way as Wesmorlyn was devoted to his more illustrious family heritage. Wesmorlyn had always feared that Lyulph would make a marital alliance with some family of his own ilk from Europe in an attempt to strengthen their dominance in the ways only werewolves knew, but it had never come about. The world of such creatures was mysterious and secret; it was not something Wes had ever delved into, but he had heard that years before, the Randells had gained land using intimidation and a kind of raw forcefulness. Landowners had been known to sell them land and leave, mysteriously, after a visit from the head of the family.

Wesmorlyn had never heard a whisper of Lyulph doing any such thing; he would have strenuously objected to that kind of bullying, if he had seen it. Believing Lyulph Randell was doing the best he could to behave in a civilized manner, Wes had been content with making peace between their two families, erasing the ill feeling their long and tangled history of enmity had engendered. It was an important part of his plan of redemption. Lyulph's apparently rigid determination to stay on the side of the angels was proof, he had thought, that he was doing right.

But all those years of peacemaking had not mattered to him when he had seen Lyulph in the garden kissing Charlotte. He had come as close to rage as he had ever in his life been, though he didn't understand why. How could he feel so possessive of a young lady he had barely met, and whom he didn't feel at all sure would make him a good wife?

There was too much of all of this that involved Lyulph Randell, including the fellow's having the one piece of information guaranteed to take the countess away from London. Wesmorlyn would get to the bottom of the mystery, but first,

he had a brokenhearted girl to deal with, and he had no idea how to soothe her hurt pride and wounded emotions. “Tell me, Hannah, how does it hurt, your heartbreak?” he asked, gently ducking his head to see her face. “Is it an actual ache? Help me to understand.”

## Chapter 15

HER BROTHER'S room was Charlotte's first destination. Finding him groggy but awake, she told him what she had found and pulled the tuft of fur out of her soaked tucker. She was certain it could not be fur from his coat in his transformed state; but it was inconclusive, Christoph replied. He had not seen himself transformed, as Charlotte had, so the evidence bore little weight with him.

Disappointed in his lackluster response, she retired to her room with Fanny, who helped her undress, taking the wet things away as Charlotte tried to clean herself up, brushing her hair and wiping her skin dry.

"What is this?" Fanny asked.

Charlotte turned, and saw her half sister holding up the wolfskin kirtle, damp from being fastened inside her saturated dress. Staring at it, Charlotte was alarmed by a sudden thought; the fur of the kirtle was mottled, with some dark spots, like the tuft she had found in the woods. If Christoph had transformed and gone out that night, could the tuft of fur beneath where Tamara fell be from the kirtle?

"Give it to me," she said, putting out her hand.

Fanny brought it over and handed it to Charlotte. "What is it?" she asked again, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

Charlotte, appalled by her train of thought, turned away from her sister, folded the hank of fur, and tucked it inside her bodice. Instead of answering, she said, "How is Tamara? Is she awake? Is she recovering?"

Fanny said nothing, and so Charlotte turned back to her and looked up, trying to read her expression. "What is it? Tell me."

"It's just odd," she said, coming and sitting on the edge of the bed. "I went to check on her. The room was dark, and so at first I didn't notice, but Christoph was sitting on the floor beside the sofa where she lay, and his head was resting on the pillow beside hers. Both were asleep. I didn't know what to do, but I suppose I made a noise, and Christoph awoke. He stood and almost ran from the room, mumbling something, I didn't hear what."

Charlotte pulled a brush through her blonde hair, untangling it, and thought about her brother. "Has Tamara woken since?"

"Yes. I visited with her for a few minutes."

"Does she remember what happened?"

"She's still very weak. I didn't ask what happened."

Charlotte sighed at such a complete lack of curiosity. But perhaps it was for the best. She wanted to talk to Tamara herself, and in her admittedly slight experience, people's recollections of events became fuzzy and indistinct the more they talked about them with others. They began to embellish upon their first memories with the influence of their own imagination and sometimes with their impression of what others wished to hear. "When did Mr. Randell arrive?"

"Just a half hour or so ago." Fanny helped her with her hair, expertly winding it into a proper style that would not shame her in front of the others. "What took you so long, Charlotte?" she asked, as she tucked in the last stray strand. "You were gone for hours."

"I was waiting until the rain stopped, and then got caught in it anyway." Changed and properly attired once again in the only other dress she had brought with her, an ivory muslin, Charlotte stood. "I have some questions for Mr. Randell. I

wish to know, first of all, why he did not directly follow us down to Cornwall as he said he would."

"Oh, but it was not his fault, Charlotte," Fanny said, anxiously, following her sister into the hall and shutting the door. "Truly. He was so very upset about what happened to us on the road. He apologized profusely, and explained immediately that he was unavoidably detained, or he would have met us in Salisbury."

"Immediately?" Charlotte headed down the hall, feeling her way in the darkness and breathing in the suffocating, mold-scented air. "Before he introduced himself to his tenant?"

"What?"

"His tenant, Eleanor." Charlotte looked back at her, making out her features in the dimness. "He had never met her before."

"Oh." Fanny frowned, her expression one of puzzlement.

"You knew that."

"Yes, but they seemed to know each other. Or perhaps that was just my mistake. I was not immediately at the door; Anne answered it and called Mother."

At the head of the stairway, Charlotte turned and stared at Fanny. Something odd was going on. "You didn't like Mr. Randell at first in London. Have you changed your mind?"

"He's very handsome," she said, slowly. "And very kind. He said I was in very good looks, and that I must be happy now that I had met my mother."

"That doesn't answer my question. Have you changed your mind about him? Do you like him now?"

"He's very kind," she said, faintly.

"Countess Charlotte, Fanny, are you coming back down?" Eleanor Dancy's voice floated up into the dim upper reaches of the hall.

At the bottom of the stairs Charlotte, in the dark, didn't see the cat and stepped on Hellebore's tail; the creature yowled and lashed out at her ankle again. She restrained her fury and her earnest desire to kick it as it scuttled away to another dark corner. "Devil beast," she muttered, wincing at the pain. "I swear he lies in wait just to torment me." But she took a deep breath and schooled her expression to a more pleasant one as she crossed the fusty hallway and strolled into the parlor. She

moved immediately over to the fire and put her hands out, trying to drive away the persistent damp chill she felt every time she entered Moor Cottage.

"I must see to my patient," Eleanor Dancey said, brightly, glancing from Fanny and Charlotte to Lyulph Randell. "Perhaps you two girls would keep Mr. Randell company?"

"Certainly," Charlotte said. As the woman left the room, Charlotte took a seat on the settee, and the gentleman, who had stood as they entered, sat as well, on a chair by the fireplace. Her mind teemed with questions, none of which she could ask without admitting that the Earl of Wesmorlyn was her source of information.

"You were a long time following, sir, when you said you would be immediately after us on the road to Cornwall."

"As I told your sister, I was delayed by a rather unfortunate business," he said, with a grimace. He shook his head. "It was a sorry thing, I must say, and I would much rather have been free to leave London when I said I would."

Carefully, Charlotte said, "Is this unfortunate business something you can share?"

"I *should* say nothing."

"Ah. Then don't let me tempt you into betraying a confidence, or relaying too much information on a subject best left untouched," she said, watching his face.

"But I feel I can trust you, Countess," he said, with a gentle smile.

"Indeed you can, but you could not know that yet, not upon such a slight acquaintance as may occur in a ballroom."

"I believe one may gauge the trustworthiness of a person by their behavior to those who rely upon them for strength. Your behavior toward your sister certainly shows your sterling character and trustworthiness."

Fanny, bewildered by the rapid pace of the conversation, glanced back and forth.

Charlotte, watching Mr. Randell's green eyes flicker, chose her next words carefully. "Does this unfortunate business have anything to do with another family with which we are both acquainted?"

"How very perspicacious of you, Countess. It does. Un-

happily, I was put in a very difficult position by the rather overwrought emotions of a young lady of tender years."

Eleanor came to the door from the hall. "Fanny dear," she said, her eyes bright and her expression tight with a forced smile, "would you come and help me in the kitchen for a moment?"

Fanny half rose from her chair, but then looked at Charlotte and said, "It wouldn't be seemly for me to leave Mr. Randell and Charlotte alone."

"Surely we need not stand on formality here? We'll just leave the door ajar."

"Go, Fanny," Charlotte said. She would have more freedom to get the information to which she was so tantalizingly close without Fanny's dampening presence. "I'll be fine."

Fanny left, but both were silent for another long moment, before Mr. Randell said, "I feel as if I can confide in you, Countess, and ask your advice."

"Oh? Advice? I hardly feel competent to give advice, Mr. Randell."

"But who so competent as a young lady, where another young lady's heart is concerned?"

"Or so incompetent. Careful, Mr. Randell, for one young lady is not interchangeable for another, you know, and to insinuate it is so or that their feelings are easily divined is to invite disdain."

"Nor would I ever think it is so, but you are very special," he claimed, with a warm tone. "I felt from the first moment we met that you have a rare gift for looking into the hearts and minds of many."

She was silent; meeting him again she could see how she had been attracted to him. He was as handsome and persuasive, and there was about him an air of romance, even in the stifling, dismal atmosphere of the cottage. She could not forget that he was a werewolf, one of her own kind, and that with him there would never be a need to explain. Initially that had led her to confide in him, but some of the instant trust she felt had evaporated with her growing assurance on the island nation's soil, and with a broader knowledge of the people. She now wondered if just being a werewolf was enough for her to have confidence in him.

After a pause, he said, "I am in the difficult position of having a young lady infatuated with me, when I have no such feeling for her." He sighed, an expression of worry on his face. "She has been unguarded and imprudent."

"In what way?"

"What am I to do with a girl who will show up at my London residence unescorted and uninvited?" he said, exasperated. He shook his head, and continued, "How am I to respond, especially when she has been a friend and almost like a little sister to me? Perhaps I see now why Wesmorlyn was concerned—" He stopped abruptly and put one hand up to his mouth. "I should not have said that name! I hadn't intended to be so indiscreet. And I spoke so openly of poor Hannah's indiscretion! I should be flayed alive."

There was something false in his movement and protestation, and yet it gibed so well with what Wesmorlyn had said about Hannah's defection, that she had to believe some part of it was true. "Why would Lady Hannah do such a rash and unlikely thing as run to you?"

"She's unhappy at home, I know that. Wesmorlyn, for all of his public face of perfect amiability—and well I know how charming he can be when he chooses to make himself so—is not so amiable in private with those over whom he has power, I fear." He was watching her eyes as he said that.

"Do you mean he puts on a false front with people?"

"He has been known to, to impress them. Why do you ask, Countess? Have you experienced that with him?"

"How would that be possible?" she asked, evasive in the face of such a direct question. "I left London so quickly, when would I have had a chance to see him again and experience aught but the irritating domination he exhibited in the ball-room?"

"True."

"And so you were delayed in London for what reason?"

He sighed. "Wesmorlyn had left Hannah unguarded. Though she was taken to Lady Harroway's to stay, that worthy woman has no notion of how sly a young lady can be when it suits her, and her companion is almost useless. I don't know where Wesmorlyn is, but he is not in London at present." He paused, and his gaze flicked over to meet hers. "I



awaited him at the duel site for hours, and I must say I was happy he did not show, as badly as it reflected on him. However, he has disappeared, and Hannah, seeing her chance and knowing me to be in London, slipped away and came to my residence. It was a very sticky situation. I would not be forced to wed the child due to her own frantic attachment to me. Especially not now, when I have another object in mind." He gave her a speaking look of intense yearning.

But Charlotte could not help but compare it to another look of yearning, and it felt practiced and theatrical in comparison. Between the two of them, Randell and Wesmorlyn, she had a definite opinion as to which was the more honest, and it was not Randell. And yet she had not a single fact to back up her impression. All her life she had heard intuition derided as worthless, while reason was put on a pedestal. And yet reasonably, she should not believe in a world where werewolves existed, for it was like believing in alchemy, the transformation of a base metal into gold. But the fact remained: werewolves existed. Perhaps there was a logic to intuition that had as yet to be revealed to the skeptical. "And so what did you do about the poor infatuated young lady?"

"I took her back to Lady Harroway's and bribed a footman to be discreet! But from then on I was quite afraid to leave London, for she swore she would follow me. That would indeed be the ruin of her reputation, if it was known that she had followed me to Cornwall. How could it end? I care for the child as the little sister I never had; if her reputation was in tatters I would . . . nay, I *must* marry her if it would help to mend it, just out of the consideration I bear the family. I am ever careful of any lady's reputation, and where I am a friend, I am a friend for life, no matter what provocation to the contrary."

*Fine words indeed*, Charlotte thought, *and easy to say*. "So Mr. Randell, was there any gossip about me when I left town so suddenly?" she asked, remembering what Wesmorlyn had said.

"No, of course not. Why would there be? It was not known under what circumstances you left, and really, from what I understand your brother left town so quickly after that it must have been considered that you traveled together, if anyone had questioned it at all."

That was not what Wesmorlyn had said; who was telling the truth? "We have had some drama here, you must have heard."

"No, I cannot say that I have. Whatever do you mean?"

"Did Miss Dancey not tell you? How odd. Last night a gypsy girl at the encampment—the one you have sanctioned, you know, and how very kind it is that you allow them to stay on your land—was attacked by some animal or a man, we are not yet sure which."

"Not sure which? How is that possible? Surely the girl knows whether it is a man or a beast that has attacked her."

"In some case the distinction is not so apparent, I'm afraid, as we both know too well."

"You mean . . ." He gasped and looked toward the door. "No, I will not believe it. It is merely a man with a dog or something of the kind, you will find, I'm sure of it."

She watched him for a moment. He had understood her readily, and she took his glance toward the hall door to mean a reference to her own brother, upstairs at the moment, as he must know from the conversation he had with Fanny and Eleanor. "So when did you arrive in Cornwall? Are you staying in your own home?"

"I arrived yesterday afternoon."

"You must have been weary after so long a ride. Did you retire early?" She knew it was impolite to make such an inquiry, but it had struck her in that moment that he, too, was a werewolf. Was he dark furred? Was he vicious?

He gazed at her intently, and said, slowly, "Countess Charlotte, I am a little puzzled as to your sudden interest in my habits, unless you think me responsible in some way for the terrible event you have just told me about. But I cannot believe it would even cross your mind that I would have anything to do with such an awful attack as you say happened on my own property. Just think for a moment what you are suggesting, that I would endanger my life and reputation to attack in such a manner! We have not known each other long, I agree, but I hope you understand me sufficiently to know I am an honorable man, and whatever else you suspect, you will acquit me when I say that though I arrived at my own estate yesterday afternoon, I spent the night at an acquaintance's in

Bodmin, after staying for dinner too late to ride home. The moon is waxing brighter, but clouds obscured it last night."

She sighed. There was no reason in the world to think him involved in the awful attack on Tamara, and every reason to think Christoph guilty; even her brother's own fear spoke to that possibility. But she would never believe that Christoph could do such a thing, and so must consider that Lyulph Randell, a stranger to her, could still be more dangerous than he seemed. She would keep a wary eye on him from now on. Though there seemed no motive for him to attack Tamara, she could not discount the possibility.

Fanny and Eleanor entered then, the older woman carrying the tea tray. "Have you been having a lovely conversation, getting reacquainted?"

Mr. Randell, having stood, bowed, and said, "We have indeed."

"How is Tamara, ma'am?" Charlotte asked. "May I see her?"

"Not at this moment. Please sit and have tea first, Countess." She set the tray down. "Indeed, I have made my special honey cakes with you in mind, for you did say to me that you enjoyed honey above all other sweets."

Had she said that? Not in her memory, but perhaps it was just a polite fiction. "I really would like to speak to her. I'm very anxious for her recovery." Charlotte turned to Mr. Randell. "I don't wish to be rude, but Tamara is truly the reason for Fanny's and my safety the first night, after your carriage driver so rudely dropped us on the side of the road."

A dark shadow crossed the gentleman's face. "I was furious when I heard of Burgess's unforgivable behavior. I had him whipped and sacked on the spot. I cannot apologize enough, Countess, for such a terrible night as you must have suffered."

He appeared sincerely annoyed at his driver. "There was no harm done ultimately," Charlotte replied, "thanks to Tamara and her people."

"Please sit, Countess Charlotte," Eleanor said, with an edge in her tone. "I really have gone to a lot of trouble to make these honey cakes because I thought they might please you, and I shall be wounded if you don't at least try them."

"All right," Charlotte said, with what grace she could muster in the face of such unyielding insistence. She glanced over at Fanny, who was watching her mother with a mystified expression.

Eleanor saw them all provided with cups and tea, and placed a small plate of cakes directly in front of Charlotte. "Please, I really do wish you to try them."

With a sigh, Charlotte did, biting into the moist, dark sweetness. It was delicious. She wolfed it down. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until that moment. She picked up another, pausing only a moment as the others watched her, then giving a little laugh. "You were right, Miss Dancey, this is the best cake I have ever tasted." She ate it, and then the last on her plate, while the others ate their repast more slowly.

"I watched her gather the honey," Fanny said, with her eyes wide and her tone breathless. "It was most amazing. She has a hive down at the end of the garden, you know, and the bees, they swarmed around her but did not sting; she sang a song while she worked."

Eleanor Dancey glanced at Fanny, and then to Mr. Randell. "I've taken the liberty of reviving a hive that stood at the foot of the garden."

Fanny cocked her head to one side and continued, "The song was so pretty, I almost fell asleep listening; it made me so drowsy. She gathered a small bucket of honey, and the bees allowed it! It was truly the most amazing thing I have ever seen."

Eleanor jumped up and said, "Would you like to take a walk in the garden with Mr. Randell, Countess, while Fanny and I clear away the tea tray?"

Charlotte stood. "I suppose," she said, dreamily, not really caring what she did or where she went. She put one hand to her head. "I was going to do something else, but I cannot remember now what it was. What was it Fanny? Do you remember?"

"You wanted to see Tamara," Fanny said, watching her.

"But I'm sure that can wait," Eleanor said, her eyes glowing and bright, a half smile on her lovely lips. "Let the gypsy girl rest for now, and visit her later."

"I suppose." It didn't really matter, after all. She stood

waiting for another suggestion, not quite knowing what to do next.

Mr. Randell rose and put out his hand. "Come, walk in the garden with me," he said, taking her hand and leading her out through the kitchen and the back door to the garden.

The day had become warm and sunny after the misty start, and bees buzzed, visiting flower after flower in the overrun garden. She had once thought the place menacing and tangled, but it appeared lovely and lush in the glorious warm sunshine. Mr. Randell led her to a stone bench near the garden wall, constructed of mellow golden brick and warmly reflecting the sunshine.

"How lovely this place is, is it not?" he said, dusting off the bench for her and urging her to sit with the pressure of his hand on her shoulder.

"It is," she said, looking around. Flowers grew in abundant mounds, a riot of color in great bunches. Butterflies fluttered on the breeze, and a songbird trilled in the plum tree that grew by the far corner of the walled overgrown garden. It was English country perfection, the kind that had convinced Frau Liebner to return with them to England after a few short months in her homeland of Germany. The colors seemed brighter than before, though. *Why is that?* she wondered. And she saw beauty where before she had seen only confusion.

"I have so longed to see you again," Mr. Randell said, sitting down beside her and pulling her attention away from the brilliance of the garden. Hellebore, who had been sunning himself in a corner of the garden, came and wound around his feet, purring loudly. "I have thought of nothing else."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I've thought of nothing but you, and that kiss we shared in the garden at Lady Harroway's ball before Wesmoryn spoiled it all with his silly challenge."

It seemed an eon ago. She should thank him for all of his trouble in making sure they got to Cornwall safely. But he didn't really ensure that, did he? His carriage driver abandoned them. And he didn't follow when he said he would.

"Have you thought of me?" he asked, turning her face toward his with the firm pressure of his strong fingers.

"I feel a little odd," she said, staring into his eyes.

"I do, too. It is just being together again. I feel so very strongly, Countess, that we were meant by fate to meet and become close . . . so very close." He moved his face toward hers and kissed her.

A weariness overtook her, an inertia. She could not move and slumped against his shoulder as he prolonged the kiss. And yet she felt nothing. Not a thing. She had no will to move away, but the kiss was as dust, uninteresting, unappealing. Not like Wesmorlyn's.

As the kiss ended at long last, she took a deep breath, pulled away, and stood suddenly. "I have to go in and lie down," she said, exerting all of her considerable will to break away from him.

"No! No, you don't wish to do that Countess."

She stopped, confused. Didn't she? Was he right about that? Perhaps she should just stay and let him talk to her some more. He had a lovely voice, and green eyes and dark hair, she thought, staring at him dreamily.

"Sit back down," he said, grabbing her arm and tugging. "You don't want to go back inside yet; it's so lovely out here, and we haven't finished talking yet."

She took another deep breath and shook her head. No, she didn't want to stay! "I *do* wish to go, sir," she said, and pulled her arm from his strong grasp. "Good day, Mr. Randell." She tripped and stumbled away from him and through the kitchen, to the hall, and upstairs. Fanny called after her, but she ignored the summons and headed for her room, where she threw herself down on the bed. After a few minutes of the room spinning, she realized she was feeling a little better. She sat up, took a deep breath, let her head clear, and then went to the window, thinking that she would like some fresh air. She glanced out and there, down in the garden, were Eleanor Dancey and Mr. Randell, and it looked for all the world as if they were having a furious argument, him gesturing and her with her hands up.

Charlotte opened the window, wondering if she could hear them, but at the sound of the sash, both looked up and saw her standing there. He waved and smiled up at her, a tight expression that held no real good humor, and Eleanor waved, then whirled and walked away, out of sight and presumably into

the house, trailed by her cat. Randell strode to the garden gate and toward the tiny cottage stable where his horse was, no doubt.

*How extraordinary*, she thought as she returned to her bed and lay down. She stared up at a damp spot on the ceiling. How utterly extraordinary that two people who supposedly did not know each other should be arguing in such an intimate and passionate manner. Surely an argument like the one she had witnessed could not happen without some degree of familiarity.

There was something quite wrong about this house and these people, but what it was confounded her. One thing was certain, trust was an attribute she was going to abandon for the next while, until she untangled the knotted mystery that was at the heart of everything odd that had happened since they arrived in England.

## Chapter 16

“IT WAS the oddest feeling,” Charlotte said to her brother, who sat in a chair by his fireplace. Unable to figure out what had just happened, she had joined him in his room and now perched up on his window seat, relating her odd experience with Mr. Randell. “As we sat together, I felt this wave of lethargy; I could not move, and when he kissed me—”

“Kissed you?” Christoph growled, squinting his blue eyes.

“Yes, just listen please; though I didn’t like it, I couldn’t move away from him. It took every fiber of my being to pull away finally. I went up to my room, for I felt quite dizzy.” She leaned forward for emphasis and said, “And listen to this: when I began to feel better I went to my window, and saw Mr. Randell and Eleanor Dancey standing in the garden arguing about something. Why would Fanny’s mother, who doesn’t know Mr. Randell except as a landlord, be arguing with him?”

“I don’t know,” Christoph said. “Maybe they were arguing about rent?”

“I suppose, though it seems unlikely.” Charlotte thought for a moment about the odd things she had observed while



staying in the cottage. "Have you noticed how Anne seems to wander around in a fog much of the time?"

"Yes, but I just thought that was because she was simple-minded."

"Perhaps, but she listens outside of doors. I've caught her a couple of times. And what about Eleanor? Something is just not right about her."

"We ought to leave," he said. "You shouldn't have come here in the first place."

"Don't begin with that again. I did what I thought right for Fanny."

"I know, I know. But there's nothing holding us here now, is there?"

"Christoph, I won't leave until Tamara is well enough, and until we figure out what Fanny's mother is up to."

"All I know is that I have felt peculiar ever since I set foot in this cottage," Christoph said. "And don't you dare make a joke out of that," he said, pointing his finger at her with a flash of his old good humor.

Fanny tapped on the door and came in. "Are you well, Christoph?" she asked. "Mother is asking you both to come down for tea. She seems unhappy about something."

Charlotte took Fanny's arm and pulled her down to sit in the window seat with her, moving a little so both could fit. "What do you think of your mother? How do you feel toward her?"

She shrugged.

Charlotte exchanged a look with Christoph. "Fanny, tell me the truth. You do know that you can tell us anything, don't you?"

"I'm so grateful to you both. You have been through so much trouble for me, and I'm very, very grateful."

"But?" Charlotte stared at her, and saw evasion and unhappiness clouding her clear blue eyes.

"Fanny, is everything all right?" Christoph asked, his forehead pinched in a frown, two vertical lines between his eyebrows. "Would you like to live with your mother from now on?"

"No! Oh, no, please, I wouldn't like that. You won't leave

me here alone, will you?" she cried, grasping at Charlotte's hand.

"Fanny, calm!" Charlotte said, squeezing her hand. She put her arm around her sister's thin shoulders. "We will go nowhere without you, I promise. It's up to you; you have a home with us whenever you need one, you must know that. No one will make you stay here. Do you not like your mother? You've only known her a few days, so it's natural you should feel shy with her. Has she been unkind to you?"

"No," Fanny said, slowly. Tears welled in her eyes and she sighed deeply. "I just don't feel comfortable. She doesn't feel like a mother; I can't explain it. She's always kind to me, though she is often short and cruel to poor Anne when she doesn't know I am watching. That's why Anne is so nervous, I think."

"We were just speaking of her, actually. Why doesn't the girl leave for another position?" Christoph asked.

"I asked her that, but she mumbled that she can't, that she is bound to the lady."

"To Miss Dancey."

"She never says her name. She only ever says 'the lady'."

Charlotte, still feeling the lingering effects of the strange bout of lethargy she had suffered, sat back in the window seat, thinking. She had tried time and again for the few days they had been there to speak with Anne about her mistress, but the girl was frightened and often blank, just staring as if she didn't understand. Was the girl an imbecile, as Christoph had suggested? At times it seemed so, but at other times the girl had quite a sharp, intelligent look in her eyes, like when she was listening at doors.

"So will you come down?" Fanny said to them both.

Christoph stood and stretched. "I suppose we should. You know," he said, addressing Charlotte, "I think it quite rude that Wesmorlyn has not answered the letter I wrote to tell him where we are. Since we are in his part of the country, I thought he might come down and we would see him. I think it imperative, Charlotte, that you apologize to him for your behavior, but we could ask him some questions about Lyulph Randell, too. Who knows the man better than the earl?"

Charlotte shifted guiltily. To tell or not to tell?

Eleanor Dancey tapped and entered the room; looking around brightly, she said, "Why are you not outside on such a beautiful afternoon?"

"Christoph has not been feeling well, ma'am," Charlotte said, watching her. She rose from her seat and continued. "I wish to see Tamara. May I speak with her?"

"Certainly," she said, her gaze flitting from Fanny, to Christoph, and then to Charlotte. "Yes, I do think my patient is up to some company now."

As she turned and exited, Charlotte followed, thinking of what Fanny had said about her unkindness to her maid, but that girl's insistence that she was "bound" to the lady. *Bound*. Was she indentured? Perhaps when Eleanor Dancey intended to go to the colonies Anne offered herself as an indentured servant to earn her way. But with the woman's humble life after her fall from grace surely she would not be able to afford another's passage? Charlotte descended behind her, wondering what mystery lay behind her reticence.

"Miss Dancey," she said, carefully. "I am so interested in your time in Germany. If you feel up to speaking of it, I would like to hear your impressions of Wolfram Castle and of my father and mother, if you please. I don't wish to be indelicate, but you must understand my interest, given how young I was when they died. The impression of an outsider would be valuable to me, as I only have my uncle and aunts' recollections to go on."

They reached the hallway, and Miss Dancey turned, her face shadowed by the fading light from the open door into the drawing room. Hellebore padded over to them and wound around Eleanor's legs, purring loudly. "Of course, Countess," she said, in her gentle, noncommittal tone. "We'll speak about that. It was a painful time for me, but if you insist, I'll tell you what I remember. But not right now."

Evasion again. Charlotte pressed on, determined to learn more. "What were you and Mr. Randell arguing about in the garden, ma'am? When I looked down from my window you were having a heated discussion."

"Really?" Eleanor said, with a puzzled expression. "How odd that it should appear so; we had no argument, I assure you." The big tabby cat leaped up into her arms and growled

at Charlotte. "Hellebore, behave," the woman said, and then, with a placid look on her lovely, perfectly smooth face, continued. "It must be a mere mistaken impression from your viewpoint. I have nothing but good things to say about the gentleman, for after all, he saved me from a very difficult situation."

"Yes, a difficult situation. So you have said over and over."

Christoph had pulled Fanny aside and was speaking to her. Charlotte moved closer to Eleanor Dancey, and in a low tone, watching the woman's face, said, "Very handsome, too, isn't he? He truly seems to be enamored of me, for he's *so* persistent! He's hinted at marriage, but I'm undecided. I very much feel the lack of a mother right now. Perhaps as an *older* lady you can help me make up my mind." She watched the woman's eyes, how they squinted in the dimness.

"I can feel how very much he cares for me," Charlotte continued, pushing it a little farther. "From one lady to another, it took all of my willpower to break away from his kiss." Was it her imagination, or did the woman's jaw clench? She certainly tightened her grip on Hellebore, for the creature squawked indignantly and leapt from her hold, slinking off down the dim hallway into the darkest shadows. "But how much do I know of him?" Charlotte said, keeping her tone low and confidential. "It's a big decision; should I allow his advances? And what about when he declares himself and offers me his hand? What should I do?"

"I have no advice to give you, Countess. Tamara will no doubt be happy to see you," she said, her tone abrupt. "I spoke to Mr. Randell about the attack at the gypsy camp and he is concerned, of course, since it occurred on his property. He's going to look into it. Perhaps *that* was the discussion you saw and misinterpreted." She turned to Christoph and Fanny. "Will you come to the dining room? Tea is almost ready, Count. I've made more honey cakes just for you, since you didn't join us earlier." She motioned them ahead of her, and then went down the hall past them toward the kitchen.

Tamara was sitting in the parlor by the front window overlooking the rose garden when Charlotte entered. Her hands were folded in her lap, and she gazed longingly out the window.

"How are you, dear girl?" Charlotte said, swooping over to

her and embracing her in a strong hug. She stood and gazed down at her new friend, taking in the paleness of her cheek and the bandage that covered the wounds on her neck. They were stained pink, her wounds still seeping.

"I'll be all right, Charlotte, though I still feel tired and so weak. I don't know why. I've slept for hours. Though I couldn't bear to stay in that poky, dark room another minute, it took every ounce of my energy to move from my bed to this chair. I don't think I could make it back again on my own," she admitted, a catch in her voice.

That reminded Charlotte of what Fanny had said about finding Christoph by Tamara's side, sleeping. She had meant to ask him about that, but became distracted by other things. "You've gone through an awful experience." She examined her carefully. Tamara's dark lustrous hair was brushed and tidy, confined at the nape of her neck with a blue ribbon. Of course: her head scarf was torn to shreds. Charlotte swallowed and refused to think of the scrap of fabric in Christoph's dressing gown pocket, and the remnant she had found in the forest. She took a seat and asked, "Can you speak of it now? What happened? We only got bits of it from Romolo and Tully."

Tamara gasped. "Romolo! Is my poor brother all right?"

"Yes, yes," Charlotte said, putting one hand on her arm. "Hush, Tamara, he's just fine. I accompanied him back to the encampment and told them you would recover after some rest. I'll get word to them that you're doing well."

"Can't I just go home? This cottage"—she shook her head and glanced around—"it doesn't feel right. I'm not used to walls on all sides, and a ceiling instead of the sky. I can't breathe here."

"It's not just you, trust me. This cottage is no place I want to stay for long. But you must recover first before you go back. We won't leave until you're well enough to go, too."

"But I'm well enough, really, and I could . . ." She stood, but wavered and then collapsed into the chair again, her coloring a little more sallow.

"You're *not* well enough. Just stay the night, at least, and then we'll see tomorrow if we can get your brother's handcart and take you back to your family that way."

Tamara leaned toward her friend and murmured, "But this cottage doesn't *feel* right."

Charlotte, curious to hear Tamara's impressions, asked, "What do you mean?"

Eleanor Dancey's voice berating Anne floated to them. Tamara just shook her head. "I don't know," she whispered. "It's all confusing. I'm just not accustomed to staying in a house, enclosed, fettered; that's likely why I feel so uneasy here. That *must* be all it is."

Charlotte examined her; the golden light of late afternoon filtered through the grimy window and touched the girl's eyes, making their warm brown almost an amber color. Tamara met her gaze and offered a weak smile, through tears that clung to her dark lashes. Charlotte would never believe that Christoph had attacked the girl, no matter what he himself feared. "Please, tell me what you remember, Tamara," she said, reaching out and taking her hand, trying to infuse some of her own strength into the gypsy.

She stared out the window, a frown wrinkling her brow. "I awoke in the night, I don't know why."

"A noise, perhaps?"

She shook her head. "I think I heard my name. I'm almost certain of that. I arose and—" She stopped, her lips parted as if to continue, but she stayed silent.

"What is it? Tamara?"

"I just can't understand it," she said, her gaze focused in the middle distance, her brow still furrowed in thought. "I *did* hear my name, and I got up and went out of the camp and toward the woods. But that seems ridiculous. Why would I do such a thing?"

"Just tell me what happened in your remembrance," Charlotte said. "Don't try to figure out *why* yet."

Tamara took a deep breath and nodded. "All right. I entered the woods; I could see somehow, though it was very dark. I don't remember what I was thinking." She blushed and turned her face away into the shadows.

"What is it? Tamara, you *do* remember what you were thinking," Charlotte said, squeezing her hand. "What is it?"

But she shook her head. "I walked," she whispered. "Then I stopped. I don't think I remember what happened next."

Charlotte, her heart pounding, remembered how Tamara had stared at Christoph when he came to the camp. She had seemed entranced by him, fascinated and attracted. If she saw him in the woods, would she admit it? Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Charlotte decided she wanted to know the truth no matter what, and she would deal with the consequences later. Even if Christoph was there, it didn't necessarily mean he was the one who hurt her. "You must remember something. Did you see anyone you recognized? Or hear a voice you had heard before?"

"No," the gypsy said, and then she met Charlotte's gaze. "No, I didn't see or hear anyone I recognized. I swear it. I *was* thinking of someone, I admit, wondering if I would ever see him again, and then . . ." She paused and put her free hand to her forehead. "It all happened so quickly. I was thrown down, and I think I heard growling and felt an awful pain, and then I suppose I screamed and fainted. That's all I remember."

"You didn't see a face, didn't feel human hands?"

Tamara shook her head helplessly. "I just don't know."

"But you must know if whatever attacked you was an animal or a person?"

"No! I tell you, I just don't know." She pulled her hand out of Charlotte's grasp and broke down, weeping.

Aghast at how pushing for answers had weakened the poor girl, Charlotte said, "All right, all right." She touched Tamara's bare arm and felt her shaking. "We'll figure this all out, don't worry. You're getting better, and I hope by tomorrow you'll be well enough to leave here."

CHARLOTTE, Christoph, and Fanny made a pact not to eat or drink anything that had not been prepared before their eyes, and so refused anything but the tea Fanny made that afternoon. Then the young ladies became extremely eager to help in the kitchen, Charlotte going so far as to say she had always been fascinated by cookery, a colossal lie. They remained in the kitchen for the rest of the afternoon, observing, helping when they could, watching when they couldn't. Eleanor Dancey was becoming more and more irritated as the day wore on, and even more so at dinner when she wanted to

add some herbs to Christoph's meal, as she had gotten into the habit of doing, but he put his hand over his food, preferring to taste the "natural" flavor, as he said, of the trout that would be the main course.

What exactly they suspected was not clear even to Charlotte, at whose instigation the changes took place, but to her there was some connection between the odd feelings both she and Christoph had been experiencing and Eleanor Dancey. The woman constantly tampered with Christoph's food, sprinkling dried or fresh herbs over his plate, even insisting on serving him personally. And yet Charlotte's own bad spell had not been preceded by anything of that kind, though she *had* eaten the honey cakes Eleanor prepared. Nothing made sense yet; it was like a human figure seen through a mist, the whole was amorphous and shrouded in mystery, unrecognizable without some key element that they did not yet possess or know. It was unthinkable to accuse the woman when they had not a clue of what to accuse her, and so they must leave it be.

The next day dawned and promised to be lovely, with golden sunlight burning off every vestige of dampness early. Charlotte impatiently waited through the morning. Christoph reported with a relieved smile that he had had no recurrence of the awful dreams, but he still did not feel confident that he was not the one to attack Tamara. When Charlotte offered to return the wolfskin kirtle, he asked her to keep it.

After lunch Charlotte made an open statement that she and Fanny were going to go down to the gypsy encampment, though Fanny was in truth going to stay in the cottage and try to go through Eleanor's things while Christoph and Tamara kept her occupied downstairs. Fanny was not the one Charlotte would have chosen for that task, but Christoph was out of the question—if he was found in her room it would have caused a terrible commotion whereas Fanny could have a plausible explanation if pressed—and Charlotte had her own reasons for going to the gypsy camp.

She left the house with Fanny, and then, when Eleanor had been called on some pretext to the small office where Tamara was sleeping, they snuck Fanny back in and up to Eleanor's bedroom. Charlotte crept back out of the cottage and bounded away, over the hills and toward the gypsy camp. She was tak-



ing back news of Tamara's recovery to Romolo and their father, but also, unbeknownst to anyone else, she was keeping her eye out for Wesmorlyn.

She delivered her message that they hoped Tamara would be well enough to come home later that day, or the next morning. Romolo was grateful but not inclined to keep her there without Fanny to stare at longingly. He was content to receive the news, relay it to his father, and then go back to his task of fashioning a new halter for one of the horses.

The day was gorgeous, warm and inviting in the way only late summer could be, with sunlight dappling the grassy hillocks beyond the gypsy encampment. She walked and walked, with no real destination, but very much hoping Wesmorlyn would meet her, for she had questions for him. Lyulph Randell's admission that Lady Hannah was infatuated with him, and that she was chasing after him in a most unladylike manner, was disturbing. Having met her at the ball, Charlotte had formed an image in her mind of the girl that did not accord well with the kind of young lady who would follow or try to entrap a gentleman into marriage, as he implied she was doing.

Perhaps Wesmorlyn would have found something out to help the puzzle pieces fall into place. At this moment it was all mysteries and no clues.

And yet as much as she needed to speak with the earl, she was troubled by her tenuous friendship with him. Perhaps it would be easier if he would just use empty flattery and obviously worship her as Mr. Randell did. Instead he kept trying to understand her, and how was that possible when she didn't understand herself? She clearly was not ready for marriage, which was no surprise, since she had formed the resolution not to marry, or at least not to marry the earl. And yet his kisses had left her trembling. Why? What was different about him from his stiff demeanor in the ballroom? Why did the handsome and flattering Mr. Randell not affect her in the same way?

All she knew was that she thought of Wesmorlyn constantly, drawn by something strong and comforting in his demeanor, and yet repelled by the other side of that, an inflexibility that irritated her free-spirited self. When he did

let loose his natural self he was overwhelmingly enticing, exciting, attractive, but that happened so seldom. He would briefly reveal how wonderful he could be, then he seemed to box up that uninhibited side of himself and return to being the stuffy, judgmental prig of the ballroom.

The sun warmed her, and she untied her bonnet and pulled it off, letting her hair come loose from its pins and tumble down her back as she strolled. She had walked a long ways from the gypsy camp, strolling in the direction Wesmorlyn always came from. As she topped a hill, she saw a figure walking alone. It was the earl, and he had just crested a far hill with his shirt and jacket undone. He was thinking deeply as he strode, a frown on his regular features, his hair wildly tousled and his shirttails fluttering in the breeze, revealing the smooth golden skin of his chest and abdomen. He was powerfully built, with sharply defined bones and sculpted muscles.

She stopped, riveted by the sight. He was always so tightly buttoned and done up. She had thought him a prig, with not a natural bone in his body. This picture of him, distracted, loosely striding with an open gait, his clothes rumpled, completely overturned any lingering impression she might have had of him as controlled and self-conscious.

He looked up, and their eyes met across the distance.

## Chapter 17

HIS MIND clouded by worry, Wesmorlyn strode to the crest of a hill and looked up, finally, to see where he was. That was when he first saw Charlotte. She stood on a hill a ways away, staring at him. The wind lifted her golden curls into a tangle, and her lithe body swayed in the breeze as if she was a beautiful flower in a meadow; she was more lovely than the most exquisite and sought-after London diamond, and with a heart and mind that he found endlessly fascinating, bewildering, infuriating, and utterly captivating. Both of them stood for a long minute staring. Then, as if they were magnets irresistibly drawn by the force of nature, they quickly went toward each other and met in the waist-high grass of the lonely meadow at the bottom of the hill. Compelled by a greedy yearning that had not left him since their last kiss, Wesmorlyn took Charlotte in his arms and kissed her, feeling the softly pouted lips against his and the seductive liteness of her form against his body.

Her hands sought his chest and touched his naked skin, sending radiating shivers through him. A wave of dizziness drove him to his knees before her and he took her down,

enfolding her body in his arms, every sensible urge of his brain, every nagging little voice that tugged at his conscience dispelled with the rush of connecting emotion and bodily sensation. It was overwhelming to feel his heart and mind come together, and her acceptance, the readiness she displayed to kiss him and hold him and touch him, heightened the new sensations he was experiencing.

Her bonnet was crushed and she laughed and tossed it to the wind as he pushed her wild blonde curls away from her face and stared into her sky blue eyes.

She stilled beneath him and her laughter died. "Wes, what is it?" she asked, one hand to his cheek. "You look so fierce, so—"

But he smothered her words with another kiss and she wrapped her arms around him, kneading his shoulders and arms. Her heartbeat was strong. The scent of her hair and the tender skin beneath his tongue and lips made his body thrum with desire. Dizzy with hunger, he lost himself to every sensible thought and for once in his life just felt his body and a strange, intoxicating joy that had nothing to do with the future, nothing to do with his hopes and plans, but just emanated from that very moment and the sun on his back and the woman beneath him. She touched his soul, challenging every firm belief, every thought, giving him a sense that life was just beginning and stretched before them, instead of the doomed sense he had always had of trudging inevitably toward the grave and the reward beyond.

Charlotte, caught off balance by his wordless physical greeting, was swept along on the tide and soon could think of nothing but this man expressing the yearning she had seen over and over in his eyes. This moment might never come again. With every tender kiss and every caress, he was asking something, and she answered by releasing her tightly controlled craving for physical contact.

Pushing his shirt and jacket down off his shoulders, she marveled at the enticing sinew and hewn muscle. His upper body was chiseled like a sculpture, hard and sleek and warm beneath her hands. As he shivered with excitement, he pushed eagerly at her clothing, tugging at the unfamiliar feminine garments, so she helped him, shedding her outer pieces of

clothing in a shameless and abandoned freedom that was exhilarating.

The sun beat down on them and the breeze that tousled the deep grasses within which they were sheltered swept over their heated skin; whatever happened, this sweet moment was for the two of them an exploration, a chance to see what it was that drew them together repeatedly. Her garters had come undone and she kicked off her stockings, slid off her petticoat, and began to unbutton the fall of his breeches as he pulled off his boots and tossed them aside.

His breathing was raspy and harsh, and his heart pounded as, propped on one elbow, he watched her fingers undo his buttons. He met her eyes, a question deep within the brown depths of his. In answer, she kept undoing, and as he rose slightly, pushed his breeches down over his slim hips, gazing steadily and with quickening breath as his penis sprang out, just as hard and sleek as his muscles, rising triumphant and lusty from a mass of brown curls. He awkwardly shed the breeches, kicking them away into the grass to rest in a tumbled heap over his boots, and knelt before her.

She had no fear. With trembling fingers she touched the fascinating length, remembering her affair with Dieter, her dancing master. He was only twenty, and she just fifteen when she lost her virginity. He was shy and gentle and she had seduced him shamelessly; she remembered the hurried meetings, the attic room she had taken him to, the secrets she had hugged to herself as a charm against the all-pervasive power of her uncle and her rebellion against it. Their lovemaking had been fumbled hurried affairs, enjoyed more as a strike against her Aunt Adele and Uncle Nikolas's dour rule and the tensions that seethed in the house than for any physical pleasure she may have wrung from each event.

But this—being with Wesmorlyn in the brilliant English sun, studying his body, wondering what it would feel like to make love with him—this was completely different. She was not a child any more, though even at fifteen she had been headstrong and had known exactly what she was doing.

She stared up at him, examining his flushed face; his whole body quivered with restrained passion as he wordlessly watched her fingers stroke him, stirring him to thicken and

lengthen. Then she rose and knelt in front of him, clad only in her chemise, and put her arms around his neck, gazing steadily into his eyes as she kissed his lips.

"Charlotte," he moaned, "We must not—"

"Shhh," she murmured and pulled him down beside her, her dress beneath them as protection from the prickly yellowing grass. "Don't say a word."

"But what shall I do?"

"You should follow your deepest desires."

He kissed her then, and ran his hand up under the short skirt of her chemise, feeling the tender skin of her thighs and bottom, cupping and fondling, exploring as if he had never touched a woman before. And in turn she touched him, running her hand along the hard edge of his hip, feeling the jutting hipbone, trailing her fingers down to the dark hair at his groin and tickling it with her fingers, feeling his stomach muscles spasm and flex.

But she felt a growing impatience as his fingers delayed, moving so very slowly to the juncture of her thighs that she thought she would go mad from the suspense. Then, slowly, his fingers eager and fumbling, he touched her, and she spread her legs, inviting his intimate touch. She kissed him deeply, suckling his tongue, laving his lips.

When he finally slipped one finger into her, her whole body rocked at the sensation and he withdrew immediately, murmuring an apology, but she took his hand and guided it back, whispering that she liked it very much, and that he shouldn't stop. Her movements meant she liked it, she explained, feeling faintly foolish that she had to tell him that, but not ashamed or apologetic.

She softly closed her hand around his penis and felt how much it had thickened. Her breath coming faster, she whispered, "Let me feel it."

"Feel it?"

Impatient, she pushed him off her and rolled him onto his back, then moved to straddle him. This was where she preferred to be anyway, she thought, looking down at him as she slowly, teasingly, lowered herself over him and rubbed softly against the thick knob, relishing the gush of warmth from the tip and shifting her hips to rub, wetting his length with their

mingled juices and quivering through her whole body with desire.

Perspiration had beaded on his forehead and his upper lip, and he closed his eyes, spanning her hips with his broad hands and digging his fingers into her waist. A shudder of lust ripped through his body and he pulled her down onto his shaft, and in one swift movement had thrown her on her back and begun to stroke eagerly, suddenly demanding.

Astonished but not unwilling to be taken so enthusiastically, she gasped and spread wider, receiving his length with some pain but more pleasure. His powerful thrusting took her close to some quivering aching fulfillment, but with a roar of carnal pleasure he released and his body jolted with orgasmic fury as he deepened his movements, burying himself inside of her and holding her tight as he collapsed on top of her, kissing her neck as he stilled.

All very well, but she was left with no such satisfaction.

"Ah, but we are not done, not nearly," she whispered in his ear, shifting to feel him better. His size had diminished some as had his stiffness, and yet that actually aided the pleasure she was seeking. She urged him with soft movements and kisses to help her, and without seeming to understand, he was willing enough; he kissed her deeply and began to move, thrusting with renewing eagerness, swelling and thickening with astonishing speed.

She stretched and wrapped her legs around him, taking him deeply into her until she could feel the pressure begin to build toward some distant and yet attainable goal. With trembling hands he stripped her of her chemise and she lay naked under him, his male heat competing with the brilliant sunshine for dominance. She cried out as he took her close, and he paused, but she dug her heels into his buttocks and pulled him closer, begging wordlessly for more of him. He responded with fervor until she felt it rise, the tension, so close, and then it burst over her in a shower of sensation, flooding her being with fiery delight.

For one long moment time stopped, and she felt deep within herself an innate knowledge that she could, if she so chose, in her moment of elation, give over to him all of her werewolf capacity, but she swiftly turned away from that

choice, shifting slightly, concentrating instead on her own needs and wants. The moment passed, and she knew then that she would never give away a part of herself that existed deep within her soul, the latent werewolfism that only lay dormant in a woman's body, ready to be given to her sons.

He didn't stop, and the tension quickly built up again; a second crashing wave of ecstasy rolled over her, rocking her body to the small of her back. He thrust deeper and finally released with a guttural cry of fulfillment.

She felt like laughing and crying, knowing that never in all her years, first with her brief experience of having a lover and then on her own, exploring the female heart of her sexuality, had she experienced such a deep sense of release and glorious bliss. As it dwindled, it left her feeling peaceful, drained, and yet oddly energized.

He had rolled off of her and lay at her side, sated and deeply breathing, almost asleep. But he opened his eyes and gazed at her, then reached out and cupped her chin, trailing a thumb over her lips. "I'm so happy, Charlotte. And deeply grateful."

She smiled over at him and curled provocatively close to his body. "You can thank me best by doing that again, only this time—"

"Have a little mercy! I don't think I can do that again for a while," he said, with a weak smile.

"No, I suppose not," she said with a delirious giggle.

"I'm so glad our first time was together. We'll always have this memory."

She almost stopped breathing and propped herself up on her elbow, looking into his dark eyes. The long grass around them fluttered and bent in the breeze, the sound like waves washing on the shore. "Do you mean that was your very first time making love?"

He kissed her chin, touching her dimple with his tongue. "Of course," he said. "When I was a student, there were girls in town who were ready and willing to make themselves available. Other fellows took advantage, but I always knew I would wait to do that with the woman I was going to marry."

*Marry.* The word resounded in her brain, chasing down the notion that it was his first time, while it was not hers. *First*



*things first.* "Wes," she said, then took a deep breath and continued, "that was not my first time."

It was a terrible blow to him, she could tell, but he said not a word. His expression was solemn, but not stiff.

As she curled close to his naked body she told him about her youthful rebellion against her uncle's strictness, and poor Dieter, sent away for his dalliance with her, but even more for how he had mindlessly acquiesced to her plan to run away together.

"I understand," he said, carefully, stroking her hair back from her face. He gazed into her eyes and trailed one finger down her neck to her collarbone. "I promise I'll never hold against you your youthful indiscretion."

She examined his expression carefully; there was no sign of reproach, though his words had made her pause for a moment. She had had to quell the first tart retort that came to her tongue, which was that she did not regret it even now, and did not feel it to be an indiscretion, but rather the natural rebellion of a high-spirited girl kept too confined. And yet she knew that many men of his status and makeup would have reviled her for her offense against morality. She put her arms around him and touched his back, running her hands up until . . . she felt between his scapula where there ought to have been a tracery of his spine. She gasped and felt, touching some kind of bone and tissue. "What is that, Wes?"

He smiled and said, "My little secret. It seems we both have secrets."

"And yours is . . . ?"

He stood, blotting out the sun, and shrugged; slowly, with startling grace, wings unfolded from his back and spread. Great, gauzy wings, the sun beaming through the pearly silken structure that was supported by thin bony extensions.

Wordless and gasping for breath, she stared. He was beautiful, his naked body a golden, muscular contrast to the ethereal splendor of his astounding wings. "You're an angel!"

"Well, not exactly," he said, his expression growing serious.

"Can you fly?"

He nodded.

She leaped to her feet and jumped up and down, clapping. "Let me see you!"

His heart pounded as he watched her small breasts bob enticingly, her slim figure perfectly pale in the glorious sunshine but for one small mole near her sharp collarbone. Sinuous curves, marble-pale skin, rosy, peaked nipples jutting upward, the soft, downy hollow at the juncture of her thighs: if he thought too much about what had just happened, he would become aroused all over again. He may never have experienced sexual fulfillment with a woman, but his own body was familiar to him, arousal an old challenge, a demon to be wrestled and defeated. This time instead of defeating it he had allowed his desire to have fulfillment, and now they were wed, in his own heart; she was his wife, and he was overwhelmed with joy. He could even forgive her sexual experience with another man. His wings beat slowly and the lift, when it came, was controlled. He took two giant steps on tiptoe and soared straight up, swooped down over her head, and then landed behind her.

She whirled and bounced up and down, her blue eyes round with amazement. She clasped her hands together under her chin. "How I wish I could fly! It must be thrilling!"

"I never realized how much I glory in it until these last few days. I think I was ashamed to love it so, but I do."

"How could you not love it? It is glorious. *You're* glorious." She smiled at him and held out her hands. "I too have a secret, though, other than my past experience with Dieter."

"Oh?" he said, coming to her and wrapping her in his arms, folding his great wings around her too. It created a sheltered world with just the two of them encased in the pearly, luminous cocoon, the sun glimmering through with hazy warmth. He kissed her then, reveling in the sweet urgency of her ardent response.

If it could only stay like this, if he could shelter her from the world, he thought, feeling the building passion, he wouldn't care another moment about anything in her past. Outside of this meadow the world awaited, though, and her unconventionality went bone deep. And yet he was committed now, forever. He had sworn an oath that his first sexual experience would be with his wife, and so she would be. But how would

they go on? Could he teach her to restrain her inappropriate wildness? She must learn to subjugate her will to his or there would be no peace in their home.

He set all that aside and concentrated on Charlotte, and her radiant face uplifted to his. "What is your other secret?" he murmured.

Shyly, she said, the pearly glow of sunshine making her blue eyes shimmer with opalescent light, "My family has long been . . . well, I know you know about Lyulph Randell and accept him as a friend. Our family has the same curious history."

"What?" he cried, not understanding at first. But then, as he saw her expression turn serious, the shock hit him in his gut and he released her, staggering back, his wings folding swiftly to protect themselves between his scapula in reflexive action. And yet she couldn't mean what it sounded like, she couldn't possibly . . . they couldn't be . . . his mind reeled.

"We are werewolves," she said, frowning and covering her nakedness. "Or at least the von Wolfram men are all werewolves, and the women, well, we . . . we pass that on to our sons." She watched him, puzzlement in her blue eyes. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head and stared at her, her nakedness a reminder of his own lack of control and sexual gluttony in her arms. He had been seduced utterly by her animalistic abandon to discard all of the prudent planning and self-restraint of his entire adulthood. He had known her barely two weeks and every carefully laid plan and closely held tenet of his life lay in ruins around him.

*Werewolves!* Horror filled him, crowding out every other thought and feeling. She was of a werewolf family, and he had done the unthinkable. Their tainted blood made them walk the fine line just above the abyss of eternal damnation, and he had fornicated with her, joining their bodies in lusty abandon, dangling his family's only hope of redemption above that deadly abyss with no regard.

He was devastated. He collapsed on the ground and drew his knees up to his forehead. What would become of him now? In four hundred years of living on neighboring estates, no Wesmorlyn had ever married nor had children with a Randell, and yet, with all his good intentions he had broken the

most sacred of vows every Wesmorlyn son made his father, never to contaminate himself. He had been less reserved than his own little sister and had allowed this wolf-woman to devour his good sense with her fevered attraction.

He looked up at her; her expression betrayed shock and anguish, but he had no reassuring words to offer. What would become of them? They could never make love again, for he had sworn not to mingle his bloodline with that of a werewolf. He struggled to his feet, weariness overwhelming him.

"I never guessed, though I should have," he said, feeling bile rise in his throat at the thought of the danger he had been toying with. Revulsion twisted through him. "Your tainted blood makes you attractive," he whispered, still aching for her, still wanting her with a treacherous yearning. "Like flames, you and your people are hypnotically beautiful, and wickedly perilous. I never guessed, not once. And Christoph?"

She watched him, all of the joy gone from her lovely face. "Of course. He's my brother; Christoph is a werewolf."

"And responsible for the attack on the gypsy girl?"

Her expression darkened, the blue of her eyes becoming smoky and her chin rising. "No! *Never!*"

"Do you know for certain? Can you vouch for him?"

"I don't need to. You do not understand my brother one bit," she said, her accent coarsening in her anger. "Though he has suffered heartbreak in his life and has faced terrible things no man should have to face, he is still the finest, most principled man in existence. And I am including you among those over which he is superior, sir!" She shivered and began methodically to dress, frowning at grass stains on her dress and bundling her unused stays and stockings into a tight ball. "I thought I could trust you," she said, her words ground out between clenched teeth. She would not meet his eyes. "I thought you would understand, being different. I thought finally I had found someone with whom I could just be myself."

He didn't believe that for one second. She had never trusted him, never fully relied on his judgment and constancy. "If that was true why did you not tell me before we made love? Charlotte—"

"Don't speak to me. I was right all along. You are a cold-hearted prig, with no more human emotion than . . ." She

paused and finally looked at him. "Human emotion. Why should I expect that, since you're not even human, are you?"

A deep freeze had taken hold of him and was stiffening his limbs, making even his face expressionless, he feared. "Yes, I am human," he said carefully.

"How can that be? Half angel, half man?"

"It is a long and complicated story," he said, on a sigh. He swiped his hand over his face, weariness shuddering through him.

"Then it is best not told, is that true? For then you would have to linger in my tainted presence and suffer my perilous attraction," she said, resentment in every line of her body and every word that dropped from her lips like shards of ice.

Patiently, he said, "You don't understand, Charlotte, how long I have labored to raise my family up to be worthy, and how in one afternoon . . ." He couldn't go on. He didn't want to hurt her, but the truth was that she would be the death of his ambitions for redemption for his family in their generation. The damage may have been done already, and he could not even right the immorality in which he had indulged by marrying her. Though he had felt them to be wed, joining with her in that intimate union was unthinkable now.

His heart throbbed with a swift ache of fear. Had they already made a child? Had he been tricked into creating that unknown and unknowable creature, a half-breed of the wolf blood and the humanus angelus? While he had thought her his future bride, it hadn't mattered if she became pregnant. But now, knowing what she was, seeing clearly for the first time how he had been drawn in and used, he was furious.

And yet she was staring at him with heartbreak in her lovely eyes and he realized in that instant that there had been no intent to soil him. She hadn't known, of course, what he was, just as he had not known what she was.

"I never want to see you again," she whispered, her words carried up on a breeze.

He held out one hand to her in a gesture of peace. "Come, Charlotte, don't be so melodramatic."

She laughed, a sharp bark of sound in the quiet day. "Melodramatic?" She clutched at her gown, struggling to keep it on since it was still undone. But she retained every

scrap of her dignity as she drew herself up and said, "You are an angel and despise the fact that I am of the werewolf blood. I think we have the very definition of melodrama here, the recipe perfect, the circumstance enviable." Her tone rose, and hysteria seeped into the laughter. "We have made love, or what I thought was making love but was clearly, to you, just an insufferable allurements, a trap set to drag you down into the filth and muck within which my family roils endlessly."

"I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did," she said, calming. A light breeze drifted down the hillside and teased her curls into movement. She stood, proud and perfectly still, staring at him. "Yes, you meant that. And that is the tragedy of it. To be so unfeeling and yet imagine yourself compassionate, to be so judgmental and yet think yourself honorable. You are unspeakably revolting. I meant what I said. I never want to see you again." She turned to walk away, but then turned back, slowly, not meeting his eyes, but just staring down at the grassy patch where they had lain in their loving embrace. "I may never know what has been behind this odd episode of Eleanor Dancey and Lyulph Randell, but I deeply feel that Eleanor is not good for Fanny. My poor sister feels no connection and thinks herself at fault. My shame is that it was my choice to bring her here; my decision has led to all of this unhappiness. But at least I have learned a lesson and been humbled. England is poisonous to us all, I think, and so we'll take our filthy selves away, back to Germany, back home, where we are valued and loved."

With that she whirled and ran, her golden hair fluttering in the breeze and her abandoned, broken straw hat tumbling after, chasing her. He had no heart to stop her and nothing to say. He picked up the hat. She topped the distant hill and looked back, once, before disappearing down the other side.

Wesmorlyn looked down at the trodden grass where they had lain and made love. It was over.

## Chapter 18

LYULPH RANDELL, as he strode over the moor, growled in fury under his breath, feeling the wolf rise in him, restrained only by the sunlight that kept him human. He needed to either vent his ire, or contain it. Mother Sarah had been right about where Wesmorlyn and Charlotte were, and Lyulph had found them with little trouble, even though they were some distance from the gypsy encampment. The sight would haunt him forever, perhaps. The moment he had crested the hill and seen Wesmorlyn and Charlotte together, in the meadow—she naked, gorgeous and gloriously alive and he not deserving of such passionate bounty—he knew she belonged to him body and soul.

He had been unsure of his path, wondering if he had made a terrible mistake in deserting his original plans, but now the fierce bite of jealousy had sunk its teeth into him like a parasite and would not abate. Charlotte von Wolfram was his mate. He must separate her from Wesmorlyn and convince her of her destiny, which was to unite with him and bond to the depth that only another of the wolf blood was capable.

And she must *never* be with Wesmorlyn again. He kicked

at a rock with his booted foot, wanting to howl with rage, but he strode on, topping another rough tor. He should never have let it go so far, nor listened to anything but his own instinct. Charlotte's most fertile time was fast approaching. He had been able to tell the moment he had seen her again at Morwenna's cottage; any sexual contact she had in that period of days would absolutely end in bearing a child.

A child. It must be *his* child. He stopped, took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, calming his heart rate and tamping down his fury, containing it with ruthless will. Long ago he had learned the bitter lesson that allowing his most dramatic emotions free expression would only garner contempt and disappointment among his peers. As unwolflike as it was, restraining his natural impulses was necessary.

He must think rationally. If he was the one to impregnate Charlotte, then he would be the one to whom she would be bound for life. That had been the way of their people since time immemorial. Even if she was unsure, bearing their child would give him a say in what she did and where she went; by law the child would be his, and a woman like her would never stray from her baby.

He sniffed the air, discerning myriad scents; the gypsy encampment was east of him, downwind, and yet he could still smell their fire and the stewpot. Horse dung, laundry drying in the sun, fecund women: all were other smells from the gypsies. But the stream that divided his property was nearby, and with the freshwater scent that teased his nostrils was something else, the smell of sex and sweat. *Wesmorlyn*. Why the earl did not flutter home on his pretty wings was not a mystery to Lyulph.

*Charlotte*. Drawn by the sight of them together in the lonely meadow, Lyulph had crept close and had seen her lithe, pale, perfect body intermittently through the tall grasses, urging the stuffy earl on to sexual feats that would certainly be beyond most males. It had made him hungry just to watch—her slender back arched, her inviting bottom rhythmically moving—and with a throbbing erection filling his breeches it had taken every fiber of his being to restrain natural urges that would require her body devoted to his needs to sate. That time would come. Soon. Self-control would be rewarded.



Lyulph had to hand it to the earl, he had kept up with her, almost. Now all of his energy would be required just to walk out of there. He would need to recover before flitting off to Wesmorlyn Abbey.

And there he was; Lyulph spotted the earl sitting on the crumbling stone bridge that crossed the stream. Now he would find out if Mother Sarah, his faithful servant, had been right after all; had the earl and Charlotte's enormous dissimilarity in personality taken its toll and made the rift he had witnessed in London even wider, into a vast, unfathomable chasm? From the scene of sexual excess he had witnessed it did not appear so. He had desperately wanted to challenge Wesmorlyn, but that was a fight that he might win, or might not.

And regardless of the outcome of the battle, an open challenge would be the end of any hope he might have of taking Charlotte not only bodily, but her mind and heart, too, for though some women liked men fighting over their favors, she didn't appear to be one of them. He believed he still had a chance to attract her, despite her unexpected resistance to even the bewitchment Morwenna had been inflicting upon her group.

Mother Sarah had been firm in her belief that it would end badly between Wesmorlyn and Charlotte. But if the gypsy was wrong, and the prophesied rift had not occurred, then he would need to solve the problem himself. He would tell Wes her family secret and see if that would make her abhorrent to him, for he was getting desperate and must separate them somehow.

He sauntered toward the earl. The hairs at the base of his skull stood on end, and it was an ordeal not to bare his teeth in aggression, but he forced the snarl into a smile. "Well, well, well," he said. "What are you doing so casually on my property, Wes? Out strolling, so far from the Abbey?"

Wesmorlyn scrambled to his feet. "Randell! I will be on my way."

"For heaven's sake, calm yourself."

"No, I'll go."

Lyulph stopped and examined Wesmorlyn's face and attitude. It was not that of one glorying in the sexual conquest of

a fulfilling lover. His shoulders were slumped and he was slovenly, not the prim and perfect earl he always was. His shirt and jacket were undone, his boots scuffed, and his chestnut hair tumbled over his forehead and lifted in the breeze. "She told you, didn't she?" he said without thinking, sure of his conclusion.

"What?"

"I saw the countess just a while ago storming across the moor," he fabricated. "The two of you were just together and she told you."

A wary expression clouded Wesmorlyn's eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Impulse had led Lyulph so far, and now it must be his plan for the moment. "I know about you and Charlotte. Mother Sarah, the gypsy queen, has told me that you and she have been meeting on the moor. I didn't see it as my business to interfere, but I was frankly surprised. I thought you better than that, better than skulking around in shadows spying and taking advantage of a sweet girl like the countess."

"You don't know anything about it!"

"Oh, yes I do," Lyulph said, gaining more assuredness as he watched the earl's eyes. Something had happened after Lyulph retreated, and the countess had told the earl her family secret, which he had not known before. There was just something in Wesmorlyn's slumped shoulders and wary gaze that told him it was true. "Countess Charlotte told you. Don't deny it; I can see it on your face. She told you her family secret."

"You know about them?"

"Of course I do," Lyulph replied, carefully watching his nemesis's expression. "I knew the moment they entered the ballroom at Lady Harroway's. One of the wolf blood always recognizes another immediately. My hackles rose at Count Christoph's entrance."

"So you knew all along that she was of that same kind."

"Well of course, *she* is of the same blood as her brother. And she told you that today, didn't she?"

"Yes," he said, hanging his head.

It was unbearably funny to watch Wesmorlyn, the self-righteous prig, now faced with his worst nightmare, union

with a werewolf family. He had thought that if the earl found out about the von Wolfram legacy he would see the opportunity that existed, of joining his unique heritage with that of a werewolf female. It was enthralling, the idea of such a union . . . at least to Lyulph. Lady Hannah, the insipid little angel girl, had little attraction to him but as a tool toward revenge on her family and mother to a new breed of human. What would their children be? It had given him chills of anticipation just wondering. And yet he had given up that plan for a chance at the enticing Charlotte. If he could just win her, the trade would be worth it.

"Why didn't you tell me, Randell?" Wesmorlyn said, his voice thick with misery.

"It wasn't my secret to tell, Wes, old man. But it must have been a blow to you, given how you have always thought of werewolves as lower than the serpent that slithers across the rocks."

"I've never treated you badly," the earl said, sharply.

"Not openly, but it was in your eyes. You hold us in disgust."

"It's not disgust I feel," Wesmorlyn said. He opened his mouth to speak, paused, but then said, "But my family, we're . . . we have other desires and aims than the earthy and corporal. You indulge yourself, with no restraint." His chin went up, and his expression became disdainful. "How can we help but conclude that our family line must not be corrupted by yours? Don't forget, Lyulph, I knew you as a youth," he said pointing one finger. "You may have learned discretion as you have matured, but I saw you in all of your excess."

Lyulph nodded. "I knew it. You never said a word, but my women, the drinking, the fun I had . . . it was all a sign of how soiled I was by my so-called animal impulses."

"The whores and the alcohol," Wesmorlyn said as he shuddered and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Randell, but that is how I feel. You were beneath me, if I am to be honest. I never wanted to say that, and never, by any word, wished you to feel it."

Lyulph restrained himself with great difficulty from launching himself headlong at the imperious earl. "But now you have descended . . . is that it? Is that what is rankling?" He watched Wes's face, and then said, with spiteful sarcasm,

"But I suppose she seduced you, teased you. Was that it? Our kind is corrupt, but attractive, and she seduced you away from your pious perfection with her animal attraction."

"Careful, Randell," the earl said, his voice throaty and harsh.

The truth came to him then in a blinding insight. All their confrontations at school and later, among mutual friends, came back to him in a rush, but with a new explanation. "All that time, at school and after, you and your clique of pure, high-minded friends . . . you *envied* me!" he crowed, and laughed out loud, the harsh sound drifting away on the quickening breeze. "You were jealous of my freedom, and the meriment, all while you toiled away at your books being the perfect student, the perfect little gentleman."

"Never! I would *never* have lowered myself to frolic in the filth with your kind!" Wesmorlyn said, his face suffused with a dull brick color.

Lyulph pushed his face into the other man's. "But now you have! Ah, poor fellow," he mocked, "did she draw you in and subjugate you? She is very beautiful, and very alluring, a tempting little morsel. That is what happened to me in the garden, at the ball, I'm sure you understand now. I was drawn in by her wanton ways; the little trollop enticed me into losing my diffidence."

Wesmorlyn balled his fists, trying to keep down a wave of fury that ripped into him at Lyulph's taunting words. "I would stop talking about her that way now, before I am forced to hurt you."

"Ah, I see. She has dug in more than just her sexual claws. She has burrowed directly to your heart. She's not good enough for you, old man. She's just a little whore. Give her to me," he said with a knowing leer. "I know what to do with her. I'll keep her busy in my bed."

Wesmorlyn's fury boiled and he launched himself off the edge of the bridge at the other man, tackling him to the ground and rolling with him down the embankment into the stream. His hands closed around Lyulph's throat and he throttled him, his vision blurred, everything covered in a haze of red. Even the cold water flowing around him could not cool his rage.

"Stop it you fool," Randell said, struggling to talk. He

flailed out at Wesmorlyn, catching him on the chin and sending him flying back. "Just stop it!" he said, staggering to his feet and retreating a few yards, dripping wet and disheveled. "Don't be an idiot."

Wesmorlyn, soaking wet, heaving, and feeling the exhaustion beat him down so much he could not stand, was sick to his core at this ridiculous compulsion he had to fight Lyulph whenever they met now. What was wrong with him? He had never in his life allowed emotion to make his decisions, but now he was no better than an animal, the way he let anger rule his actions. He covered his face and let the cold water on his hands run down and cool his heated cheeks and neck.

"You *know* I'm right," Randell said, clutching at his throat and coughing. "She's not good enough for you. You can't marry her, not now, knowing the truth. That's it, isn't it? That's why you're so upset." He paused and cleared his throat, taking a deep breath. "What shall you do now about your engagement?" he said, pushing and prodding his rival. "You feel honor-bound, but you cannot marry her and bring forth the next generation of Wesmorlyn heirs. A she-wolf countess? Wolf-angel babies? The thought sickens you, doesn't it?" Lyulph recovered quickly with another deep shuddering breath, and straightened. "Tell you what," he said, straightening and watching the earl's red face, "I'll take her off your hands." He shook off another shower of water and passed his hand over his hair.

"You say it as if she is a mare you would consider purchasing," Wesmorlyn said, resentfully.

Lyulph shrugged. His dark hair glistened in the brilliant sunshine and he swiftly restored order to his impeccable clothes, damp but hardly damaged at all by their scrap. With a slight smile, he said, "Despite our differences, Wes, I have always considered you a worthy fellow. Any enmity has never been on my side. I may have envied you at times, but beyond that I consider you a valuable neighbor and an ally." With studied grace, he leaned one hip against the stone bridge abutment and gazed at Wesmorlyn as he struggled to his feet. "I like Charlotte. She is, perhaps, a little wild and uncouth, and you can see that she is too willing to succumb to the lusts of the flesh, but for me that is not such a problem as it is for you.

You are an earl; your countess will be expected to dine with dukes and princes, hostess elegant parties, perhaps even sponsor Lady Hannah's first season. She must meet the Queen. Can you see her doing any of that?"

"No," Wesmorlyn agreed. She was impetuous and headstrong, and yet every fault in her character he would have overlooked, if only she did not possess the fatal flaw; her blood betrayed them both. He couldn't abandon the principles of a lifetime for Charlotte; what would that say about his character? He had sworn to uphold the tradition of his ancestors. No Wesmorlyn could ally him or herself to one of the wolf blood.

And yet, she was not an animal to be traded between them. He met Lyulph's steady gaze, searching his eyes, as he left the stream and waded up the embankment. Did he genuinely care for Charlotte, or was this some kind of charade? Could he bear thinking of them together, seeing them, as he inevitably would if Lyulph and Charlotte wed? Wesmorlyn touched the bruising at the corner of his mouth and winced. "You have a rather good left, there, Lyulph. Better than in our school days."

"I was untrained and undisciplined then. Wild. Unmanageable. I have seen the benefit of harnessing my energy toward a goal."

Chilled, Wesmorlyn watched Randell's green, changeable eyes. There was something behind them, an implacable will that had never been there in his youth when he had been unruly but good-hearted and warm. "It is not my place to discuss the countess's future," he said, stiffly. "Her last words to me after we argued were that she and her brother and sister are going back to Germany, and that is for the best, I believe."

"Really." The other man backed away and bowed, saying, "Take your time recovering, Wesmorlyn. If you need help getting back to the Abbey, the gypsies will loan you a horse . . . for a price. I hope I didn't hurt you too badly."

"No more than I hurt you," he replied.

As Randell walked away, disappearing over the far tor, Wesmorlyn contemplated all that had just occurred. His whole body still registered the shock of Randell's accusation that he was jealous of his freedom and always had been. It

couldn't be true, could it? Perhaps it was; seeing Lyulph transform for the first time had been appalling and exhilarating at the same time, and after that his own uniqueness, his wings, had seemed tame and drab by comparison. And Randell's friends had always seemed more exciting and dashing than his own. But now was not the time for morose reflection; something was not quite right and he needed to figure out what it was. He should have asked about Eleanor Dancey while he had the chance, but it was too late now. He supposed he could run after the man and ask, but perhaps there were other ways of getting the information. He didn't think he could bear another moment of Randell's mocking company just then.

With energy renewed by necessity, Wesmorlyn stood and took off his jacket, squeezing the excess water out of it and folding it carefully, then removing his shirt and doing the same, his actions methodical and practiced. Then he shrugged his shoulders and tested his wings. Home was not an impossible distance and the need was great. He would take the chance. His great wings slowly beating, he lifted from the ground and ascended to the blue and golden heavens, becoming, for those on the ground, just another bird soaring overhead.

THE dinner hour had arrived and the homely dining room of the Whip and Wheel coaching inn was full of solitary men eating pasties, pies, and homemade sausages. The taproom across the dreary, narrow hallway was low-ceilinged and dark, and was equally as busy. This was the place where Burgess, the coach driver in Randell's employ, was said to spend his evenings, Wesmorlyn had heard. Smoke from a dozen pipes drifted like fog and men bent their heads together in earnest conversation, much of it in Cornish, the blurred and thick accent buzzing through the hazy pall kept down at head height by the low-beamed ceiling. Bare wood tables lined the walls; seating was confined to benches polished by decades of broadcloth-clad bottoms. Wesmorlyn strolled along, peering through the dimness. Some conversations stopped as he passed, but he did his best to ignore them and slouch convincingly through the room.

Dressed in old clothes discarded by his coachman, he was hoping to be taken as a carter or driver passing through, but clothes alone would not do it. His attitude and speech must convey the correct status. He shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and plastered his unshaven face with what he hoped was a dour expression. It was not as difficult as it would normally have been, because he felt a deep shaft of hopelessness piercing his heart, so he let his emotions show on his face instead of schooling his expression to a bland mildness. The bruise by his mouth helped; he looked like a ruffian who fought regularly.

Though deeply disturbed, he felt truly alive, and could feel the blood pulse through his veins. Even as he tried to defeat it, desire and passion for Charlotte still overwhelmed him, and he didn't know how to eradicate those earthy sensations, or even if he wanted to. Making love with her had taught him lessons that had eluded him in life. His human side was stronger than he had ever been willing to acknowledge. And loving a woman was more than a physical act; it took every bit of him, human and angelic. Corners of his soul that had never been explored were now illuminated with the bright light of self-examination, and he wasn't sure he was proud of what he saw. It was unnerving and enthralling, all at the same time.

But self-knowledge would have to wait. There was a more important task at hand. He must get to the bottom of the mystery of why Randell had lured Charlotte to Cornwall. A lifetime of living in Cornwall must aid him in reproducing the distinct West Country accent, for he would need to be authentically Cornish. He ambled through the barroom.

There, by the standing bar, was the fellow described by Charlotte, his unusual broadness of shoulders, swarthy features, and one drooping eyelid marking him as Burgess, the carriage driver who dropped them in the middle of nowhere. He was alone; he flirted with a comely barmaid and flipped her a coin, which she caught in midair with practiced ease.

"Thou bist handy at that, lass," Wesmorlyn remarked as he approached, broadening his accent, and adopting the mannerisms he knew from a youth spent in the stable, grooming his



own horse and listening to the men tell tall tales of their conquests among the local lasses.

“‘Ow thee do prate,” the young woman said with a saucy wink, eying him favorably in comparison to the swarthy Burgess, and then asking his preference in beverage. He ordered stout, and one for Burgess, too, which won from the man a nod of thanks. But the gratitude was scant and overlaid by a wariness Wesmorlyn knew would be hard to overcome in a West Country fellow.

So he didn’t say a thing for a while, just kept refilling their tankards with stout. The noise increased as the dinner hour passed and men began to drink in earnest, and Wesmorlyn felt he must say something or go mad from the smoke and hum of conversation, like a swarm of bees in his ears. The other men in the room avoided Burgess, casting him surly glances or ignoring him, as was their inclination. Wesmorlyn had heard the fellow was not liked by anyone because of his willingness to take offence and beat others up when he was in his cups.

Wesmorlyn’s eyes teared from the pipe smoke and his stomach began to rebel against the liberal downing of dark beer. He felt it coming before he knew it, and a mighty belch erupted, relieving the gas building in his stomach. He would have been horrified, except the barmaid just glanced over from her conversation and giggled, and Burgess clinked his tankard against Wesmorlyn’s.

Finally, his mood mellowed by gallons of good beer, the coach driver began a guarded conversation with Wesmorlyn, which the earl gradually guided to a conversation about a humorous story he had heard doing the rounds of a couple of young foreign lasses being dropped off in the middle of nowhere as a good lark. He laughed drunkenly, and then hiccupped; the brew had gone to his head, and he would need to keep his wits about him.

“Ar, forrin’ lasses they were,” Burgess said, with a slow wink.

“Don’t tell me tha knowst the tale?”

“Summat,” the man said, with a mysterious nod and another wink.

“What zay thee then? Who be th’lasses, and who the

driver?" Wesmorlyn said, employing his thickest accent. Would Burgess admit his part?

"Hush, naw," Burgess said, but then leaned forward and continued: "Harkee here, zur and I be trauthful, dedent oy jutz be the one? T'were twa forrin lasses, and long side th'road didst dump them, loike to be trash." He chuckled.

Wesmorlyn burned inside at Burgess's gay recitation of dumping the two girls along the side of the road as if they were garbage, but he held back his fury, for the driver had not done it on his own. Why would he have? There must be some reason behind it, and Lyulph Randell must have had a hand.

So he led the conversation along, letting it weave tipsily, knowing that too direct a questioning would sober even the inebriated Burgess. The driver admitted dropping the girls at a preplanned spot on the way to Bodmin. He didn't know why, but his master was a deep thinker, and had ordered it so.

And then, Burgess said, glowering, "Bloody minded bastard."

"Bloody minded? 'Ow zo?"

Burgess, with many pauses to down more beer, drunkenly related to his captive audience how his employer had a hatred for one enemy in particular so deep his whole life was bent to destroying the man, no matter what it took. Wesmorlyn was puzzled; was he this enemy? And what did any of it have to do with Charlotte and Fanny?

He cautiously probed for more information. It seemed that Lyulph Randell was consumed by this hatred, and had hoped to take away not only the man's sister, but his home and even his life. Not, the fellow added hastily, that it would be murder. Oh no, his master was a deep thinker, and would certainly not kill the man outright. There were other ways of destroying a man until he withered away and died or took his own life. Wesmorlyn, sobered by the awful implications of what he was hearing, shakily asked who the object of his employer's hatred was, but Burgess, even staggering drunk, would not give a name. Not that it needed to be spoken.

"Ar naw, whut dost thou care?" the man asked, suspicion thick in his tone.

Wesmorlyn called for more beer, and the man took a long drink from the tankard, his whole face disappearing before he

came up for air, foamy ale dripping off his chin. He forgot his suspicion enough to speak on, wending through a long tale of the Witch of Bodmin Moor, who had confused and bewitched many a fair lad into doing her dirty work. Fair of face she was, Burgess confided, but foul of deed. She stole souls, draining the weak and unwary until there was nothing left but a husk, like chaff from wheat.

"Tha'st met her?" Wesmorlyn asked, wondering how to get back to the man's employer and his enemy.

"Ay, harkee, bra aand saucy I be," he said, claiming bravery and impertinence, as he leaned close and exclaimed, his malt-soured breath puffing out the words, "but naw would'st I go to herr, nay matter th'lure, fur she be m'maister's doxy."

Wesmorlyn frowned into the smoky gloom; Burgess claimed he would not respond to her allurements no matter what, for this supposed Witch of Bodmin Moor was Randell's mistress. As well as he knew Lyulph Randell and as much as he had been in his company this last spring and summer, he had heard no word of any mistress in his keeping. Unless a woman who had once resided at Moor Cottage, he thought, with a sick feeling in his stomach, a woman he had heard tell of as Morwenna Maxwell, was she. But then was this the same woman as the one now claiming to be Fanny's mother?

It was confusing and inconclusive. But a few things were certain. Randell had ordered Burgess to dump Fanny and Charlotte by the roadside and had some ulterior motive for doing so. Far from firing the man for the deed, he had rewarded the driver. And if the woman at Moor Cottage was known to him intimately and he had lied about it, then she was certainly not Eleanor Dancey. But why? How did luring Fanny and Charlotte away from London with a false story benefit Randell? Unless, as he now suspected, the entire plot was aimed at Wesmorlyn all along. But still, the plan was hazy and uncertain.

Burgess stood, woozily, wavering on his feet. "Got ta go naw. Big doin's, aand me wid no wits." He put his hand to his head and took a deep breath, trying to sober up.

"Big doings?"

He shuddered drunkenly. "M'maister did zay, I mait be

one whut did that deed, nor mait be Diggory, dedn't I chuse zo. Pure Diggory . . . haw ist bewitched, und effen he doan do whut maister zay, he smart's turrible fur it."

Burgess was in no shape to do anything that night, so the hapless Diggory, that Burgess spoke of as bewitched and obliged to obey Lyulph Randell, would be forced to do whatever was to be done.

Wesmorlyn watched him leave. Why, he wondered, thunderstruck by the information he had just received, did Lyulph Randell want him destroyed? He was forced now to believe that everything, all the plotting and everything that had so far happened to Hannah, Charlotte, Christoph, Fanny, and even, likely, the gypsy girl, could be laid at Lyulph Randell's door. But why? And how?

Questions teemed in Wesmorlyn's logical mind, adding up to sums he could not calculate. How long had Lyulph Randell been concocting plans to destroy him? For years? Since they were in school? And was poor Hannah's devastating attraction to him, resulting in her self-destructive and unfathomable behavior, part of the plan?

One thing was clear: the Eleanor Dancey residing at Moor Cottage was not the real lady, not Fanny's mother. Despite the terrible terms on which he and Charlotte had parted, he could not let the von Wolframs suffer, not when he had knowledge that they needed, and especially since it all seemed ultimately to be a scheme to destroy *him*; they had been caught up in it only because of their ill-timed appearance in London. Something was coming to a head. Tonight was perhaps the night, or tomorrow, but he had to get word to Charlotte immediately.

"IT is all falling apart around me, I tell you!" Lyulph said, pacing in the kitchen garden immediately by the back door of Moor Cottage. Twilight was falling, and the light from the kitchen window cast a faint buttery glow over the green, lush herbs that grew in riotous overabundance. "Your witchcraft isn't working. Charlotte doesn't trust me now; how can I achieve my goals without her trusting me?"

"And just what are your goals, Lyulph?"

Lyulph stopped pacing abruptly and stared at his mistress, signaled to be watchful by something in her voice, a tone, a hint of asperity or something else. She was not one to toy with, nor to betray, at least not openly. His change in plans had not been communicated to her, for he was sure she would not be sanguine about the adjustment. His deepest fear was that she had her own plans, and had not shared them with him. "What is it, Morwenna? Are you troubled about something?"

"Troubled? No, Lyulph, I am not *troubled*," she said, her voice silky and seductive. "But I wonder if you have been completely frank with me about your plans."

"I've told you everything," he said, carefully, his nostrils flaring. He scented danger. "I cannot have another werewolf family in England; it just will not do. My plan is to drive the von Wolframs from England by disgracing them all."

She simply stared at him, her hypnotic eyes holding his gaze.

"To do that," he went on, compelled by her stare, "I need complete mastery over them. It is imperative that they trust me if I am to thoroughly destroy them. That's why you've been feeding them your potions; I need them wholly in my power."

She just stared at him.

"I've told you over and over; I will not allow another werewolf to settle in England and begin to breed. My family worked for centuries to establish dominance and drive the last of our kind away, fending off every challenge. I am on the very brink of eliminating any threat from Wesmorlyn and forcing Lady Hannah into marriage."

"Then why do you dally with Countess Charlotte?"

Ah, so she had sensed his confusion and ambivalence of the last few days; he must be careful that she not discern his growing need for the countess. There was something about Charlotte von Wolfram that attracted him as no other woman had ever done. Of course the werewolf blood that flowed through both of their hearts was a connection deeper than he had ever thought possible. He hadn't foreseen his feelings, but then he had never met another of his own kind. Charlotte was wild at heart, and he had not been able to get her out of

his head since their kiss in the garden in London. That interest had grown into his current obsession. Perhaps Morwenna already felt it, for her senses about such things were heightened during the time of her menses and she had often come close to invading his mind at such a time. Always powerful—to his detriment he had angered her more than once and felt the sting of her abilities—during that time of her cycle she was formidable, her connection to the rhythm of nature intensifying her energy tenfold.

He had to keep her content, and in such a way that she detected no deceit. He took her in his arms, blanking his mind of every thought about Charlotte. Instead he let himself feel Morwenna, and their powerful physical attraction for each other reasserted dominance in the human and sensible part of him. He became fully aware of her lush curves pressed to his body, and experienced a surge of arousal as he bent to kiss her in the shadows of the door overhang. She was his kind of woman, full-bodied, curvaceous, and wide-hipped, bound to the earth through something more than animal instinct. Her dark eyes were clouded with desire as he released her. She sighed and licked her lips.

“Does that convince you, my own bewitching Morwenna?” he said, huskily, his hands sliding down to her waist and around, locking them behind her back and holding her firmly to him. “What I do, I do for us, for our future,” he murmured. “I have promised you offspring, children that unite our unique abilities and who will continue our heritage, but first, to protect my legacy, to ensure the fruit of my loins becomes as powerful as I plan, I must use my own abilities to disgrace forever and thus drive the von Wolfram siblings from our shores. *Trust me!*”

She stared up at him. “I do trust you,” she said, softly, cupping his cheek with her warm palm. “I trust that you know where your best interest lies. I trust you will be intelligent and not anger me. If you betray me, you must know you will feel my wrath. I will never leave you in peace, and though I am forbidden to kill, I can make you wish for death!” She tightened her grip and pulled his face down to hers. She whispered in his ear, “You have made promises to me, Lyulph Randell, vows to which I will hold you, and I

have made my bond with you. Our offspring will be more powerful than either of us could dream. You will marry that little wench, Lady Hannah, and break Wesmorlyn under your heel, and then it will all be ours."

She kissed his ear and nibbled his earlobe. Too late Lyulph felt her slip her tongue into his ear, the poison of her innate cruelty deeply implanted. He pulled back and clapped one hand to his ear, feeling the seething coil of treachery wind into him. "What have you done?" he said on a groan.

She smiled, her eyes darkening to coal. "I have ensured that you will be faithful and do what you have vowed to do, and come back to me," she whispered, her voice a soft and sibilant hiss. "If you betray me, you will feel the sting and be driven mad by it. Unless you remain devoted to me your very soul will drain from you like lifeblood."

He saw, then, the danger in which he had placed himself, but it was too late. Morwenna, cunning, beautiful, and ruthless, was using him as much as he had ever thought he was using her. It was a disaster. "What have I done to deserve such malice?" he moaned.

She ran her fingers down his arm and squeezed his hand. "I feel the change in you, my love. You have become enamored of that despicable little wolfling girl. But I will not have you deny me your seed."

"I never for one moment planned to deny you your wishes," he whined, cringing as her fingernails dug into his palm.

"It was not your plan, but that is how it would have ended. The bowl has told me. Now, I will send that simpering little miss out to you, and you will do what you must. You can depend upon my help only so far. Destroy the family and send them scampering back to Germany before I go mad from having to share a roof and floor with them."

He stood still, trying to think what to do. He could feel the inexorable progress of her poisonous maggot burrowing into him. Morwenna's magic would eventually make him her slave, if he let her, and yet what could he do now to defeat her plan? It was already too late, and he must do exactly what she wished or die. Or *was* it too late? The deep pairbond he would create with Charlotte could help him fight the poison,

and Mother Sarah could help him the rest of the way. It might be his only opportunity now to keep from being enslaved by the treacherous power of Morwenna, the Witch of Bodmin Moor.



## Chapter 19

CHARLOTTE SIDLED out the door, but kept her distance from him.

“Will you walk in the garden with me?” he asked, his tone gentle. Lyulph’s mind raced as he tried to imagine how best to escape this new and alarming dilemma.

She looked back into the kitchen, and then met his gaze with her clear, focused, bright eyes. “You and she are in league together, don’t even try to deny it,” she said, sharply.

“Why would you think that?” he said, putting his hand over his heart. He swallowed, struggling with the confusion that overwhelmed him. Morwenna had him in thrall, the maggot inflicting him with the dreadful curse of mindless obedience, but his heart and body were working to overcome the spell. Her orders were to humiliate the von Wolframs and send them racing back to Germany, but he had other plans. Charlotte von Wolfram, lovely, intelligent, and with the blood of the wolf in her veins, called to him in ways Morwenna, with all her beauty and treachery, could never match.

And now he *needed* Charlotte if he was to escape the curse set within him. Morwenna’s poison was already infecting

him, and soon he would be nothing but an automaton carrying out her commands. He had one chance, and he must act quickly; he had to convince Charlotte von Wolfram to believe him and rescue him from his fate. He could not submit to being ruled by Morwenna. Death by her horrible spell would be preferable, for he was beginning to understand how dark her arts were and how ambitious she was.

"All right," he said, looking over his shoulder. He could see movement in the kitchen, shadows that altered the faint light from the oil lantern. Hellebore slunk out of the door, throwing himself down in the gloom under a shrub and licking one paw, pretending to be an ordinary house cat. "Her name is Morwenna Maxwell, and it's true," he murmured. "She and I were in league together to try to send you and your brother and sister away, because I had plans to marry Lady Hannah."

"You *did* lure that poor girl away!" Charlotte hissed, her face getting pink with agitation.

"It was a mistake, and I knew it. I changed my mind and sent her back! I swear to you," he whispered, the words tumbling over each other like polished stones in a stream, "that I did not know the extent of Morwenna's treachery." He reached for her hands but she snatched them away and put them behind her back.

"Morwenna Maxwell. So she is not Eleanor Dancey, but a witch?"

How she had guessed that Morwenna was a witch, he couldn't imagine. Perhaps that explained why she was not befuddled by the herbal potions his mistress had been feeding them all. Charlotte was supposed to be mindlessly obedient and malleable by then, but her clear, skeptical gaze told him she had eluded enchantment. "Yes," he admitted, forced to tell some of the truth, "a very dangerous one. But when I told you she was Fanny's mother and sent you down here it was not to put you in her clutches, it was simply to get you safely out of London. I had no idea she had her own plans."

"I wish I could believe that."

"It's true! But I was wrong to go along with her plans. I didn't understand how dangerous she would become." He glanced up, watching through the window for her shadow. Could she see him? Could she hear him, even? He didn't think

so. Not yet, anyway, but soon unless he got away and sealed his bond with Charlotte. He clasped his hands together before her in a gesture of supplication. "Please believe me; I only wish to help you now."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes. *Yes!*" he cried, softly.

"Why should I believe you?"

He gazed at her lovely face, the tender lips drawn down in distrust. "I don't know," he admitted. "All I can tell you is the truth." He stared at her. "I love you, and I want to protect you."

Hellebore got up and darted into the cottage through the open kitchen door.

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "Even if I believed you, that wouldn't change how *I* feel, though. I don't love you. Your witch mistress thinks my senses are dulled with her herbal poison," she murmured, "but they aren't. She tried to bewitch *all* of us, but we've dealt with such things before. Her potions are as nothing to us. Tonight Christoph, Fanny, and I will be taking Tamara out of here. Then you and Wesmorlyn can continue whatever contemptible battle you have going. However this struggle for power ends between you, I don't care, just leave us alone."

So she had figured out that she was merely a pawn in a scheme that went deeper than her family's involvement. But everything had changed for him, and now it was a blow to hear her say she was leaving England. His situation had become desperate now that he had lost Morwenna's trust. If Charlotte would not bond with him and strengthen him, he would have to leave England or submit to becoming a mindless slave.

"You're not going to marry Wesmorlyn then?" he asked, remembering the flashes of her naked body in the meadow, the jealousy and anger he had struggled with, and the glory of knowing Wesmorlyn was such an ass as to toss away this breathtaking girl. Now he had the confirmation that she had broken irrevocably with the earl. One night with her and he would be whole again. His future would open before him like a glorious vista of power and strength and supremacy. Desperation lanced through him, sharp and fierce. "Are you?" he urged, when she hesitated.

"No. He's made his choices, and his precious sense of his 'duty' to his family's destiny comes before anything else. I told him the truth about the von Wolframs, and he seems to think that I'm soiled with the tainted blood of my forefathers." She tipped her chin up. "I will not apologize for being what I am."

Impressed by her fortitude, he saw finally the difference between a woman of strength and a woman of menace. Charlotte and Morwenna. His breath caught in his chest; he deeply admired her, and his path, newly minted, seemed even more right than he had thought. She would be his. She might not see his reason yet, and she may be too distracted to give herself over to him completely, but she *would* be his.

But his time was dwindling. "Listen to me," he said, leaning toward her and speaking hurriedly. Hellebore was yowling inside, and Lyulph had never figured out how much the cat understood, and how much he could relate to his mistress. "Instead of leaving England, marry *me*! Come away with me tonight and we'll be bound, in old handfast tradition, and then by the church as soon as I can get a license."

She reared back in surprise. "What are you saying?"

"Shh!" he said, putting one finger up to his mouth. "Be quiet! Come with me," he said, grasping her hand. "We'll defeat them all by combining our blood, tonight! I, too, have been made to feel like dirt by Wesmorlyn, and together we could raise a generation of werewolves that would defeat the 'humanus angelus,' as his kind have styled their precious selves." Now he had risked everything. She had fire in her veins, just like he did, and together they would overcome magic and angels.

"You must be joking," she said, jerking her hand away with an incredulous expression on her face.

It was as if she had poured a bucket of cold water over his head, to see the distaste on her face. "No, of course I'm not joking."

"You would marry me to make me into a vessel for your own despicable plans for domination? You've taken leave of your senses. Good luck to you, Lyulph Randell," she said, turning away, "but as for myself, I'm going home to Wolfram Castle."

"Wait," he said, grabbing her arm and pulling her back.

"Let go of me!" she said, wrenching her arm out of his grasp.

He had no choice; if Morwenna heard and came, he would be dead for this desperate act of mutiny. He grabbed Charlotte and yanked her hard. She lost her balance, tumbling into his grasp, and he pulled her to him, putting his hand over her mouth. She struggled, trying to bite his fingers, but he was done being gentle. She was going to see sense or he would make her do so. He pulled and tugged her down the garden path toward the gate, even as she thrashed about. Her squirming only fired his determination; he dragged her away from the cottage.

Once through the gate, out of earshot of Morwenna and almost to his mount, tied up to a tree on the other side of the stable, he threw her over his shoulder and carried her. She beat on his back with her fists and howled, screaming at him to let her go, and though he knew he would have bruises from it, he relished her fury, determined to tame her and turn that fire into passion before long. He had seen how she could be, free and wild, and now he would experience it for himself, claiming any bit of her that still yearned for Wesmorlyn. He would make her over into his mate.

"TAMARA," Christoph whispered, coming to the door of her tiny chamber. "Are you feeling any better?"

No answer.

He daredn't go any closer. "Tamara?"

Still no answer, and yet he could make out her form on the couch. It was imperative that he talk to her though, because neither he nor Charlotte were willing to leave Moor Cottage without her, and they were determined to leave that very night.

He felt the pull of her as he heard her soft, even breathing; she slumbered deeply. Heat roiled through his body, and he rolled up his shirtsleeves as a trickle of sweat rolled down his back. Hunger burned him like an ember in the pit of his stomach every time he was in her presence, and the sensation left him filled him with guilt. Would he never feel whole again?

The anger turned inward, a fury that such natural feelings suffocated him with self-loathing.

He feared the attraction he felt for her whenever they were alone, and yet *had* to speak with her. "Tamara," he said, approaching the sofa. She was awakening, and her movement, as she rolled over onto her back, displayed her lush bosom and the womanly swell of her hip.

"Christoph?" she said, reaching out her hand.

Just the touch of her fingers brushing against his naked forearm sent shivers over him, and he drew his arm out of reach. He knelt on the floor near the sofa and stared through the dark, grateful in one sense for the heightened abilities his wolf side left him with: excellent night vision, superior sense of smell, and an acute awareness of every tiny sound. He could tell exactly where she was and each movement of her body and hands, and so avoid that provocative nearness. And yet those same things drove him to the brink of madness when associated with the seductive innocence of Tamara's voice and feminine scent. It was like waves of physical sensation. He opened his mouth and let it drift over his tongue, to the back of his nose. Arousal swiftly followed, even as he tried to close himself off from those physical feelings.

"What is it, Christoph? You are upset, fearful. What is it?"

"How can you tell that?" he asked.

She shrugged and rolled to sit up, sweeping her tumbled locks away from her face. "I don't know. I've always been able to tell things about people. My father says my mother was like that. I can hear it in your voice, and can feel it. It rolls off of you like waves crashing on the shore."

"I have grave concerns for the safety of all of you ladies in this cottage. This is not a good place to be. Charlotte told me you feel the same way."

"There is evil here," she whispered. "I feel it."

So she also had a sense of the menace the cottage held for them. "I sent Siegfried, my valet, back to London to find out what he could about Eleanor Dancey, but that was before we figured out that this woman is not who she says she is. We must get out of here; are you well enough to leave tonight? With what we suspect of this woman, it is wisest if we go. Charlotte and I both feel this way."

"I can make it."

"I don't wish to frighten you, but we feel sure she is some kind of witch, and so shall do this in secrecy, the better to escape her undetected." He stood.

"Christoph," she said, softly.

He felt a shiver down his spine. "Yes?"

"Have I done anything to upset you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You avoid me."

He took in a deep and shaky breath. She must never know how he felt, for she would turn away from him in disgust; any decent woman would, given his past. "You've done nothing. Please don't concern yourself. My sisters and I have nothing to do with this country, and soon we'll be gone, leaving you in peace."

She was silent for a long moment, then said, "I will be ready to leave whenever you say. Do you think my people are safe from whatever may occur?"

"I think so. They're not involved in any way, and should completely escape the witch's wrath."

She stood and moved close to him, so close he could almost taste her scent. Without another thought he put his arms around her and held onto her tightly. In the dimness, he saw her upturned face and his will crumbled. He dipped his head and hungrily he kissed her, his grip tightening convulsively as the sweet intoxication of lust overtook him.

She responded, pressing her body to him, full breasts squashed to his chest, surrendering to his passionate embrace. Lost in the feelings, he felt the pulse of arousal, and his hold on her tightened even as he felt her squirm and gasp. "Tamara," he murmured against her lips, pushing her down to the sofa, "Tamara, let me—"

"No, Count, please, you're hurting me!" she cried out, her words smothered by his insistent kiss.

He released her instantly and staggered away, shame filling him. How could he have abused her trust that way? "I'm sorry," he groaned. "Please forgive me!"

"I didn't mean for you to stop kissing me," she said, breathless. "It's just that your grip was so tight, it hurt. Come back to me!"

But he shook his head and stumbled back to the doorway. Shame and anger overwhelmed him, and all of the terrible associations of sexual hunger flooded back, filling him with self-loathing. "Be ready when I come back for you," he said, from the doorway. "I'll make sure you get back safely to your father and brother, and I swear on my life and honor I'll not molest you again." He turned and fled back upstairs.

CHARLOTTE had been taken against her will before by someone she had thought she could trust. That time, the man had ended up dead, through no action of her own. This time Lyulph Randell had made good his escape, though, and she was being transported through the twilight, across fields and over streams and hills, slung over a horse's back like a sack of goods. Her ribs ached and she was nauseous, the motion and flickering light of the moon when she could see it leaving her feeling faint and sick. Finally, after straining to get away and twisting and turning trying to figure out where she was, she resolved to save her strength for when she best had a chance to use it.

Lyulph slowed the horse, pulling back on the reins.

"Where are we? Why are you doing this?" she said, fighting back a wave of fear as she saw a dark house looming nearby. It was black and lifeless, isolated by its situation on the edge of a dark forest that stretched off into the distance.

To her surprise his voice, when he spoke, was mild in tone. "I just need somewhere to keep you for a while. I promise you on my life no harm will come to you." He threw his leg over the horse and slid to the ground, then helped her down. Her legs were wobbly, and she staggered against him. He righted her with gentle hands. "There you go," he said.

She tensed her muscles and was about to run when he grabbed her hard and pulled her back against his chest, binding her close to him with strong arms.

"Don't trespass on my kindness by thinking you can run. Where would you go? You don't know the way back to Moor Cottage, nor to the village. The moors, my fierce one," he said into her ear, "are wild and lonely, and the tors full of crags and rocky cliffs. Four hundred years ago Wesmorlyn's ancestor



fought mine to a standstill; he was awarded the plum, the land that was farmable and gentle. We got the rocky, wild, craggy tors, the land Wesmorlyn's kin disdained." He awkwardly hauled her with him as he moved toward a small stable. "But it's mine, and I know every inch of it; even the people who live on it are faithful to me. If you run you will have nowhere to go. This is my land, and *you* are mine, now, too."

"I am *not* yours!" she said, twisting and turning. His brutal grasp was bruising her, but she would rather be black-and-blue than stay his captive.

"You will be, and you'll be happy about it, if you just settle down and give me the chance. If you ran," he still growled into her ear, holding her tightly against his chest in a strong embrace, "I would run after you as a wolf, and I am very fast indeed. You would not like how I would be forced to hold you in that form. By my teeth, my dearest Charlotte, by my big, white teeth."

"It was you who attacked Tamara!" she cried, her voice trembling with a mixture of anger and fear.

"I'm not proud of that, but I didn't hurt her badly. I could easily have killed her, but I had no wish to; all I wanted was for you to think your brother had done it."

"Why?"

He sighed. "Forget it!"

"How can I? I never for a moment believed it was him, but you made him so unhappy, you and your trollop!"

"You're testing my patience, Charlotte. We were trying to sow the seeds of discord in your tight little group. It was a wicked thing to do, and I apologize."

He said it so casually, as if such a heinous offense could be swept away by a few careless words of apology. Her voice low and trembling, she said, "Did you taste human blood when you terrorized poor Tamara?"

He shuddered, his body jolting. "Yes. But it was unavoidable."

That was not the answer she had hoped for. She swallowed hard against the terror that welled up within her, the taste bitter in her mouth. She wanted to scream, to fight, to make him suffer, but for the moment, with her arms pinned at her sides as she staggered forward, it seemed useless. She kept talking,

trying to work her arms free. "My great aunt said that the way of a werewolf is hard. If he once begins to walk toward the dark side, he is pulled relentlessly until it is all he can be, all he can do. Have you done that? Have you given yourself over to evil?"

"I didn't know the German people had such a flair for drama." He pushed her knee with his, urging her forward.

"It has nothing to do with drama. You tasted human blood. Listen to me, Lyulph Randell," she said, twisting to look up at him in the gloom, as he forced her to walk beside the agitated, restless horse. "You *must* stop now and fight what is happening to you, or you'll be drawn into the abyss. I'm speaking to you as one of the wolf blood; stop, or you're in danger of losing your soul."

With one arm he held her still, and with the other he led his horse into the pitch blackness of the stable, leaving it there and shutting the door as he tugged Charlotte back out. "Come," he said, one hand still clutching her arm, the other tangled in a mass of her clothing. "Resistance will do neither of us any good. I have no desire to hurt you, but I'll use whatever force is necessary to make you behave yourself as a young lady ought."

She was exhausted from struggling. He was too far into his plan to listen now, she feared. He had abandoned his witch mistress and now ran in fear of her wrath, that much she understood. But surely reason would still have some sway. "You said you loved me," she said, twisting and tugging, trying to get free. "What has become of the chivalrous gentleman I thought you were?"

"Chivalry is just a thin veneer with which men coat their baser instincts, my dearest Charlotte. It is a ruse to gain the trust of the ladies. After marriage men show their true colors. Be grateful you'll know the worst about your husband before we're wed."

*Wed?* He was deluded. "I don't believe any of that." Even as they spoke, she was trying to figure a way out of her dilemma, for she didn't want to go into the house he was hauling her toward. But he was stronger than she had expected. When she dug her feet into the earth, he simply picked her up, with little enough effort, and half carried her, both arms

around her again, binding her arms to her sides. Never had she resented male strength more than that moment. "You only think that because that is what you are, base and despicable." She tried to jam her elbow into his gut, but could not move it. She lifted her foot to bring it down on his, but he shifted her and threw her off balance. She was ready to scream with frustration, but who would hear her? The blackness of the night was unrelieved by any illumination save the moon, which was just beginning to rise.

"Believe what you will," he said, as he guided her toward the door of the dark, timbered dwelling, opening it and pushing her through. "I do love you, my sweet little wolfling, but if you will not succumb to my charming self, then you must be made to see reason. I have no time for dawdling."

It was dark in the house, and he shoved her hard; she stumbled in the inky interior, feeling around to figure out where she was. It was a hallway, she supposed, and there was a staircase nearby. She stood and clung to a newel post, attempting to orient herself, trying to think of a way out of her predicament. He seemed to be able to see quite well, for he shot a bolt across and she could hear a lock snick into place. Of course, he was a wolf, and Christoph had said once that all of his senses were heightened from the first time he had transformed, and that those powers became stronger with usage.

"No one knows where you are," he said, his voice deceptively gentle. He pulled her against him. "And this house is fast, prepared as a snug retreat. It would be best for you if you accept the truth, that I truly do care for you. If you will just submit and bind with me, it will go better. I wish you no harm. I do love you Charlotte, and I promise, do as I ask—marry me—and I will allow your brother to leave England, and to take your half sister with him."

"He is a werewolf, too, as you well know, and—" She stopped abruptly, stricken by the knowledge that fastened to her underskirts was Christoph's only way of transforming.

He turned her around and sought her lips, but she twisted away. He jammed his fingers into her hair, turning her face toward his, and said, "Charlotte, I don't know what you're thinking, but if you're contemplating running, forget it. Even if you could get out, you have no idea where we are, and I

could hunt you down in a trice. I know what you did with Wesmorlyn, rutting with him in the open field, and I know you were no simpering virgin even before that. I don't mind. I'm not a judgmental sort, nor am I jealous as a rule."

He pulled her head back and kissed her throat, touching the pulse at the base of it with his lips and breathing deeply, inhaling her scent. "But you will be mine," he said, twisting her head and whispering into her ear. "There is room for only one werewolf family in England, and it will be ours, a dynasty of such power as the world has not seen. Let Wesmorlyn try to regain heaven for himself and his offspring. I am content with earth for mine." He bit her earlobe and drew blood.

## Chapter 20

“WELL WHERE is she then, if she’s not here with you?” Christoph asked Fanny, who stood, bewildered, in the middle of the room she shared with her sister.

“I don’t know. She went down to the kitchen to get a cup of milk, but has not yet returned. I thought perhaps you and she went to speak to Tamara together.”

“No. Where is she, I wonder?” Christoph thought for a moment, not willing to jump to conclusions, especially where his sister was concerned. Charlotte was more than capable of taking off in her own direction, with her own ideas.

“Christoph,” Fanny said, agitated, “we must go down to make sure she is still here.”

“You stay here,” he said, putting out one hand. “I’ll find her. I don’t want to alert that witch woman to our plans.” He descended, quietly; the house was eerily still. Tamara was still in the room where her narrow sofa was, he could tell just by feeling her in his mind. Every pore of his body was alive to Tamara’s rich female scent and the delicious perfume of her fecundity, and now that he had tasted her lips he would never forget the sensation, the sweet heady rush of desire. He shut

down such forbidden thoughts. That part of life was dead to him forever, for he was unworthy of such purity and innocence as sweet Tamara possessed.

But where was Charlotte? He stopped in the hallway and stilled himself. He didn't know if he could feel Charlotte. She was his sister, and they were close, but it was not at all the same as with Tamara. He blanked his mind and closed his eyes, standing still and hearing the night noises around him. Mice in the walls, a branch rubbing against the roof of the cottage, a breeze rustling through the herb garden outside. Tamara paced restlessly, waiting for him to return. Fanny, too; he didn't need his excellent senses to hear the floorboards creaking above him.

*The kitchen.* Who was there? He paced quietly through the hall toward the back of the house, and pushed open the door. Anne stood to one side, her shoulders slumped, the flickering light of the hearth fire dimly lighting up her blank eyes and lackluster expression. The worktable in the middle of the small room had a large copper pot on it, and the woman he knew only as Eleanor stood, peering down into it, her normally neatly restrained hair a wild tumble of chestnut locks. Hellebore, her cat, had his paws up on the edge of the bowl and he was staring to its depths, too, in a weirdly human attitude. At some movement or sound he made she looked up and her eyes were wide, her irises and pupils a glowing silvery shade.

"Where is Charlotte?" When she didn't answer, he strode into the room and said, "Where is my sister? What have you done to her?"

Hellebore crouched and growled, spitting and screeching at him.

"I have done nothing. But here, look to the water and you will see what is happening to your littermate." She smiled a wide, weird smile and backed away from the pot, motioning toward it as the cat leaped down and scuttled away.

He crossed the room in two steps and gazed down into the depths of the large copper vessel. It was filled with silvery water, and images flickered across the surface. At first he couldn't make them out, but then he saw, as the surface settled, Charlotte. She was clinging to a wooden bedpost, and a

man dressed in black with his back turned knelt by her, doing something. When the man stood up, Christoph could see Charlotte was chained to the bed. The man turned. It was Lyulph Randell.

HANNAH was feverish; she tossed and turned and her ancient nanny, Mrs. Howe, a devout woman who had been her nursemaid all her life, sat by her and patted her forehead with a damp cloth.

"What's wrong with her?" Wesmorlyn cried, pacing. "I don't understand."

Semyaza, standing quietly by the door, said, "There is magic at work here."

"Magic?"

"She is suffering the end of a spell. When one is under magic, the diminishing of it leaves a void in the soul; something must fill the void."

The nanny wept and prayed, holding the girl's slim hand. Wesmorlyn stopped and stared at Hannah, and then turned to Semyaza. "What are you talking about? She was fine when she arrived from London."

"But still under a spell. At first I thought it was just glamour; Lyulph Randell's kind have a sort of magic of their own. Sometimes they are not even aware they're using it, though Randell knows. But this seems like more to me, perhaps a potion or a spell. Someone has been luring her with magic."

Fear clutched at Wesmorlyn, fear for his precious little sister, and for the others, for Charlotte and Christoph and Fanny. "Randell sees me as his enemy, I'm still not sure why. Could he have done this magic?"

"No. He is not a magician and this is beyond his reach. His lure dies with distance from him, whereas this had dug deep into her like a burrowing slug, consuming a part of her."

Burgess's words came back to haunt him. The man had said the woman at Moor Cottage was capable of weaving a spell that would consume a soul. "The woman who calls herself Eleanor Dancey; she's the one they call the Witch of Bodmin Moor!" he exclaimed.

Semyaza nodded, encouragingly. "Bound in some way to Randell, through love or perhaps just ambition."

"And that means the others are in danger from her. I had intended to warn Charlotte of Lyulph Randell's part in her abandonment by his coachman, but now I must warn them against that woman, too. But how can I leave right now, when Hannah needs me?" Wesmorlyn went to his sister's bedside and gazed down at her, then turned to Semyaza. He had returned to check on her before going on to Moor Cottage, but had found Hannah in anguished torment. "Sam," he said, his voice breaking, "will she be all right?"

He nodded, a ghost of a smile on his thin lips. "Now she will. The magic is dwindling. Nanny Howe, with love and prayer, is filling the empty part of her soul with all that is good and wise and healthful. She will be weak after this, but I think will recover fully."

Wesmorlyn crossed back to the door. "Semyaza, my old friend, I must go, but will you stay with her through this terrible night?" he asked, putting one hand on his guide's lean arm. Semyaza nodded, and Wesmorlyn looked back at his little sister, her sweet face finally calm in the candlelight as Mrs. Howe prayed and held her thin hand cupped in her own blue-veined ones; he regretted every harsh word he had said to her about her flight to Lyulph Randell's residence and his disbelief of her protestations that she didn't know why she did it. He had believed Randell over his own sister, and he ought to be horsewhipped through the village for his brotherly failings.

With a whispered prayer he left, racing through the Abbey, and to the stables. A hair shirt would not fix the current dangerous situation. He must act rather than contemplate, as soothing and refreshing as a trip to the Wesmorlyn chapel would be at that moment. In the past, he would have turned to prayer and contemplation, but now saw that in some instances, no amount of prayer would substitute for action. As late as it was, he must go to Moor Cottage and alert the von Wolframs that they were staying in the viper's den and would be poisoned by her venom if they did not leave that moment. He'd drag them away if he must, especially Charlotte, who was in the most danger. He certainly couldn't scoop her up and fly away with her in front of the others, so he must ride;



if both Fanny and Charlotte needed to escape, he would let them share his horse. His groom already had his horse saddled, and he rode out into the gathering gloom of twilight, as the moon began to rise.

He still could not stomach the thought of what Charlotte had told him about her family, and yet the hours preceding her revelation had been a wild tumult of new feelings and sensations, and the burgeoning sense of what love could be between a man and a woman content to be merely human. Could something that was so wonderful and sweet and full of joy be wrong? And the natural, earthy act of lovemaking . . . now he understood why men sought it so vigorously. That precious hour in the meadow with her, allowing nature to command him, had taught him that he was not beyond physical passion.

He couldn't say now with any certainty whether he had made a mull of his future or not; was a union with a woman of werewolf blood really so out of the question? He had to ponder that. For the first time his heart was speaking to him, and it was beguiling him with tender thoughts and hope. All that mattered this moment, though, was that Charlotte was in danger and he must help her.

The steady beat of his mount's hooves thudded his urgency. He hoped to heaven he was not too late. He prayed that the von Wolframs did not suffer for what he suspected was a legacy of Randell anger directed at the Wesmorlyn's.

THE room was small and dark, the light of one candle the only illumination. The only furnishing was a broken settle in the corner and a four-poster bed with just a ticking-covered feather mattress on it.

"Don't you see," Lyulph said for perhaps the tenth time, "that together, you and I could produce the most powerful breed of werewolf the world has ever seen? My family has had centuries to become as we are, dark and formidable. Your legacy is fresh and vibrant."

"Ours goes back centuries as well, to the dark times, I've been told." Charlotte, chained to a bedpost and battling fear, kept her tone even, despite the lunacy with which she was

faced. He had been talking at her for a half hour, but she remained steadfast in her determination to keep him at bay.

"But somehow your family line has remained untainted by time." He gazed at her steadily. "Mine is powerful, but diluted by hundreds of years of living among ordinary humans. Perhaps it's the secrecy your family has maintained, and your isolation, but I felt it from your brother. He has the potential to be a giant among our kind, pure in his spirit."

Charlotte watched his eyes when he said that; the green of the irises disappeared as his pupils, large and dark, dominated, making his gaze menacing. His words sounded mild enough, but there was a threat there. He would not suffer Christoph to remain in England unchallenged. He intended, she realized, to marry her and then drive Christoph away somehow. But she didn't think that had been his original plan. "That purity, or whatever it is, is because Christoph has never given himself over to the darkness. Don't you sense the danger?" She didn't know what she was talking about, but would say anything to keep him distracted.

"No, no danger. Power, Charlotte . . . unlimited power. The strength of two werewolf family lines joined. Our children," Lyulph Randell went on, his tone sly and insinuating, "would be vigorous and tough, uniting the best of what we are, severally and together. We could perhaps take by might what I had planned to obtain by marriage. It's a chance. It might not even succeed. But for *you* I would be willing to upset the plans of a lifetime and boldly venture."

"You've crossed the line from sanity to lunacy, can't you see that?" Charlotte said, staring at him and shivering in the chilly, damp night air.

"I'm not mad," he said, his tone indignant.

She was wise enough not to pursue that line of reasoning; madmen never admitted it, she had experience enough to know. "This was not your plan initially."

"No. Meeting you changed everything."

"How?"

"I didn't know that Wesmorlyn's intended would be from a family such as yours. How could I? Even those families acknowledged among our kind exist in secrecy, or we would be hunted down and murdered! We *must* take whatever we can

from the others, for nothing will ever be given to us! They fear us, don't you see that?" he said, urgently, leaning toward her. "It's us against them!"

"No!" She sneezed once and rubbed her nose. The house was ancient and had clearly not been inhabited for some time, for the musty smell, much the same as at Moor Cottage, was driving her almost as mad as Lyulph Randell's wicked, crazy schemes. He had been warped, it seemed to her, by a lifetime of persuasion, to think that plotting and planning was the only way to live. Perhaps reason would work. "Do you truly think that any nation in our day could be overruled by force? Or that a sane, sober government would stand idly by while you rob another man of his birthright?" she said, referring to some part of his plan that she surmised involved seizing Wesmorlyn's land. "We live in more civilized times, sir, and though your ancestors may have been robbed of land and power by force, the same will not gain you those back."

"I'm not an idiot! I know how to get what I want." He knelt by her. "I had little simpering Lady Hannah in the palm of my hand," he said through bared teeth, his expression twisted by frustrated ambition as he held his hand out, palm up. "I could have married her and blended her family's legacy with my own. I would have suppressed Wesmorlyn then, brought him to his knees somehow."

"You mean by Morwenna's spells and potions!" she gasped, astonished at the depth of his deviltry. Would he have poisoned Wesmorlyn, murdering him even? Seducing her in the garden on the night of the ball was just one more battle in a war of his own making.

"The world has never seen the offspring of such a union as werewolf and angel," he said, regret in his tone. He stood and paced, frustrated ambition in every movement. "I could have taken over not only Wesmorlyn's land, joining it with my own—his is one of the rare earldoms that will pass to a female member of the family should he die without issue—but I could have used Hannah and my offspring to gain more. And what we could not gain by marriage, we would take by force. I had it all planned." He stopped, and stared into the distance. "What have I done? I gave it up, and for what?" He swung his

gaze back to her in the flickering candlelight. "For the hope of you. For the *chance* of you!"

"Then you gave it up for nothing," she said, watching him. He didn't seem truly mad, just furious that she would not go along with his plans. She was trying, as they spoke, to figure a way out of her predicament, but the chains at her wrist were indestructible. "You aren't doing any of this for me, but for yourself."

He collapsed in front of her, then reached out and touched her hair, the tumbled golden locks shining in the dim moonlight from the window. "But I *love* you, Charlotte."

He stared into her eyes and she felt the lure, the ache of passion that rose within her, and yet it was false. She knew that now. Every tender moment with Wesmorlyn had been real: every trembling longing and even every angry moment, every feeling of affection mingled with pain, all had been honest emotions with truth behind them. Nothing with Lyulph was real, not his friendship, nor his passion, nor his spurious claims of love. Wesmorlyn, for all his faults, was just trying to puzzle life out as she was. Lyulph was the most dangerous of creatures, in her estimation; he was one of those who thought he had it all figured out. He manipulated through the use of some kind of power he wielded over women. And as she thought that, the fascination abated and she was left in peace. She met his gaze and cared nothing for it.

He saw it and growled in fury. "You will do what I want, or . . ."

"Or what?" she said, triumphant. "Your power is nothing over me now. You can hold me here as long as you want, but you cannot make me marry you." She watched his eyes, holding back her own fear that he would force her to give in to his physical demands. But she saw in his eyes that for some reason he couldn't, or mustn't. There was so much her family did not know about their own powers, she thought, wishing she knew more, wishing she could say with confidence that he could never force her into lying with him.

"I *will* have you," he growled. He stood and paced to the door. "Think about this while I'm gone; I am offering you the chance at a life with me, and the power that will come of uniting our destinies. What could you ever have with Wesmorlyn

but his shame and penance and that endless, whining, *cringing* wish to get back into heaven? It is nauseating, and I have had to listen to it my whole life. I don't need heaven, not while I have earth. You and I together could defeat him and gain mastery, dooming his legacy to die with him and his puerile sister."

"I don't want power," she said, "and I don't want a husband. Choose between the two of you? I choose neither. I don't want you and I don't want him. I'll *never* acquiesce!"

"We'll see," he muttered.

She could hear his voice floating out behind him as he clattered down the stairs to the main floor.

"We'll see!" he shouted.

She kicked at the bedpost in impotent fury. How was she going to get out of this quandary? She would have to think of a way.

## Chapter 21

WOULD ELEANOR know they were leaving, Christoph wondered? Would she care? He had no idea; he only knew that Fanny and Tamara were his responsibility, and he must get them out before finding Charlotte.

Christoph crept down the stairs with Fanny, and paused in the hallway, holding one finger to his lips. Though he felt a powerful connection with Tamara, would she experience it too and feel him calling her? He put all his energy into it, reaching out, trying to touch her mind, and he was rewarded when he heard the faint creak of the door to her sleeping chamber. A shadowy figure crept through the parlor door and he knew without a doubt that it was her.

"We must leave this very minute," he whispered. "I will explain all when we get outside."

"What about Charlotte?" Tamara murmured, her dark eyes mere blots even to his sensitive eyesight in the windowless, dank hallway.

He took her arm, led her to the front door, and opened it, trying to be silent. Fanny to one side and Tamara to the other, he led them out and left it open, not willing to risk the sound

of it closing. He hastened his steps, leading them to the gate that opened on to the moor, but something made him glance back; Eleanor stood motionless in the doorway. And yet she did nothing, just stood and watched.

He feared that he was doing exactly what she expected and wanted but he could think of no other way out, so he led his sister and Tamara through the gate and to the open moor. "Charlotte has been taken by Lyulph Randell. I'll handle him, but first we need to get you both to safety. Do you know your way by heart back to the gypsy encampment?" he murmured to Tamara.

"Yes. I know it well, even in the dark."

"Then take us there. It's too dark to take my horse; I'll come back and get it after you, Fanny, and Charlotte are safe. The gypsy camp is our only hope as we need somewhere to stop until I can figure out where Randell is keeping Charlotte. I don't even know if I can trust what I saw in that woman's damnable witch's bowl," he said, and explained the vision he had seen in the kitchen. "If I can, then I don't think we have long to rescue her."

Fanny began to weep silently, her body shuddering with every stifled sob, and Christoph cursed his thoughtlessness. It was an arduous journey over the hills in the dark, and Fanny stumbled often. He almost regretted not bringing his horse for her sake, but it would likely have taken just as long or longer, given the number of rock outcroppings across the moor.

"I don't understand why Mr. Randell would steal Charlotte away like that," Tamara said, as they walked. She had tugged Fanny to walk between them so they could both help her when she stumbled, which in her emotional state was often.

Christoph couldn't tell her what he suspected. Randell, knowing the von Wolfram family secret, was either using Charlotte to lure him out to destroy him as a rival, or he had decided—and given his behavior of late it seemed the most likely explanation—to make Charlotte his mate, hoping the werewolf in her would strengthen his own family line. But a werewolf could not take a mate by force. That was the one thing his Uncle Nikolas had been adamant about, not that Christoph ever would, but his uncle had told him as a piece of necessary information to pass down in the family. Charlotte

wouldn't know that, though, he realized, and would be suffering terror because of it.

But a werewolf in human form was just a man, a very strong, vigorous, and dangerous man. And as a man, if she refused to bond with him as his mate, Randell could still intend to use her as no woman should ever be used; Christoph would fight to the death before he would allow his sister to be so violated. He hastened his pace, dragging the two young women after him.

WESMORLYN, guided by the glittering moon that ascended the sky in its nightly journey, rode swiftly along the highway. When he had to leave the road to approach lonely Moor Cottage, it was painfully slow, picking through the hummocky grass and rocky outcroppings. He didn't wish to forewarn the witch woman of his presence, and knew he would need to be quiet in his approach; how then would he manage to alert Charlotte and Christoph to the danger they faced?

His mount's hooves swished through the grass and the wind whispered around him. From a distance he saw that the front door to the cottage was open, and could make out the form of a girl staggering down the path toward the gate. He rode faster, risking a stumble, and dismounted quickly, fearing he was too late. But as he pelted forward, through the gate and to the front garden, he could see that the young woman was a stranger to him. Wesmorlyn had no time to ascertain more before another woman, long dark hair streaming behind her, came racing out the door after her, laughing.

"Go then," she cried. "Go! You're no more use to me anyway."

"What's going on?" Wesmorlyn shouted, striding toward the cottage.

"She's a witch," the younger woman cried, stumbling to him. "She has cursed me, and now I'll die!"

He caught her in his arms as she fell weeping to her knees. Gently he helped her back to her feet, pushed her behind him, and shielded her from the other woman. She was treacherously beautiful, her skin waxen and white, her hair dark and



long, coiled in curls. "You're Morwenna Maxwell," he said, certain that he was right. "You are a witch, and Lyulph Randall's leman."

She stopped, her dark, flat eyes wide open but strangely reflecting the rising moon off their glassy surface. "Who are you, to know my name? No, wait, don't tell me. I know." She paced down the sidewalk as the girl cowered behind him. "You are he, Lyulph's mortal foe," she whispered, staring up at him. "But more, you are one of the fallen. He never told me that. Why did he never tell me that?"

"Where are Countess Charlotte and her sister and brother?" Wesmorlyn asked, turning to the girl, whose white face shone with desperate fear.

"They have gone," the girl said, haltingly, "Gone. Gone." Her repetition was a hollow echo, forlorn and empty of meaning.

He took her shoulders in his hands and shook her. "Gone where?"

The woman laughed, a low seductive chuckle. "She is almost completely drained of sense, poor little dear. I have used her up. Why don't you ask *me*, angelic one?"

When he turned to face her, she strolled the rest of the way down the walk to him and stared up into his eyes. "Where are they, then?" he asked. Black anger filled him; this was the demon who had used her dark arts on Hannah. Her witchery on her maidservant had the same foul stamp, the draining of intelligence leaving behind a feverish, mournful vacuity.

"How beautiful you are," she said, reaching up to push his chestnut curls off his forehead.

He swatted her hand away. "Where are they?"

"Countess Charlotte was taken away by the man, her lover!" the girl cried, pointing at her mistress. She wailed after speaking and fell to her knees again, as if the effort gave her great pain.

"Anne, shut up!" the woman shouted, pointing at the girl. "I forbid you to speak again."

"Lyulph took her? Where? Where did they go?" Wesmorlyn said, fury and fear ripping into him. But he knew he would receive no answer, so he turned and was about to return to his

horse when the girl cried out. He whirled and saw that the witch had Anne by the hair. "Let her go!" he shouted.

The witch released her and the girl fell to the ground. Morwenna walked down the path, swaying, her hips twitching; she whispered something in another tongue as she walked, but he hardened his heart against any spell she might try to weave.

The moon's reflection glittered in her opaque eyes. Stopping before him she put out one hand and touched his face, her fingers trailing over his lips. She left a path of sparking heat where she touched. Her expression full of delight, her smile wide and weird, vacant of true joy, she said, "You are one of the fallen—or rather, one of the descendents of the fallen. Am I right?"

"You're right." He watched her, filled with dread, faced with a creature he had never in his life expected to meet. She was a witch, one of the oldest forms of half-mortals. Her eyes were empty, or no, not empty, he realized, staring into them, lost in the shifting silvery shadows that chased through their fathomless depths; they were full of cruelty and a horrible, aching hunger that would never be satisfied. Perhaps that insatiability was the terrible price she paid for her power. Thunder rumbled in the sky above and the moon flickered between swiftly coursing clouds, reflecting in their silvery void. Mindless ambition and pitiless determination had drained them of any humanity she might have possessed. He was seared by a dreadful knowledge; he was in danger of becoming as she was. If he abandoned the human side of him in his striving for redemption, he would become vacant of humanity, lacking any warmth. She had made the choice to abandon her half-mortal heart in favor of darkness; he had been on the verge of abandoning *his* humanity in walking toward the light. The decision was one that faced all who were other than merely mortal.

Would he choose the angelic side of him or the human? This was not the time to make that decision, but he hoped he was wise enough to decide correctly, and not out of fear or pain. Or perhaps he could learn to walk the fine line between them.

Her eyes glowed brighter with the silver light of the moon. "This explains so very much that I did not understand, for I

have felt in all of our planning a resistance in the ether. Lyulph never told me we were plotting against an angel!"

"I'm not an angel."

"No, perhaps not, fully, but you do have the pretty, pretty wings, don't you?" she said, smacking his cheek with each word.

He was tempted to strike out at her, but it wasn't worth the time or effort. He had other priorities, so he just pushed her away and focused his attention on the girl, who had collapsed on the walkway. Human compassion filled his heart as he saw the silent tears rolling down her pale cheeks. "I must go and find Charlotte and the others. Come with me," he said, gently, holding out one hand. "Come." Trembling, she clambered to her feet and started toward him.

"Stop!" the witch commanded.

Anne stopped and stared at Wesmorlyn, yearning in her eyes, her gaze going beyond him and beyond the gate to the open moors and freedom. He couldn't leave without her, though his heart raged at the delay. Fanny and Christoph had clearly already left, possibly to the gypsy camp with Tamara, or perhaps to help Charlotte. He couldn't afford another second, and yet couldn't just abandon the girl to the witch's cruelty.

"Anne, come with me."

"Why don't you leave her alone, pretty angel," the woman said, strolling toward him yet again, her expression one of excitement mingled with fascination. "She is of no use to you."

"I won't leave her with you," he said. He held out his hand. "Anne, come, now!"

The girl tried, but, weeping hysterically, stopped when the witch laid one hand on her shoulder.

"Why don't you let her go?" Wesmorlyn said. "She's of no use to you now, you said so yourself."

"One more moment and I will release her." She stopped and stared at Wesmorlyn. "You interest me. Your kind was barred from redemption by your ancestor's action."

He was silent.

"Those ancestors . . . their greatest sin was breeding with human women, creating the anakim, the giants that once

roamed the earth," she said, cocking her head to one side. "Do I have the ancient story correct?"

"Yes, yes, of course," he said, impatiently. He didn't need a lesson in his family's history from her.

"And now you are merely shrunken butterflies. Why don't you leave it behind, this desperate attempt to reclaim heaven? It is a fool's ambition," she chided. "Come to me, and we can become something more beautiful, darkness and light, heaven and hell, eternal balance." She added some words in another tongue.

But nothing she could say nor any magic spell could stay him in his path. "I think I'll stay with my fool's ambition to regain the hope of redemption for my children."

"There is no true ambition but personal ambition," she said, with disdain. "All the rest is shadows and dreams."

"So you say." *Enough talk.* He must ask once more. "Where has Lyulph Randell taken Charlotte?"

"Why would I tell you that?"

He watched her for a moment and had a flicker of the truth occur to him. "Do you not care that Charlotte has supplanted you in Lyulph's affections?" he said, watching the light in her silvery eyes. "Doesn't it infuriate you that he has plotted to win her? I saw them kissing; I know what passion he feels for her. Has she taken your place?"

Her expression darkened to anger, but she defeated it easily. "I have him in my power; Lyulph Randell will not dare go against me."

"But you'll always know he chose Charlotte over you."

"That doesn't matter. My own plan will win out anyway; all others will be destroyed and he'll remain faithful to me, or die." She reached out one hand and held it close to Wesmoryn's head, searching his eyes. "One of the fallen," she whispered. "I had heard that you were beautiful, and that is true. Tell me, what was the name of your first ancestor?"

"I may not say that on pain of death."

"Pain of death." A dark expression crossed her beautiful face and shone in her eyes. "I have been betrayed and deceived before this night, but no more. Do you wish to know your fate? I can show you, in my bowl." She stepped back

toward the house, crooking her finger in a beckoning gesture. "Come with me, beautiful angel, and I'll show you your fate."

He wasn't tempted. "Come Anne," he said, putting out his hand and staring at the girl, willing her to trust him and defeat the residual power of the witch. "She has not taken your soul, and her power is not limitless. The magic has drained much of your vital being, but I promise, you can regain yourself."

"I can't," the girl wailed, her arms over her stomach.

"You can!" he said, urgently, his hand still stretched out to her. Time was wasting away, and he must find the others. "Come with me and I'll make sure you are safe and secure in my house. You'll be replenished with good things, love and prayer and hope. You can regain your soul with the courage you've already displayed."

The witch haughtily said, with a flicking motion of her hands, "I am becoming bored. Be gone. Go to your fate."

Anne finally broke free and grasped his hand, a tranquil expression on her face. As she joined him in walking to his horse, Wesmorlyn uttered a silent thanks to Semyaza for the information that might save the girl from being lost forever. Though the witch might be angry at his intervention, she seemed disinclined to interfere. He knew her unwillingness to take any action, though, was because she had a much larger plot brewing, the end of which was now in sight. He feared that he had unwittingly furthered those plans with his own resistance to the truth he felt in his bones; he loved Charlotte von Wolfram with a frighteningly human intensity that he still did not know how to acknowledge or handle.

But they had already been there too long. He *had* to find the others, and quickly, for they might know where Randell had taken Charlotte. Wesmorlyn turned to Anne. "Sit up on my horse and we'll follow the others. Do you know where Christoph, Fanny, and Tamara went?"

"The count took the ladies to the gypsies."

It was far too dark to risk riding over the moors; Wesmorlyn helped Anne up onto the horse and they walked away, the earl leading his mount. The walk was not long, but for the entire length of it Wesmorlyn tried to plan. He was not so naïve as to think that the witch's decision not to interfere in their leaving meant she had no further intentions. Him following

the others to the gypsy camp might even be a part of some elaborate plot, or she might think him inconsequential and powerless. But there was nothing else to do; he had to find Charlotte and rescue her from Randell's clutches. Christoph might know where she was.

"DRINK. Drink more of the wine. Are you not increasingly thirsty?" Lyulph said, holding a stemmed silver goblet out to Charlotte.

"I've had enough, I tell you!" Charlotte, free of her chains, knocked it from his hands, and the wine spilled over the floor, a dark trail of liquid seeping into the floorboards.

"Damn you!" he exclaimed and wiped his hand on his jacket. "Why won't you drink more? Aren't you thirsty?"

She watched him in the dim light from the one candle in the dark room. He had left, but had not been gone long, and when he came back it was with food and wine for her. She didn't answer his query.

He knelt beside her and touched her hair, fury darkening his face when she shrank away from his touch and made an exclamation of disgust. "Come, you must care for me a little. Remember how you kissed me in the garden at the ball within minutes of meeting me; don't you feel the same this minute?" He pushed his face close to hers and tried to kiss her cheek, but she swatted him away like a pesky insect. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her but then stopped abruptly, putting his hands up and saying, "I'm sorry! I just wish you wouldn't treat me so coldly. Don't push me away, Charlotte, please."

"You've taken me against my will and hold me prisoner. What do you expect from me?"

He leaped to his feet, pacing. Then he stopped and crouched before her again. "I expect you to recognize your mate for life! We're the same, you and I," he said, thumping his chest for emphasis. "I *like* your challenging nature. I *appreciate* your spirit. Can you say the same for precious Wesmorlyn? Does he value your wildness, your independence?"

Charlotte blinked back tears. "No. He hates our kind."

"He despises us as animals, no better than his hounds. I've always known that beneath his feigned kindness to me was

that arrogance, that presumption that because he is from a race that once ruled the heavens, he's better than those of us who are bound to the earth and happy for it."

She bowed her head. "Your truth does not mean I'll turn to you as I turn away from Wesmorlyn."

He poured another glass of wine with shaking hands. "Drink," he said, pushing it at her. "Drink more, please!"

"No, I told you, I've had enough!" she said, batting it away again. She stared at him; there was an expression of thwarted determination in his green eyes. "What's in the wine?" she asked. "Poison?"

He was aghast. "Why would I try to hurt you? I only want you to care for me, Charlotte."

"Is it some kind of love potion?" She saw the truth in the shame in his eyes.

Lyulph, frustrated by her recalcitrance and even more so because he could not force her into anything or it would work against his plans, began to realize one very important thing. Every step of the way, as he thought Morwenna was aiding him, she was really furthering her own plot. She had sensed the change in his plans, and perhaps she feared his desire for Charlotte. The love philter she had provided him with was likely nothing more than colored water. This avenue was futile.

Why did everyone oppose him? He didn't ask much, just that she go along with his plan. It would benefit them both, after all! He had promised Morwenna offspring, a blend of the witch and werewolf. All she had to do was help him achieve his goal, though that had changed from his original plan to marry Lady Hannah and subvert her family's supposed destiny, altering it to suit his own needs. Meeting Charlotte had changed everything, he thought, looking down at her.

Everything. If she would just see that together they would be magnificent, siring a generation of leaders and conquerors. He felt the power within her, and perhaps a call to her inner determination would work.

"Charlotte," he said, sitting down on the floor in front of her. He examined her pale face, her hair a tangled rats' nest of blonde curls and dirt smudged on the tip of her nose. She was never more desirable. "Listen to me. I'm being candid, more

so than I have ever in my life been. I care for you." She turned her face away. "No, don't shut yourself off from me," he said, turning her face gently back to him. "I care for you in a quite unexpected way. I offer myself to you wholly, without reservation, and will give you whatever you want."

She stared at him in the gloom, her brilliant blue eyes full of questions. "Do you really care for me?"

"Yes! Yes, I do."

"Then let me go."

"No!"

"Then you don't care for me. You keep spouting nonsense about destiny and sharing everything, and yet you keep me prisoner!"

He grasped his hair in his hands. Taking a deep breath, he pushed back his frustration. "If I let you go, will you marry me?"

"You would let me go if I promised to marry you?"

It was a trap, and he saw that before he stepped in. "I would need more than a promise. My vicar could marry us in the old tradition, a handfast marriage."

"Handfast," Charlotte repeated.

"Yes; that means—"

"I know what handfasting is," Charlotte grimly stated. "And I know what follows. Do you think me uneducated? Or my people? If you have your way, you and I would handfast, or betroth, and then we would consummate the marriage through sexual intercourse, which would solemnize the ceremony and make it binding."

A greedy light entered his eyes. "How bright you are. I had thought I preferred the dim and dull for marriage, but I find your quick mind enticing. It offers so many opportunities for educating you in the ways you could please me. Consummation. Yes, we'll have that, but I would make it quite pleasant, sweetness," he said, taking up one of her matted blonde curls.

"I am not sweet, so do not choose some idiotic pet name for me like I was a puppy," she said, swatting his hand away. "And don't touch me. There will be no handfast, and no consummation. And the last wish I have is to please you."

The spirit he so loved in her had an unfortunate side. She was indomitable. He stood and looked down at her. This was



going nowhere, and he had one other unexplored option. There was one whose loyalty was beyond question, one whose bond to him went back generations. Mother Sarah, while not a witch, was a creator of potions and philters. It was she who had told him not to interfere in Charlotte and Wesmorlyn's secret meetings, because she said she could see the disharmony between them, and how it would end in anger and disenchantment on both sides, and she had been right. Perhaps he should have gone to her from the beginning rather than relying on Morwenna, who Mother Sarah warned had her own plans.

"I'll leave you to think over my deal." He took up the chains again, but she shrank back.

"Please," she said, her whole heart in that one word. "I *hate* the chains. I feel like I can't breathe!"

"That is the wolf in you," he said, fingering the metal links. "No wolf can tolerate the chains and bonds that dogs willingly bear to be near humans." He thought about it, and said, "I won't chain you if you promise me that you won't try to get out."

She stared at him for a long minute and then bowed her head. "I can't promise," she mumbled.

It moved him that she was honest. Any other woman would have easily lied. "As a sign of my good faith, and in the hope that you will not try to get out—the attempt would be useless, my dear, anyway, for I shall lock the door behind me—I'll leave you unchained only to prove that, unlike Wesmorlyn, I don't wish to break your spirit or change you in any way. I treasure the wolf in you, that unfettered wildness, and together we could find such bliss as I have only heard about in old stories," he said, gently. "Think about that."

He left the room, locking it after him with a padlock. What she could not know is what he had sensed the moment he had entered; Morwenna had at least done as he asked and put a protection spell on the house. No point of egress or ingress was available to anyone but him. He could well afford to make this touching display of trust, because she could not get out no matter what she did.

And now, to the gypsy camp to get from Mother Sarah what Morwenna had failed to give him. A love philter or

charm of some kind. One way or another Charlotte would be his. Even if she would not submit to a handfast ceremony, all he needed was for her to say “yes” and allow him to create within her his child. Then nothing could touch them, for the wolf in her was so powerful, nothing else would matter but the baby she carried and her bond to him, as the father.

## Chapter 22

“WHAT HAVE you done to him? What have you done?”

As Wesmorlyn arrived, that was the anguished lament he heard from a young woman he assumed was Tamara, the gypsy girl who had befriended Charlotte; she knelt by a prone Christoph von Wolfram. The young German count rolled on the ground in agony, doubled over.

“What has happened?” Wesmorlyn asked, speeding his pace as he arrived at the gypsy encampment leading Anne, who listlessly and awkwardly rode his horse over the rocky and treacherous moor.

“My lord,” cried Fanny, running to him as he approached. “It’s my brother! That awful old gypsy woman has given him some potion that has made him ill!”

An ancient woman sat a little distance away, with a secretive smile on her face, the flickering flames of the nearby fire giving her a demonic appearance. But as Wesmorlyn came closer her expression sobered and she stared at him with dread in her dark eyes. He felt her trepidation; it emanated from her in waves, and he knew that somehow she could sense his secret. Why would she fear him, though? He had no special

ability other than flight, and he was duty-bound to eschew violence, though he had kept to his vows poorly in the last weeks.

Was there something about him intrinsically that she feared? "What's wrong with him?" he said, striding over and staring down at Count Christoph. The sounds the fellow was making were awful. He was retching and moaning. "Has he been poisoned?"

Trembling, the beautiful gypsy girl, holding a damp cloth to his forehead and trying to calm his agony, looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know!"

"Didn't know what?" he asked, bewildered.

"Some of our elders are bound to Lyulph Randell," she said, sobbing. "They are promised to him as to a liege lord, and do his bidding whenever necessary. I never would have thought such a promise possible. Our people promise allegiance to *no one*! And yet they have done this thing. In return we have been promised protection from the English. I did not know this until a short while ago; Mr. Randell was here and consulted with Mother Sarah, who gave him a corked earthen bottle, and then he left again."

"Randell was just here?" Wesmorlyn said, anger and urgency rising up in him like a tidal wave. He grabbed her shoulders and stared into her dark eyes. "Where is he? What was he doing?"

She said, "He *was* here, but just for a few minutes, and then he left again."

"Where has he gone? And where is Countess Charlotte?" he asked, crouching down by her. Christoph still moaned, and the girl's attention was divided as she mopped the count's forehead, sobs catching in her throat while Fanny, behind them, wrung her hands and wept. One of the young gypsy men was trying to calm her to no avail.

"I don't know where she is!" Tamara's eyes narrowed, and she continued, "Lyulph Randell must have her close by, though, or he could not so easily have come here on foot."

And if he was dressed, Wesmorlyn reflected, then he must have come as a human, and not as a wolf. "I must find her," he said, feeling his stomach clench into a knot. "But what does any of this have to do with Christoph? What has hap-

pened to him?" he asked, kneeling by her side and putting two hands on the younger man's shoulders; he had finally stopped groaning and rolling around. The count opened his eyes, as startling blue as his sister's, and gazed up at Wesmorlyn, but his expression was blank and he appeared not to know the earl. "Are you sure this is not some residual effect of the witch's sorcery?" Wesmorlyn asked the gypsy girl, thinking of Hannah's belated agony.

"I don't think so," she answered. "This terrible torture began the moment he drank ale given him by Mother Sarah." She pointed at the old woman huddled by the fire. "He dropped to the ground in agony and became as you see him."

Fanny still wept and wailed in the background; the young gypsy man patted her shoulder, trying in vain to offer comfort.

"You know all this and assume the old woman is responsible," Wesmorlyn said, "and yet you claim you knew nothing of your band's reliance on Lyulph Randell?"

"Do not blame my sister! Tamara didn't know, nor did I," the young gypsy man said, stepping forward, "because the old ones kept it a secret from all of us younger, and yet this night, in her glee at the count's agony, Mother Sarah revealed the truth. She said they did not tell us young ones because they knew we had different ways, that we felt differently about the people of this land."

"Romolo, don't try to excuse our ignorance," Tamara said, sitting back on her heels, calmer as Christoph appeared to fall asleep.

Christoph von Wolfram's pale face was now composed, and his breathing was deep and even. Fanny, though, was still sobbing that Christoph was going to die, as Tamara patted his forehead with a damp cloth and tenderly brushed his golden hair off his forehead. Romolo watched Fanny, hopeless yearning and pain in his dark eyes, helpless to ease her misery. Wesmorlyn felt like his eyes had been opened as he watched, alive to the powerful human passions of all who gathered, where in the normal course of events he took great pains to shut himself off from those terrible, painful, and sometimes touching emotions. A few of the young women, children clinging to their skirts, looked confused and frightened, while their men seemed suspicious of him. Though they appeared to wish

Christoph no ill, neither would they help him if the elders did not allow it.

It was almost overwhelming, the sudden onslaught of knowledge that came to him now. He felt like he had knowledge thrust into his brain, a profound awareness of human passion opened to him since his intimacy with Charlotte von Wolfram. Now he saw the many faces of love: Fanny's sweet devotion to her brother; the powerful passion Tamara carried in her heart for Christoph, over whom she crooned in desolate sorrow; and the young gypsy fellow's hopeless adoration of Fanny. It was beautiful and terrible, both at the same time, overwhelming him with conflicting sensations of hope and agony. Everything that it was, was irrevocably a part of him now. Once acknowledged, it could not be turned away from, and he felt a humbling desire to help if he could.

"Your brother is right, Tamara," Wesmorlyn said. He took a deep breath and let it out. "You cannot be held responsible for what you did not know."

Then one old man stood. Romolo watched him, and from the resemblance between them it was evident to Wesmorlyn that they were father and son.

"We have too long listened to this woman," he said, his voice quavering as he pointed to Mother Sarah. "She has preached hatred and fear of the English. What has this brought us but trouble?" He looked at Fanny and then to Wesmorlyn, resolution in his dark eyes. "I vow the young German will be safe here while these women look after him," he said, indicating the younger women of his tribe.

"And this English girl," Wesmorlyn said, indicating Anne, who listlessly slid from the saddle and stood, quiescent and mindless.

"And the English girl," the man agreed, gesturing to one of the men to help her. A young mother with kind dark eyes held a lantern for them as the gypsy fellow helped Anne over to sit by the fire.

The old gypsy matriarch had been watching and listening, but now grunted in disgust. "Pah! Idiocy. You do not know what you are saying," she said, pointing to Romolo and his father. "You overstep your boundaries! These are *gorgios*, not

Rom!" Mother Sarah rose, her ponderous girth swathed in flowing robes of many colors.

"But they are *gorgios* who have done us no harm," Tamara said, taking in some of the other gypsies in her encompassing glance. "Lyulph Randell is *gorgios*, too; why should we cause pain on his command? Why should we pledge ourselves to him?"

"My only concern is for Countess Charlotte," Wesmorlyn said, putting up one hand in a gesture of peace. He had to find her, desperation seizing him at this delay. "Among you she stayed in peace, but your liege lord, he to whom you have mistakenly given allegiance, has taken her. That is where he has likely gone now, back to where he has hidden her! I fear for her life. This is her brother," he said, one hand on Christoph's shoulder, "and he has done no one harm. His only wish is to save his sister and leave England. Do *any* of you know where Lyulph Randell would keep her?" The gypsies shook their heads.

But Tamara met his gaze across the prone form of Christoph. Trembling, she said, "My lord, I *may* know how to find her."

"Where is she?" he asked. "Just tell me where she is and I'll go this instant."

But she shook her head. "I do not know to *tell* you where she is, I know in other ways. I can find my way to her, for she is here," she said, hand over her heart. "She's my friend, and I know I can find her."

Wesmorlyn must have displayed his skepticism, because the young man, her brother Romolo, stepped forward. "Please, my lord, don't doubt my sister. She has the sight. It is why Mother Sarah kept her close, I think; she feared her powers."

"She has no power," the old woman scoffed, but was ignored. She slumped back down on her seat, the fire gone from her eyes as her people paid no attention to her outburst.

"Will you lead me?" he asked of the young woman, and she nodded. "Can you do so in this darkness?" She nodded again. "Then let's go." It seemed a faint hope, but it was all he had to cling to.

Tamara gazed down at Christoph, swept his blond hair off

his forehead, and kissed it. She murmured some words in his ear, and then looked up at Fanny. "My brother will protect you both from harm, and so will my papa. Trust Romolo."

"I do," Fanny said, her voice quavering, but calmer, responding to Tamara's composed strength.

Once more Tamara bent over Christoph, her hair shielding her from view; she was motionless for a long moment, then rose. "I'm ready now. I can find Charlotte." She turned and started toward the woods beyond the gypsy encampment.

EXHAUSTED, Charlotte sat on the floor, her knees up and her arms wrapped around them, dust and dirt clinging to her and her hair a ratted mess. She was cold and weary and miserable. She had been trying to find a way out of the room ever since Lyulph left. The window would have seemed a logical choice, but it resisted every effort of her hands to open, and when she tried to break the glass it was as if she was hitting water, for though she could put her wrapped fist through it, it closed up again when she withdrew her hand. Witchcraft at work.

The awful dilemma she was in finally hit her, and the tears ran down her grimy face, though she would not give in to the weakness of weeping outright. The candle guttered and died, and she was plunged into utter darkness. A sob welled up from her gut and burst out, against her fiercest attempt to quell it. But she was not one to concede; after a few fainthearted minutes, Charlotte took a deep, gulping breath and fought back the tears, anger building in her heart. She would not be defeated, not until her last breath was taken and her last heartbeat stilled. She couldn't change the past, but she could determine her future.

So she began to methodically search the room in the dark for any weapon she could use on Lyulph Randell when he came back. In the darkness, as she searched slowly, blindly reaching out and feeling around her, she looked back over every step she had taken that had brought her to this moment in time.

She had left Germany intent on finding Fanny's mother, though she had led her uncle and brother to believe she was



seriously considering the Earl of Wesmorlyn as a husband. There was no need for regret there. How else did men expect women to behave if they would not listen to them and treat them as rational beings? Subterfuge was the resource of the powerless.

That feeling of powerlessness over her own destiny was what had led her to *all* the mistakes of her youth, even her misguided affair with poor Dieter, her young lover, though she could hardly blame her uncle for concluding from it that she was a danger to herself. She was a wild young girl, unhappy, turbulent, difficult, and at fifteen, to throw herself at her dancing master as she did, betrayed an unsteadiness of character that would have led to even worse disaster in the broad world. Though she shuddered to think of the risk she had taken of becoming pregnant, she still couldn't regret her behavior even now. Some would say that indicated how low her character was, but she didn't care. Her fault had not been in seeking love and affection, but in trying to inflict upon the mild-mannered young man a plan to take her away from Wolfram Castle. Her Uncle Nikolas had learned of the plan, and thus began a distrust of her that had never waned. Through it, she had learned to fear her own feelings and doubt her instincts.

She grabbed the iron leg of the bed in the dark and felt for a way to disassemble it; would it come apart? Could it be used as a weapon against Randell?

Wryly, she thought that if her Uncle Nikolas could see her now he would be shaking his finger and saying that he knew it would come to a bad end. But once she was in England, with the best of intentions to help Fanny find her mother, she didn't see how she could have known to behave any differently, given the string of events beginning at the ball her first night in London.

Damn the iron bed! Frustrated, she gave up trying to get the leg off. It was firmly welded on and she was just straining herself to no purpose. She tried instead to figure out if there was any other piece of the bed that would come apart. It was evident to her now, she thought as she worked, that Lyulph Randell, who had appeared to be such a fast friend to Wesmorlyn and Lady Hannah, was really plotting their downfall.

But how could she possibly have known that then? Even Wesmorlyn had been in the dark about Lyulph Randell's plan to marry Hannah and thus take over the earl's estate. If anyone had a reason to be chagrined at not knowing the truth, it was Wesmorlyn. She had trusted Lyulph Randell because he appeared to be a solid member of their society, and an intimate even of her approved fiancé.

She supposed if she had stayed in London and gone along with the plan to wed Wesmorlyn, Randell would have just come up with some other plan to thwart his enemy, as he had repeatedly called the earl. He saw her and her brother and sister as an impediment, first, and then a tool. Now he seemed to have some wild plan to make her his wife and create a generation of powerful offspring to fight his battle. It was absurd, but he would not listen to reason.

There was no escaping her own responsibility, ultimately, though, no matter how she tried to justify her behavior. She should never have trusted someone she didn't know. Blinded by her instant dislike of the earl, flattered and taken in by Randell's persuasive charm, and pushed relentlessly by her brother's insistence that they were going back to Wolfram Castle immediately, she had taken matters into her own hands, with these disastrous results. It didn't matter one bit that it may all have turned out the same if she had not interfered, for she *had* interfered, and this was on her head.

She gave up on the bed, for it was indestructible, and put her forehead on her knees. Then there was Wesmorlyn, the center of her misery. How had it happened that a man she had despised from the moment they met had become so important to her, then tenderly valued, and then a betrayer? For she could think of it as nothing less than utter betrayal, that he should take their most tender, intimate moment, and what she shared with him in that time, and turn it against her. He had twisted it into something terrible, despising her for her honesty, failing her test of trust. If they had only worked together, and if he had not been the kind to despise her for what she was, then perhaps it would have all turned out differently.

His own revelation of his unique heritage had, after all, been a complete shock to her. But she had taken it in stride and honored him for his uniqueness, feeling perhaps they

were drawn together to balance each other out—the earth and the sky, wild and disciplined. It had led her to believe that as unusual as he was, he would understand and appreciate her own distinction. So the disgust evident in his expression when she told him her family secret had been doubly a betrayal, and she had not foreseen it. Perhaps that was why it still stung so badly.

A noise made her look up; Lyulph unlocked the door and strode into the room, lantern in hand. He thrust forth a bottle and said, “Drink this!”

“No!” she cried, blinking at the light and covering her eyes.

“Please,” he said, falling to his knees and pushing the bottle toward her. “Charlotte, if you do, I will do anything, I promise. Anything you ask of me.”

“Liar.”

“You’re impossible,” he hollered, fury in his expression, frustration in the tense line of his body. “Drink!” He shoved it at her.

“No!” she cried again, hitting his hand away from her face.

They quarreled for a time, but Charlotte no longer felt his lure. He was just a scheming, jealous, pitiful wretch pushed and prodded by his envy of Wesmorlyn’s family holdings and unblemished history to try to steal it all away. He could pretend it was some grand, diabolical scheme, but in the end it came down to petty jealousy. As her resistance remained intact, he became more frustrated and louder in his demands. But she would not be bullied.

“Give up, Randell,” she finally said, “for I will never willingly go along with your scheme, and I suspect you cannot take me unwillingly, or—”

“But I *can* take you unwillingly,” he said, his voice hoarse with anger. He set the lantern aside, stood, and pulled off his jacket, tossing it across the filthy floor, out of his way. “Our bond will not be the same. You won’t be my wife and lifelong partner, but since you refuse me anyway, then I will *take* what I want and follow through with the rest of my plan.” His eyes had darkened with fury and anguish, but he paused and stared at her, his expression softening, the grim set of his mouth slackening. “Charlotte, please,” he said, pacing toward her

with measured steps, his boots striking the wood floor with a thudding beat, "I give you one more chance. I have restrained myself until now out of respect for you, but if you will be so foolishly stubborn, then you leave me no other choice but to—"

"There is *always* another choice," she cried, fighting back her fear, skittering back against the wall. "You can stop now, and let me go!"

"No! You don't understand."

"I don't, and I never will!"

His eyes widened, and there was terror in the green depths, fear of some unknowable horror, it seemed to Charlotte. "I have no choice!" he said, crouching by her and holding out one hand. She batted it away. He sighed, scrubbed his face with both hands, and then stared at her. "Charlotte, this is the only way for me now, the only way I can break away from Morwenna. She has planted a terrible magic within me, and to fight it I need to bond with you, or leave forever." He leaped back up to his feet. "If you persist in this stubbornness," he said, pacing in agitation, "then I must make you with child. You will bear my son and then I will take him away from you, raising him to—"

"Shut your mouth," she said, fear and fury mingling in her tone. She slid along the wall to the bed, some of her courage fleeing at his growled threat.

He stopped pacing and stared at her as he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled the bottom out of his trousers. He unbuttoned the fall of his breeches and pulled his shirt off. His pale skin, sleek musculature, and the wiry dark hair over his chest and forearms riveted Charlotte's gaze. Grabbing her by the arm he threw her down on the mattress, but she kicked out at him, catching him on the shin. He yelped in pain, but didn't let go of her until she summoned every bit of her strength and kicked him in the groin. Staggering, he knocked over the lantern and it went out; the smell of lantern oil filled the air and a tiny flame trailed across the wooden floorboards as the fire ate the fuel and licked up to the bed mattress.

At that very moment, a noise outside drew their attention. The glass in the windows rattled as something or someone pounded on the outside door. Lyulph stumbled to the window

and threw it open, gazing down below. "Damn!" he shouted. "Damn him, *damn* him! How did he find us, and so quickly? Why did Morwenna not delay him as she said she would?"

Charlotte leaped to her feet and raced to the window; she pushed Lyulph aside, looking down. "Wesmorlyn," she hollered, as she saw his chestnut hair gleaming dark gold and copper in the pale platinum light of the moon. Flames began to light up the room, as they caught on the bare mattress.

"Charlotte!" he cried, as he looked up. He took off his jacket and shirt and threw them aside, and in front of Tamara, who gaped at him in awe from a few yards away, he unfolded his mighty wings, the twelve-foot span arcing away from his body and the tips unfurling. "I can come to you. If you will cast yourself out of the window, I'll carry you away from this madman!"

"I can't," Charlotte said, as she tried, but was pushed back by a force that was like hands on her chest, keeping her inside. She beat at the wooden window frame, trying to find a weak spot, but it was useless. "Some magic is at work, and the house is locked to me; I can't get out! And the room is on fire!"

"It is time this was over," Lyulph, behind her, growled.

She turned in time to see that he had stripped off his last articles of clothing, tossing them to the flames, and she staggered back in horror as before her eyes, he sprouted dark fur, as dark as that found after the attack on Tamara, and his body convulsed in change, his snout forming, big white teeth bared. A howl of pain and glory erupted from his throat. And then, as she backed away, he leaped at the window, breaking the wooden frame to splinters. He landed on the ground and faced the earl.

Charlotte turned back to the room and saw that the rush of air had fueled the flames, which licked up the papered wall and raced across the wood-paneled ceiling.

SOMEONE groaned. Who was that, Christoph wondered, blinking and rolling over.

"Christoph, are you all right?" Fanny asked, crouching by him in the dark.

He realized it was he who was groaning and stopped. "Yes," he said, his voice strangely hoarse. "I'm all right." Confusing memories bubbled to the surface of his consciousness, but overlying it all was a sense of urgency. He bolted upright. "Charlotte!" His vision went black for a moment, and he put one hand to his head and moaned again.

Fanny cried out, "Christoph, Christoph!"

But it was another's voice he remembered. Tamara had spoken to him as he drifted in a condition of stasis, conscious but unable to move or indicate that he heard her. She had leaned over him, kissed his lips with sweet fervor, and whispered, "*Come to me; you will always be able to find me now, from this moment forward.*"

And he did know where she was; she was near Charlotte, who was in danger. He couldn't explain to anyone how he knew this, but he did. He must go to them, and he must go as a wolf. But he was without the wolfskin kirtle; could he make the transformation without it? He staggered to his feet and shook himself. He had to try. Fanny stood nearby wringing her hands and weeping.

"Fanny, stop crying," he whispered, taking her shoulders in his hands and moving her away from the firelight, into the gloomy shadows of one of the caravans. "Do you wish to help me save Charlotte?"

"Yes, oh yes," she said, gulping back tears. She took a deep breath and straightened. "How?"

He glanced around at the gypsy camp. The old woman who gave him the ale when he arrived at the gypsy camp—Mother Sarah, she had been called—was embroiled in a bitter argument with some others, but the discussion was carried on in their own unintelligible language. Children wept and clung to their frightened mothers, their soft sobs carried on the breeze to his sensitive ears. Others of the group lingered in the shadows, including Tamara's brother, who administered to a young girl he recognized as Anne, the witch's befuddled maidservant from Moor Cottage.

"I need to get away," he murmured, turning back to Fanny, "and I need you to be very brave." He stared into her eyes and felt the force of his own personality emanate, transferring courage to his nervous half sister. "I know how frightened you

are of werewolves, but can you be brave, Fanny? Can you gather your courage and help me, for Charlotte's sake?"

She took a deep shuddering breath and stared into his eyes, the blue of hers almost disappearing around her dilated pupils. "For Charlotte," she said, faintly. "For her I will do anything."

CHARLOTTE looked down from the window and saw Lyulph the black wolf dart at Wesmorlyn, leaping and tearing at his beautiful but fragile wings. Tamara screamed, and Lyulph turned toward her, snarling.

"No!" Charlotte screamed. "Tamara, run away! Run! Protect yourself!"

"I will not leave you!" she cried. "I see fire. Can you climb out yet? Is the magic still working?"

It was; she tried again to climb out the window, but it still barred her. She could feel the heat from the fire on her back, and knew she would die if she stayed in that room for much longer. The ceiling was engulfed. Flames rushed toward her, eating everything in their path like some ravenous insatiable monster.

Fury ripped through Charlotte, and then an odd, preternatural calm. She was *not* going to die, not now, and not this way. Lyulph had turned back to Wesmorlyn; with his mighty wings the earl soared and beat at the wolf, which leaped and snapped, its great jaws closing occasionally on the wings. Charlotte heard a sickening crunch, and the bony tip of one wing hung limp, shattered by the powerful teeth of Lyulph, but Wesmorlyn did not stop. He soared straight up, and then came down, striking at Lyulph with his heel, but it was a glancing blow off the wolf's broad head, and only stopped him for a moment.

A confidence entered Charlotte, down to her soul. She was a von Wolfram through and through; she now knew something she had never known before, and was willing to take the chance no other woman had ever taken. She rapidly stripped her clothing off, feeling the heat from the flames lick at her feet and blister her naked back. Then she climbed up to the windowsill, holding aloft the wolfskin kirtle as she fought back her fear and settled deep into her mind, finding the darkest recesses, the most secret knowledge of her core. The an-

swer to the enigma of her life resided deep within her; she had the power. She always had.

It trembled through her and she felt the transformation, the gut-wrenching evolution of her body into its elemental form. The wolf within her had always longed to get out to express the wildness of her soul, and now it shivered to life. Slim but strong, silver and golden all at once in the pale moonlight and glittering firelight, wrapped in the warmth of thick wolf fur and agile in ways no human ever could be, she leapt from the third floor, no longer bound by the spell on the cottage, just as the first flames danced and flashed out the window.

She landed on all fours. The world was different; vision shifted and she could see only in shades of light and dark, but for every loss of color and depth of perception she could feel a ferociously powerful sense; Tamara whimpered, so softly no one but a wolf could hear it, and Wesmorlyn was beginning to wheeze, his breath coming quickly. The fresh scent of the grass upon which she had landed was overlaid by the acrid stench of the crackling fire that was now consuming the entire third floor of the building. Lyulph had not tired a bit, but when he whirled and saw her, he yelped in utter astonishment, and she felt his mind, the roar of anger in his soul. For him, she was his mate, even more so now that he saw her as a wolf, but to her, he was nothing but a danger that must be destroyed.

She raced at him, leaping at his neck and sinking her teeth in, glorying in the sensation of breaking skin and the flood of warm blood. But he was stronger than she and bigger, as well as far more experienced in wolfish behavior. So as he shook her off and scrambled to try to recover from the shock, she knew that she had but a few precious seconds left to hurt him before he would regain his equilibrium and she could be killed.

But Wesmorlyn, horror on his beautiful face, gazed at her. "You're an animal," he cried, and heaved, retching as he staggered back, his wings beating to try to maintain his balance. "A beast, just like him!" He shook his head, the horror twisting his mouth, but then, as Lyulph growled and leaped at Charlotte, he rejoined her in her battle against the giant wolf. He soared and stomped again, and the wolf yelped in pain, rolling, stunned on the ground.



His expression a grimace of fury, Wesmorlyn kicked Lyulph again and again, as Charlotte, determined to keep Lyulph down, leaped on him, going for the jugular. It was not a conscious decision she was making, but the rapid response of instinct over thought. She must stop him before he hurt someone, and so she held him by the throat. Wesmorlyn ran to her side and reached out, but in that second Lyulph leaped to his feet, shook off Charlotte and pounced on Wesmorlyn, pinning him to the ground and ripping into his left wing, clamping down on it and pulling with all his might. A sickening snap of bone and the pop of a joint being pulled, and Wesmorlyn cried out in agony, the wail of pain echoing in the night as he writhed.

But he would not be defeated so easily; even as Charlotte, the fierce animal part of her mind failing her and the woman watching in horror, leaped forward to tackle Lyulph, Wesmorlyn rose, his golden skin emitting a blinding light that rivaled the consuming fire for brilliance, his fury translating into superior strength. Lyulph twisted to meet Charlotte's attack and the earl yelled, "No!" He lunged at the animal, his one injured wing dragging on the ground, and gripped the huge dark wolf in both hands, digging his fingers into the fur. As it yelped in shock, he picked up the robust beast and heaved it against the stone wall of the house. It lay in a heap by the bushes at the foundation, howling in pain as embers and ash from the fire above rained down on its head. The bitter scent of burning fur wafted on the damp night air, the stench filling Charlotte's nostrils.

At that second, across the moor, came another silver wolf, slim, and slightly larger than Charlotte. She howled in joy; it was Christoph! He skidded to a halt at the sight before him, and his mind reached out, touching hers. *Charlotte?*

*It is me*, she said to him with an excited yip. He raced to her, they rubbed muzzles, brother-wolf and sister-wolf. Lyulph had risen and was trying to limp off into the night, blood gleaming on his dark fur and dripping off his snout. Charlotte, overjoyed by their collective victory, wanted to race after the badly injured werewolf, but a howl from Christoph stopped her in her tracks.

There on the ground lay Wesmorlyn, pale and uncon-

scious, his beautiful wings stretched out and torn, ripped to shreds and battered. One hung loosely from its joint between his scapula. His head was bleeding from the fall he had taken when Lyulph had pulled him down by the wing. But his fists were still closed around the hanks of fur he had pulled from Lyulph's hide in his stalwart attack, the one that had finally defeated Lyulph Randell and forced him to retreat.

Tamara knelt by him and looked up at the two wolves. "He does not breathe!"

## Chapter 23

CHRISTOPH RACED off after Lyulph, no doubt concerned that their formidable foe would come back. Charlotte rushed to Wesmorlyn; only when she saw Tamara pull back did she realize that as a wolf, she would never be able to take him in her arms or touch his face. She leaped away and willed herself to come back to her human form. The transformation hit and she rolled on the ground in agony, howling in pain and hugging the wolfskin kirtle to her breast. As her body returned to human form, quivering and naked in the damp night air, she understood at last the danger inherent in werewolfism. As jealous as she had been of Christoph's magical ability, it was a burden to be assumed not lightly, but with great trepidation. Panting and shivering, still feeling the awful torment of the change, she accepted it willingly, stronger now and sure of herself and her place in the world. She was a wolf-woman, perhaps the first, perhaps the only.

Tamara, stalwart even in her shock at the von Wolfram family secret, ran to her and put her own cloak around Charlotte's shoulders, covering her nakedness. "We have to get

away from this building before it comes down," she cried, looking up in fear at the burning house.

"Wesmorlyn," Charlotte cried, staggering to her feet and stumbling to him, collapsing at his side. She threw herself over him, and then felt, as she wept with relief, the faint sound of breathing in his chest, and a tiny puff of air from his mouth. "He's breathing! He's alive!"

Fanny, holding a bundle of clothes, raced out of the nearby copse and joined them, her pale face betraying her fear and horror at the events of the night. She cried out at the sight of the fire. Charlotte leaped to her feet, hugged the poor girl, and hurriedly explained all that had happened. "We have to get Wesmorlyn away from this place before it comes down," she commanded, as a cracking sound overhead announced the splitting of a support beam. A heavy charred piece of wood landed near them.

Fanny shrieked and danced away, but then stared at the earl again. His broken wing was stretched out at an odd angle. "But what is he?" Fanny cried, staring at Wesmorlyn. "I don't understand!"

"Never mind that now, just help me, *both* of you!" Charlotte shouted, over the increasingly savage roar of the inferno. Together, the three girls pulled Wesmorlyn far enough away, to safety.

Fanny, panting, told Charlotte that she had Christoph's clothes, and asked where he was.

"He has followed Lyulph Randell," Charlotte said.

She eyed the earl. "I still don't know what he is. I don't understand any of this."

"He's a kind of angel, Fanny; hush." Looking around, fearful and uncertain, Charlotte tried to think, but her gaze returned to Wesmorlyn, motionless and bruised, the gorgeous golden aura he had emanated as he vented his wrath on Lyulph now extinguished. "We need to decide what to do now. How are we to get him back to his home?"

"Romolo has the earl's horse safely tied up at our encampment; he can help get the gentleman back to Wesmorlyn Abbey," Tamara said, her olive complexion made golden by the flames that now had consumed the uppermost floor of

Charlotte's former prison. "It's not far from here, and my brother knows the way."

A floor inside gave way and crashed, the sound echoing in the night, the smoke spilling out of windows and billowing upward, blotting out the moon as sparks flew up in clouds. Fanny cried out and clung to Charlotte, who said, "But what about Christoph? How will he find us?"

"I'll stay behind and help him follow," Tamara replied, calm in the face of everything that had happened.

"Are you sure?" Charlotte asked, kneeling by Wesmorlyn and cradling his head on her cloaked lap. It would be a relief to have help with Wesmorlyn and Fanny, and Romolo had impressed her as calm and courageous as his sister. "But after all you've seen . . . don't you even want an explanation?"

Tamara shook her head. "No. You're my friend; we don't need words. Wait here. I'll go get Romolo, as well as some clothes for you; you must leave here as soon as possible." She gazing up at the blazing building. "I'm afraid this fire may spread. I'll send Romolo to you with the horse and clothing; you three take the earl, and I'll wait for Christoph and guide him to Wesmorlyn Abbey."

"But how will you know where to go?" Charlotte asked, exhaustion beginning to wear her down.

"I led Wesmorlyn to you tonight. I'll know the way, for I will always find you, my friend."

Charlotte stared at Tamara and then went to her; they clung to each other, and she felt it. It was true; there was no need for words. They were bonded friends, down to the soul, and Charlotte was grateful for the young woman's steady good sense in this hour of terror.

She supposed it took a half hour, and in that long interval, Charlotte stared up at the rapid progress of the fire consuming her prison. But finally Romolo, leading the earl's horse, found them and handed Charlotte a bundle, sent along by Tamara. She dashed to the copse of trees, dressed as well as she could and put her friend's cloak back on over it all. Then Charlotte accompanied Romolo, Fanny, and Wesmorlyn, who slumped on his horse, cloak over his battered and torn wings. As they walked away from the disastrous scene, a horrible rumbling noise shook the ground and Charlotte looked back; the roof

had finally collapsed and the walls were now just jagged fingers pointing skyward, outlined in orange and crimson by the shooting flames. If she had not transformed, she might have been a burned skeleton lying in the ruin.

They walked for hours, until Charlotte thought she would go mad from fatigue. Light glimmered in the eastern sky as they finally wended their way up a long, crushed-stone lane toward a sprawling golden stone castle.

A tall sepulchral man stood before the great open gates in front of Gothic arched oak double doors. His expression was impassive as he strode forward and pulled back the drab, filthy cloak that covered Wesmorlyn. As pale as he had appeared, Charlotte saw his gaunt face bleach to the color of finest white linen, a whiter pallor than humanly possible, as if he had no blood in his body. "This I feared from the beginning."

He pulled the earl off the patient horse, gently folded his broken wings, and easily bore him through the gates and the enormous oaken doors that swung open as he approached. Romolo led the horse away, around to the back.

"Who are you?" Charlotte cried, gathering up her gypsy skirts and following into the Abbey. "Don't you wish me to explain? Don't you want to hear—"

"I need no explanation. Rather I will tell you. You are the Countess Charlotte von Wolfram, affianced to this man, the Earl of Wesmorlyn. Having made hasty and unwise choices, you found yourself in terrible trouble, and the earl went to your succor. He persevered and defeated Lyulph Randell, suffered greatly in the event, and now is damaged, and perhaps has given up his lifelong goal of justifying his family's return to the fold."

"Who are you?" she whispered, her voice echoing like the hushed sound of leaves falling in autumn.

He still walked across the flagstone floor of the vast great hall, bigger even than that of Wolfram Castle, the earl limp in his outstretched arms. Charlotte followed, trembling with exhaustion, weary and sick at heart, but Fanny sank down into a chair, murmuring that she was exhausted, without even the energy to climb the stairs. The man did not answer Charlotte, and what did it matter? Her curiosity died with the acknowledgment that there was nothing for her here. The man's disap-

proving speech proved that the vast chasm between her and Wesmorlyn was wider than she had even imagined. What did an angel and a wolf have in common that could possibly make any link between them viable?

As they reached the third floor, Charlotte mindlessly following, not knowing what else to do and hoping to see the earl stir, at least, before leaving the castle forever, a door down the hall opened and Lady Hannah bolted out.

"Semyaza!" she cried. "What has happened to Wes?"

Charlotte stared at the girl, remembering what the earl had said about her running away, and her obsession with Lyulph Randell. Randell must have been using his odd power on her; his scheme had been to marry this girl and destroy Wesmorlyn. All of his plans had been upset the moment Charlotte and Christoph entered the ballroom and he realized that his nemesis's proposed wife was of a family of werewolves.

And yet his interest may have been served better if he had not lured Charlotte away with the false promise of Fanny's mother. If she had stayed in London, if she had not allowed Randell to influence her and lead her astray, her initial dislike of the earl may have hardened into something worse. London, to her, after her brief acquaintance with it, did not seem fashioned to bring about any better end, for the falseness of its society, the dreariness of its atmosphere, and the stultified company they would have been to each other in the brief drawing room visits allowed a young man and his fiancée could never have explained them to each other as time alone on the moors had.

So her engagement with Wesmorlyn was doomed from the beginning either way, she supposed, ultimately. The dull ache in her heart as she remembered their fleeting fervent encounter on the moor pained her still, but she would have to forget it and carry on as best she could.

Hannah followed them, and both young women entered a bedchamber after Semyaza, who strode across the huge room in a couple of long steps and laid the earl gently on a velvet-draped bed. "What happened?" Lady Hannah cried, sobbing and folding her hands as if in prayer. "What is that awful smell? Why is he hurt? His wings—his beautiful, *beautiful* wings—are shattered and singed!"

"He saved my life," Charlotte said, her tone hollow and vacant. "Lyulph Randell attacked me and Wesmorlyn intervened," she continued, remembering his awesome strength as he picked Randell up and threw him against the stone building. "He risked his life to save mine, even though he saw me in a form that revolted him. Still, he saved me."

Semyaza turned, and gazed at her, the diffused light from the curtained window shadowing his hollow eyes. "What did you just say?"

Charlotte rubbed her arms, swallowed hard, and repeated her words, then said, "And now he's dying, perhaps, and it's all my fault!" She coughed, feeling the effects of the smoke in her throat.

Semyaza nodded in acknowledgment, but then said, "Yes, perhaps, but don't blame yourself for what happened, Countess. It was one more necessary step in this young man's progress," he said, touching the broken wing with gentle fingers. "The earl was doing the right thing, and learning a most important lesson. You have helped him by demonstrating your own passion for life and family. He needed to know this, for he has never understood that the human part of him is equally as important as his angelic heritage."

Charlotte shrugged, not caring about lessons in life at that moment. She glanced over at Hannah, who crouched and wept at her brother's bedside; her heart ached, for she knew what it was to despair for a brother so deeply and yet be powerless to help him. "Shouldn't we be doing something for him?" she asked, her voice thick and strange to her own ears. "Shouldn't you get him a physician, or . . ." She trailed off.

"You should be helping him."

"Me?" she asked, horrified, meeting the tall man's penetrating gaze.

"Yes, you."

She shook her head and backed away, but Semyaza took Lady Hannah's arm and hauled her out to the hall and then closed the door behind them, leaving Charlotte inside. "But sir!" Charlotte cried as she heard Hannah wail mournfully. She raced to the door and pulled at it, but it was locked from the outside. "I can't help him!" she cried, pounding on the door. "He needs a doctor!"



"No doctor can mend his wounds." The man's hollow voice was muffled by the thick wood of the door.

"But what can I do? I almost got him killed!"

"Think but a moment and you will understand. Go to him!" the man said, his voice commanding.

Hannah's sobs echoed down the hall, diminishing as the man led her away. Pounding on the door and wailing would not move him; Charlotte knew it somehow, and stopped. She put her forehead to the wood door, weary in body and spirit. But finally, there was nothing to do but obey. She returned to the earl's bedside and stared down at him. He was utterly beautiful in his stillness, his skin golden, though smudged with ashes, his brown hair dirty and tightly curled, sweat on his brow. She sat on the edge of the bed. How could she help him? She was no healer. It didn't come naturally to her as it did to some women of her acquaintance. His wings were broken and burned, and she was no angel's surgeon, nor was she anything but a wolf-woman, wild and untamed. She wouldn't take back her transformation even if she could, for with it had come a knowledge that a part of her she had always suppressed as evil and unwomanly had been released. Strength was not unwomanly, nor was vigor. Protecting those she cared for was not unwomanly, nor was sexual need and the satisfying of it, no matter what those at home would say. She was more a woman now, where she was a girl before.

And yet still, she felt deep within her the pain of becoming repellent in Wesmorlyn's eyes, when once, before her metamorphosis, those eyes had looked upon her with desire and affection. She was about to stand and leave the bedside, but he stirred, and she paused. He had risked his life to save her, even after she had told him the truth about their family, and even seeing her in her animal form. What was that if not the ultimate test of fidelity and courage? She couldn't abandon him now. She knelt by his bedside, and rusty as her prayers were, she began to speak to whatever power governed the universe, for she was not sure if she believed in the god of her childhood, the unyielding, wise, and stern master of all. Did she even believe in the god of these fallen angels, an angry, all-knowing, all-seeing god?

"Please," she whispered, "take this man-angel and return

him to health, for he is good and kind and wise, and his sister needs him, as do those in his care and employ. Even abhorring my family legacy as he does, even seeing me as a wild wolf, still he came to my aid and saved me from Lyulph Randell, whom he knew to be full of anger and ambition." Tears welled in her eyes.

He moved, and his broken wings stretched out. She gazed through a veil of tears, and reached out to touch them, feeling the torn, gauzy material, like fragile silk stretched between brittle ivory bone, shredded by the sharp fractures of the bone shards. The edges were singed and crisped by the fire, and they were blackened at the tips. Tears dropped and stained, spreading on the gossamer fabric like water on blotting paper.

"Heal him," she whispered, smoothing the diaphanous web between her hands as she closed her eyes, tears raining down to her fingers. She laid her cheek against his chest, feeling the smooth warmth of his skin and hearing the steady *thump-thump* of his heart. Pressing her lips to his skin, she murmured, "Come back, Wes, and know that though we'll be apart, I will always understand how much you risked for me and be grateful to you. Your life is here with those who need you. Come back for Hannah's sake."

She wept softly, knowing that a fractured part of her heart would always be devoted to him, and as much as he was revolted by her wolf essence, he must care for her, too, or he wouldn't have made such an incredible sacrifice. But their differences were too great and the pain of knowing she would always repulse him, no matter how he tried to get over it, made it an impossible bond to maintain except apart. When she was back home she would remember his lovemaking, his kindness, and his courage, and would do her best to forget the moment of horrified revulsion when he saw her for the first time as a werewolf. And in turn she hoped he remembered their golden afternoon together and would forget everything else.

Hours passed. She talked and prayed and found some solace, knowing that as much as she had done wrong, she had learned and would be better and stronger in the future. Being a wolf might seem an ugly thing to some, but for the first time in her life she felt whole and at peace in her heart. She rubbed her cheek against his lovely wings and then slept, eventually.

They had arrived at Wesmorlyn Abbey just after dawn; when she awoke, day had dwindled into early evening. Twilight made a golden glow in the room as the sun set. She was sitting on the floor against the bed, stiff and aching all over. Not a soul had come to the room all day, and she wondered what had happened, realizing with a start that she had not even thought about Fanny, Christoph, or Tamara all day. When she finally stood and gazed down at Wesmorlyn, it was to see that he slept peacefully now. His outstretched wings were mended, the filmy gauze beautiful, translucent, and repaired. The broken wing tip, which had been singed and hanging limply, was healed and strong again. He was still dirty and smudged with ashes, but he was whole.

She sighed, relieved at his miraculous recovery. His breathing was even, and he slumbered deeply, his expression peaceful at last. How had it happened? She couldn't believe she had any part in it, though she had prayed for his recovery. Another time her curiosity would have plagued her, but this was one of the things she would likely never know, and she would have to live with that. It was enough that he was recuperating; how it happened was not important.

Tapping at the door lifted her from her reverie. "Yes?"

Her brother entered. "Charlotte?"

"Christoph!" she cried and ran to him, hugging him hard. "You returned! Did you find Lyulph Randell? Where did he go? What did you do?"

"He escaped," Christoph said, frustration in his voice. "He left a trail of blood, for Wesmorlyn's mighty throw and your attack left him badly hurt. I tracked him as far as I could, but lost him eventually. I can't tell whether I'm grateful or angry about that."

"Where did he go?"

"I think he may have returned to Morwenna. When I got to the cottage, the door was wide open and the place was abandoned, and his blood was on the doorstep."

"Oh." A sense of dread swept over her as she thought about Lyulph and Morwenna together, their anger building. But she was safe now. Lyulph Randell couldn't hurt her. "What about . . . about . . ." She put a hand to her forehead and wavered. "Oooh," she groaned. "I feel so weak."

"When did you last eat?" he asked.

"I don't remember," she admitted. "Yesterday? What time is it?"

"It's about half eight in the evening. Fanny, poor girl, was exhausted after the ordeal. Hannah was very kind to her, she told me when I arrived, and even though she was worried frantically about the earl, nursed our little sister very kindly. Fanny slept most of the day. I'm not sure I understand this household; Lady Hannah seems to rely utterly on that fellow, Semyaza, who I thought was a servant, at first."

"I don't think he's a servant, Christoph. I'm not sure what he is, but he is very grand and solemn, and yet kind enough, I suppose, though he locked me in with the earl." She put one hand on Wesmorlyn's bare arm, feeling the steady pulse of his blood through his veins.

"What?" Christoph appeared horrified that she had been locked in, but Charlotte, after one lingering look at the earl, explained it all to him as he helped her up and out of the room, guiding her to the stairs and down.

"What about Tamara?" Charlotte asked.

When he didn't answer, she glanced sideways at him. If there was one thing she knew, it was that Tamara had fallen in love with him almost the moment she saw him. He, though, to the best of her knowledge, was still aching over his lost love, Melisande Davidovich. His pain was raw, like a burn, and Charlotte could not bear to hurt him by probing the wound, so she didn't pursue the matter.

"Tamara and her brother have gone back to their tribe," he said, finally, leading her along a modern hallway to a lovely dining room.

"Oh," she replied, experiencing a sharp ache of sorrow. She would never see them again, because they would no doubt go back to London immediately, and from thence would return to Germany. "I hope you said good-bye for me," she said, her voice thick with unshed tears.

"I did. Tamara didn't speak much, but Romolo told me he and his sister were going to make sure that their tribe does not suffer any retribution from Lyulph Randell. They are going to leave Cornwall now, forever."

Semyaza, Christoph went on to say, had ordered all who

came from their party to be made comfortable and given rooms to sleep in, food to eat, and fresh clothes to wear. Fanny, who was waiting in the dining room, rushed at her and hugged her. Charlotte rocked back on her heels.

"Fanny, Charlotte needs some food," Christoph said. "Release her."

"Of course, Christoph." Fanny guided her to a chair and piled a plate high with food, serving her as she had always done.

Charlotte put out one staying hand, grabbing her arm. "Fanny, stop! You are *not* our servant."

"I know that," Fanny said, putting her free hand over Charlotte's, "but it's natural to me to help wherever I can. I'm not strong, nor am I intelligent, but I can make people comfortable." She shrugged. "That's what I can do."

"Fanny, you're so much more than that, and I hope you learn that someday," Charlotte said, affectionately, hugging the girl.

They ate, and no one from the castle staff interfered, except to bring fresh dishes and hot water when necessary. A maid came in and closed the curtains against the purple twilight outside, then lit the candles as the three talked. The old gypsy woman had used wolfsbane on Christoph, he told them; that was what was in the ale she gave him. But he had been exposed to it before, in Germany, and so recovered swiftly. Fanny, Christoph said with pride, had gathered all of her courage to assist him in his transformation into a wolf. Their younger sister colored, and ducked her head shyly at the praise.

"What about poor Anne?" Charlotte asked, beginning, as she ate and drank some wine, to at least feel alive again, after the traumatic events of the past while.

"Anne was beginning to recover when last I saw her," Fanny said. "She was afraid of the gypsies at first, but I think she will be grateful to them and may stay there, with Tamara. I don't think they'll allow Mother Sarah to deceive them again, now that they see how she will lead them into trouble and danger."

"Poor Romolo," Charlotte said, watching her sister's face. "He cares for you a great deal."

"I said good-bye to him before he left," she said, calmly, "and thanked him for all of his help." Taking a deep breath she sat up straighter. "Where shall we go now? What shall we do?"

Her desire to change the subject was evident, and Charlotte and Christoph exchanged glances.

"I thought we should return to London and continue the search for your mother, your *real* mother," Christoph said. "If it is truly what you want, Fanny."

"But what about the earl?" Fanny said, looking at Charlotte.

Feeling the pain deep within her, Charlotte looked down at her hands and said, "He's well cared for here, and will get better in time, I have no doubt. He made it quite clear that my being who I am revolts him, and no matter how I feel, I could never love someone who didn't care for me exactly as I am."

"You don't need him," Christoph said, his tone dark with anger. "You don't need any of these English. We'll return to Germany where you are valued and loved."

Charlotte nodded, afraid to talk for the tears in her voice. She conquered her emotion and finally said, "But first, Fanny, you didn't answer. Do you wish to find your mother? I was wrong before to push you. I didn't really take your feelings into consideration. What do you *truly* want?"

"I would like to find my mother," Fanny said, hesitantly. "I may never live with her, and she may not want to see me, but I would just like to know that she is all right, and didn't suffer for bearing me."

"All right then, that is what we'll do," Christoph said. "We can leave for London in the morning at first light."

"I'll tell Semyaza," Charlotte said.

She didn't need to search for him. The moment Fanny and Christoph left the room, Semyaza materialized as if out of nowhere.

"You have made a decision," he said to her, his gaunt face sallow in the golden candlelight.

"Yes," she said, folding her hands together on the mahogany dining table to keep from twisting them in her anxiety. "First, will the earl recover now?" she asked, breathless. This man would know.

"Yes, he will recover in time, thanks to you. Do you know what you did?"

She shook her head.

"You may not understand," he said, gently, kindness in his pale gray eyes, "but you gave him a part of yourself, a part that he needed to heal. He has learned a valuable lesson from you, and will be a better man for it."

Her breath caught in her throat and she held back a sob. "Then I repaid him for his valiant effort to rescue me, and no debt exists. Good. We're leaving in the morning."

He nodded.

She cleared her throat, still raw from the smoke she had inhaled. "May we use one of the earl's carriages? It would facilitate our move."

"Of course."

"Thank you. Will you make our farewells to Lady Hannah? It's late, and I don't wish to disturb her, especially as she has not been well lately, nor will she be up when we are ready to leave in the morning."

"I'm sure she would wish to see you before you leave."

"No. No, I just want to go. I'll write her a note of farewell. It will be easier that way."

"Then it shall be as you wish," Semyaza said. "Everything will be prepared for your journey."

## Chapter 24

BRIGHT MORNING sunlight slanted through the window and directly into Wesmorlyn's eyes. He was dazzled as he awoke, stretching and yawning, wondering at the wild dreams he had had, of werewolves and fire, a ferocious battle, and Charlotte weeping over him, her tears dripping down on his wings. He flexed his shoulders and sat up in bed.

"Wes, finally, you're awake!" Hannah cried, leaping up from her chair, which for some strange reason was by his bedside.

"What are you doing in here, Hannah?" he said, holding the sheets up over his naked chest. His little sister had never invaded his sanctum before.

"Waiting for you to awaken. You must get up," she said, taking his wrist and tugging him in an unusual display of vigor. "She's gone and I didn't know what to do. You've been asleep for days and days, but Semyaza said it was all right, just to let you sleep. But Charlotte saved your life, but she left and she didn't even say good-bye, though she left me a sweet note. But she's gone! What shall we do?"

He threw his legs over the edge of the bed and touched his



head, which ached fiercely. There was a bandage at his throat. He pulled it away, touching almost healed wounds. Memories flooded back to him, of the battle and his fury at Lyulph, and then the one moment when time stood still, and he saw, up in the window, flames leaping behind her, his beautiful, naked Charlotte. And she changed into a wolf. The intense attraction he had felt toward her had not disappeared, not even knowing what she was, and that was a revelation to him. But he had experienced an intense moment of revulsion, and knew that must have showed in his expression. Putting his head in his hands, he closed his eyes; how could he have let that show? His reaction must have hurt her. Perhaps that was why she had left before he regained consciousness.

The hazy memory of joy and contentment in her company came back to him, and with it the intriguingly erotic sensation of joining with her body and soul. What would have happened between them if her revelation of werewolf blood had not followed his so swiftly? Would he have asked her to marry him?

Would she have said yes?

He looked up and met Hannah's worried gaze. He had thought himself a considerate and exemplary brother, but had failed in some elemental way. If he had really listened to Hannah and given her credit for her excellent moral fiber, if he had just dug deeper, he would have discovered why she couldn't help her behavior around Lyulph; Randell had been trying to destroy his family by luring Hannah into either disgrace or marriage.

In the golden light of truth, he saw that he had become proud and cold and inhuman. He had felt his family to be above others, most especially the Randells, and not solely because of their secret life. Though Lyulph Randell's behavior couldn't be excused, he didn't think the fellow was always so angry. Many years before he had been just a carefree, cheerful youth, with none of the brooding anger of the last while. Wesmorlyn's haughty disdain for the fellow was the root of much of his need for vengeance. He had sowed the seeds of this discord with his own behavior, and that stung deeply. Had he done the same to Charlotte?

And in his attempt to rescue his family from eternal damnation, had he condemned them all to hell on earth? It

was humbling to find that in trying to do the right thing, he had so completely missed the mark in every respect.

But for a few hours, at least, he had forgotten his distrust and distaste for all things passionate and human. In Charlotte's arms he had been whole for just a while, and simply a man, giving and taking in equal measure, feeling bonded with another human in a way he had never been before and likely never would again, now that he had driven her away so brutally.

Semyaza entered and gazed steadily at him.

"I've made a complete ass of myself and ruined everything, haven't I?" he said to his watcher. "I put myself and my family up on a pedestal, and forgot that most of our composition is human and fallible, and that our connection with humans, though it initially was our downfall will also be our—" He stopped, mouth open, and stared out the window, awareness seeping into his soul, understanding that was prompted by Charlotte's beautiful spirit and radiantly human soul. "Of course, that's it. Our salvation lies in our humanity!" he whispered.

He took Hannah's hand in his and watched the silent tears roll down her soft cheeks. "We'll *never* be perfect," he said, thinking out loud. "To gain redemption we have to keep trying and failing, over and over, working at it day by day, just like all humans do. There is no end, just the continual struggle, and as hard as that is, there's also great joy. And love." He squeezed his sister's hand. "We must take chances and opportunities, love and be loved. Connect to other imperfect spirits." He looked up at his guide. "I was so afraid of failing that I wouldn't give of myself, no emotion, no love, no true compassion. I tried to hold us apart, doing nothing, giving nothing."

Semyaza deeply sighed. "Imperfect you began, and imperfect you shall always be."

"Isn't there a ring of hell dedicated to those who do nothing, neither evil nor good? I believe I was headed there. Hannah," he said, putting one arm around her slim shoulders, "I never was the loving brother I should have been."

"But you were. I felt the love in everything you did."

He was humbled and grateful, and knew there was some truth to it. There must be an innate side of him that was lov-

ing, and Hannah had always had that deep brotherly devotion, from the very first moment of her birth. "I held you as a little baby, and now look how lovely you are." He turned and stared at Semyaza's gaunt face and ghostly eyes. "Sam, I've driven Charlotte away, idiot that I am. She was the one sent to teach me the truth, to show me how human I truly am, and I've driven her away. I have to go find her!"

"Then you must go to London," he said, with a faint smile on his thin lips.

A letter awaited Charlotte, Christoph, and Fanny in London. Their old friend, Frau Liebner, now on her way back to London to join them, had found out the fate of the real Miss Eleanor Dancey. The reason the woman had left Plymouth was a happy one; she was married and settled in a comfortable home in Chelsea with three stepchildren, and would be happy to see her long-lost daughter.

"So we need not even have left London to find your mother," Charlotte said, staring at the letter. They sat together at a table near the window overlooking the street in the dreary sitting room of their rented London townhome. "And I put you all through so much because of my impatience. Taking us off to Cornwall like that! Perhaps Uncle Nikolas is right after all. I'm imprudent and hasty, unfit to make my own decisions."

"That's your weariness talking, Charlotte," Christoph said, putting one hand over hers and meeting her gaze.

"No, Christoph, you're very kind, but I was foolish and hasty, and I must apologize," she said, humbly. "I put you all through so much, and I'm very sorry."

"I've been thinking of this," he said, releasing her hand and sitting back in the dusty, ornately carved side chair. "And you were right the night of the ball when you accused me of behaving badly because of my confusion over how to handle meeting another werewolf. Perhaps now that you have transformed you'll understand what it's like. I knew it wouldn't end well. I must challenge him or he must challenge me; one or the other of us must submit or leave."

Fanny, wide-eyed, said, "What would you have done?"

A hard gleam entered Christoph's blue eyes. "I would not have submitted, I can tell you that much." His expression softened. "I suppose I sensed some threat from him, but I'm still inexperienced and I wasn't sure of my conclusions. But my point is, by my recalcitrance and bad temper that evening, I drove you to your actions, Charlotte."

"No, it's kind of you to try to ameliorate my own opinion of myself, but it will not do." Self-knowledge came with a price, Charlotte found, and the price was conceding one's faults. Though she would never again allow anyone to make her decisions for her, neither would she be hasty in making them herself. "Deep inside I knew you would not, nor could you, make me leave if I wasn't ready. I wanted an adventure, and I got it. I was wrong to haul you all into it with me."

"But Charlotte," Fanny said, timidly. Her brow wrinkled and she took a deep breath. "If I had been stronger, I could have said immediately that I didn't like that awful witch-woman, and we could have left Cornwall before things went as far as they did."

Warm tears begin to slip down Charlotte's cheeks and she put out both her arms and pulled her siblings to her. "I am grateful, my loves, for your kindness." She released them, laughing at Christoph's discomfited expression, and took in a deep breath. "But this is not a night for tears, this is a night for celebration," she said, picking up the letter and waving it. "Fanny, tomorrow you will truly meet your mother. I'm so happy for you!"

Christoph retrieved his violin and played a merry tune, then laid it aside. "Tomorrow." He took Fanny's hand and squeezed it. "We'll be at your side, my dear, don't worry."

The next day Fanny was unnerved and pacing, alternating between tears and laughter. Morning was too early for the visit, and so she tried to occupy her time, but failed miserably, ending up simply staring out the front window at the gloomy little park opposite their rented townhouse. Charlotte left it to her to choose how the day was to proceed, and she decided she would like her brother and sister with her. If things went well, then she would let them know she was comfortable enough for a private visit with the woman.

A maid answered the door of the snug Chelsea house, just

a street back from the embankment, and guided them up the stairs to a first-floor parlor. Flanking Fanny, Charlotte and Christoph entered the room just slightly behind her, both with a hand at her elbow in case she should feel faint or need an encouraging squeeze.

A woman, sitting by an unnecessary fire, stood, nervously twining her hands around each other. She stared, her blue eyes big and round, but her belly even bigger and rounder. She was heavily pregnant, and seemed to tremble on the verge of tears, ready to drop back down into her seat. "My daughter," the woman said, her voice breathy and quavering.

Fanny broke free from her siblings and dashed across the room, taking the woman by the arm, guiding her to sit back down. "Some water for Mrs. Prudholme," Fanny said to a lingering maid, looking down at the woman, who had her eyes closed and had leaned her head against the chair back.

Any tension there might have been was diminished by this domestic scene, and after a short interlude for the woman to regain her breath, the four sat together, the tea tray in front of them, though no one could think of eating or drinking at the moment. Mrs. Eleanor Prudholme had taken hold of Fanny's hand and had not yet let go.

"I've never stopped thinking of my little girl all these years," she said, gazing at Fanny with tears in her eyes and voice. "You were such a beautiful baby, so perfect and sweet and well-behaved. How I longed to take you away with me! But I was young and frightened, and for a long time, even during my trip back to England and after, I was ill. The von Wolframs were kind—especially Countess Adele—but pointed out that they had already secured a wet nurse, while I . . . I didn't have the first idea how to care for you. My aunt, with whom I lived until she passed from this life a few years ago, advised me just to forget it all, but I never could."

"We love Fanny very much," Charlotte said, catching her sister's eye, "and you can be proud of the young woman she has become." Her voice broke on the last word, but she took a deep breath and stiffened her spine.

They spoke for a while about Eleanor's time in Germany, and she talked about Charlotte and Christoph's mother and father, confessing her own shame over events, but soon the con-

versation turned from painful subjects to happier things, and then as the daylight hours dwindled, it was time to go.

Charlotte drew Fanny aside and asked her what she wished to do; she had an invitation to stay in the house. They had briefly met Eleanor's husband, and he was a kindly, studious gentleman, absentminded but tenderhearted and doting on his heavily gravid wife. He was many years older than her, and a little nervous, he said, about having a baby in the house.

"I think I'd like to stay for a couple of days to become acquainted with her," Fanny said, looking back to the scene by the fire. Her mother had three stepchildren, and the youngest child, a girl of about seven years, sat at Eleanor's feet, one hand on her stepmother's enormous belly, while the two elder children were at a table in the corner playing a game.

"I think that would be good," Charlotte said. "But if you need me, or wish to come back, please just come. We're at your command."

"I wish matters between you and the earl had ended on a better note," Fanny said. "I feel terribly guilty having so much happiness when you—"

"Stop, Fanny!" Charlotte said, putting her forehead to her sister's and petting her hair. "Stop fussing. You are *such* a fusser. Take your happiness; you deserve it, and have paid amply in your life for what contentment you now can enjoy."

They left Fanny in Chelsea surrounded by her new family. Returning to their dreary rented house—the moldering rooms, the surly servants—was all the worse for her absence and the contrast between what they endured and the chaotic warmth and shabby charm of the Prudholme abode. Charlotte had not realized how, in such a short time, she had become so attached and dependent upon Fanny's presence. For all her fussing and occasional depression, she had become precious to both von Wolfram siblings.

And so, at dinner in the dark dining room, Charlotte and Christoph stared at each other across the scratched oak dining table. They had talked at length about Fanny's new family and had exhausted the topic. There were other things of which neither of them wished to speak, and so Charlotte's amazing transformation was all that was left.

"You are a werewolf, too," Christoph said, gazing at her

with an odd mixture of puzzlement and pride. "No woman has ever become one of us, one of the transformed. Not even every man born to our race can do what you've done. It is oft times only one man in each family or generation, but you did it, and so easily."

"Not easily," she said, with a deep sigh, pushing a dry piece of fish around on her chipped plate. "My fear of the fire and the anxiety of the moment facilitated the change, along with having the kirtle in my grasp. It was the only way I could escape the enchantment on the house, too, for that spell contained only the human me. I would have died in that fire if I hadn't transformed. I understand now, Christoph, what you and Uncle Nikolas have said about the sacrifice and the temptation and the burden of responsibility. I was jealous, but I know now it's not a gift, but an encumbrance."

"You can't go back now, though," he said, "or you would become . . ."

He didn't need to go on. The fate of the *unveraendert*, or untransformed, was familiar to them, the awful weakening and fading of the ones who refused to transform, refused to accept the burden and temptations and rewards of their unique heritage. Eventually the untransformed faded from life, but not into death, just into a kind of gray existence, where they walked among men unseen and unnoticed, banished forever from the joys of the flesh, and yet forbidden the relief of death. They had seen a man well on his way to such a death-in-life, and neither would consider it. It was a selfish and weak path, they both agreed.

"How did you know you could do it?" Christoph continued, determinedly cheerful, taking a fork full of the tasteless fish.

"I think I always felt it, the wolf within me, but I never knew what to do with it. No one ever told me it was possible; it was something I had to figure out on my own."

"I wonder if any woman has ever done what you have done?"

"I don't know."

Silence for a long few minutes.

"There's a lot, I think, that I don't know about what went

on between you and Wesmorlyn," Christoph said, still toying with his fish fork. He watched her intently.

"Trust me, Christoph, there is much more that I don't understand myself." She shook her head and pushed her plate away. "But all that really matters is that we shall not suit, as they say, and the engagement is broken irrevocably."

"You're sure of that?" Christoph said, gently.

"I'm quite sure."

FOR the first time in his life, Wesmorlyn acted purely on instinct. Semyaza assured him that Charlotte would be in London, and so he headed there, flying on the wings she had mended with tears of sorrow and humility and human forgiveness. But once there, he was unsure of himself, doubting everything but that he didn't deserve her forgiveness. What would he say? How should he approach her?

Not willing to face Christoph, he watched the house until she exited alone the morning after his arrival; she headed across the street to the small garden opposite and walked in the shade of the golden trees. Trembling with excitement to see her again, to say all he had to say, he followed her.

"Charlotte," he whispered.

Charlotte turned, and there was Wesmorlyn, impeccably clad in city clothing, his brown eyes full of yearning, the same melting look she had seen on the moor, the same look that had driven her into his arms. But this time she didn't believe it. It was a lie, a sham intended to make her feel that he cared when she knew that he didn't. Not really. Not for her. And she would never settle for less than bone-deep love. "I am happy to see you returned to health."

"Not so cold, Charlotte, please; don't be so chilly toward me." He took a step toward her.

"You say that as if you merit otherwise, when you scorn all that I am, all that my family is," she said, taking a step back, trembling as anger surged up within her heart. "You treat us like beasts; you behave as though because your ancestors did something dreadful and were cast out of paradise you are somehow better than we are. You're intolerably smug, judgmental, cold!" A chill wind blew through the park, and the



leaves overhead trembled, some pulling free and fluttering down to rest at her feet.

"No, Charlotte," he said, putting out one hand. "That is how I *was*, not how I *am*."

"Can you truly say from your heart that you think differently now? Can you truly say that there remains within you no hint of censure, nor even a scrap of disgust?"

He blinked at her vituperation. "Charlotte, you must understand, the Randells have been my family's only experience of . . . of your kind. At times in their family history they have been brutal and cruel."

"And have your ancestors always been saints?"

He ignored that question, saying, "Please understand; I was raised to think of one objective only, and that was to regain what was lost, to better my family until we became worthy of deliverance."

"And you thought the way to do that was to become cold and emotionless?"

He approached, both hands outstretched. "That's how I *was*, Charlotte, but I've learned from you how far from worthy I was, how much I had yet to learn, how far I had to go. How far I *still* have to go."

"So you've learned a valuable lesson, and I'm sure that will be a comfort to me as I make my way back to Wolfram Castle." Another leaf fell from the tree above, fluttering down to her, and she caught it in one bare hand, savoring the leathery texture of the golden surface before letting it go to drift down to the ground.

"You're leaving?"

"Why would I stay in England?" she said, watching his eyes. The breeze lifted his russet curls off his nobly proportioned forehead. He was perfectly dressed and styled, and yet she thought he had been far handsomer in Cornwall, with careless attention to his attire and hair. In the dark night her heart still pounded with passion when she thought of him, his shirt and jacket undone, striding toward her over the moors with ardor lighting up his brown eyes.

"Give me another chance," he said, still slowly pacing toward her. "I know that somewhere in your heart you've

forgiven me for treating you so badly. Now give me the opportunity to prove I can be what you want me to be."

"I think our time has passed."

"Please, Charlotte, don't say that."

His beautiful brown eyes held that expression of yearning again, and she couldn't bear it. Choking back tears, she turned away, and said, "I will never forget the look of revulsion on your face when I became what is, for me, the essence of my being. I'm a wolf-woman, and will always be, now, for once one of us has taken the step, we can never go back." She turned to see his expression, and caught the look; the faint shadow of distaste was still there.

"Surely you can go back," he said, stopping a ways away from her on the walk. "Can you not suppress it?"

She shook her head. Sighing, she said, "There, you see? You haven't changed."

"Yes, yes I have! I didn't mean that you *should* suppress it, just if you wanted to—"

"All right," she interrupted, "I'll say it differently, though what I just said is still true. I have taken the step and I would no more wish to go back than I would wish . . ." She paused, gazing at him through a haze of unshed tears. "I would no more take back my transformation than I would wish we had never made love. Would you take *that* back if you could?"

"No."

But she could see in his eyes that a part of him would take it back. "You're lying," she said, her tone harsh, her tears drying.

"No, I'm not." He had stopped and his head was bowed. "I would never take that back; it's my most precious memory. But I was raised to believe one way, and I cannot in one leap undo the teaching of a lifetime. I just wish we had waited until our marriage vows were said."

"That should be my speech," she said, dryly. "It makes me realize how unsuited for each other we are. We would be a constant reproach to each other. We would always want something from the other that was never going to be fulfilled, and the frustration would drive us apart no matter how much I l—" She stopped abruptly midword and turned away from him.

"What were you going to say?"

"I'll never deny that I care for you, Wes, but I will not be reproached for who I am every day of my life. I need to be myself. I need to transform and run as a wolf." She met his gaze, needing to make him understand what separated them. "How could I do that with the revulsion on your face, and knowing to you it is a dirty secret?"

"But we can work that out!" he declared. "You once told me marriage would be compromise and working things out as we went along."

"No. Some things, yes; but this, no."

"Please, Charlotte."

She turned away and headed out of the park, her shoes crunching on the falling leaves. "Let me go, Wes," she said, over her shoulder. "It will benefit neither of us to prolong this."

"No!" he roared. He bounded after her in a few quick steps, caught her, turned her swiftly, and jerked her into his arms. "I love you," he said, then pressed his lips to hers, binding her tightly in his arms.

She pushed him away and wiped her mouth, her hand trembling. "Perhaps love isn't enough," she said, and walked away.

"One more chance, Charlotte."

"Leave me alone, Wesmorlyn," she said, pausing at the edge of the park, and looking back at him. The overhanging trees, beginning to lose their summer leaves, shadowed his face. "Let me think. I need some quiet in my mind." She ran back across the street as a carriage passed, and then up the steps and into the gloomy townhouse as a light rain began to patter down on the pavement.

## Chapter 25

THE MOON, waning to a half disc, was silvery, but with a yellowish haze surrounding it. Charlotte lay in bed and stared at the window, thinking of home. She really wasn't sure she belonged there anymore, but where else was there to go? With all the changes she had undergone, her uncle was going to have a difficult time dealing with her. No other woman in their family had ever gone through the transformation, and he might be appalled, though he would try to hide it if he was, no doubt. It wasn't that he would ever be unkind, it was just that his idea of what a young lady ought to be and her true self were at distinct odds. It occurred to her that she would excuse her uncle's behavior, and yet she was holding Wesmorlyn to a far higher ideal.

Ah, but if she couldn't *blame* Wesmorlyn, then she would have to admit that she loved him and wished, despite their vast differences, they could marry. *Marry*. The word had an oddly appealing ring. *He is the man I would like to marry*, she thought. Having a home away from her family, staying in Cornwall, having an exciting new life with Wesmorlyn, loving him every day and night: it was an enchanting idea, and

she could too easily imagine herself happy at Wesmorlyn Abbey. She sighed and turned over, restless, but then she flipped back again to stare out her window, from which she had drawn back the curtains.

It just wouldn't do to envision some ideal life with Wesmorlyn. Living with a man who found such a vital part of her as her wolfdom revolting would be soul crushing. Being angry at the earl was self-preservation. It was simple fact that he couldn't help but be disgusted by that part of her.

*That part of her.* Looking back, she knew that the wolf side of her was always trying to surface, and the wildness she felt, the appalling need to be free, was what had led to her horrible indiscretion with her hapless dancing master. It would not have happened if she had known what to do with those feelings. The werewolf side of her released all of that pent-up energy, as she had learned from running with her brother through the midnight streets of London the previous night. It was exhilarating and freeing and she felt, after, refreshed and relieved of tension.

Ultimately it was a part of her, and she knew that her sexual desires were a part of her too. The relief and deep sense of freedom after making love with Wesmorlyn had been similar, though the connection lovemaking had forged between them had been soul-shattering and unexpected. They would always be a part of each other now, she supposed, even if they lived forever apart. And what was she to do with those emotions if they were not to be together?

She turned over and beat her pillow. The expression on his face as she left him in the park that afternoon haunted her, the look of painful hunger on his face, the haughtiness he had always displayed beaten down and hammered into humility. She remembered again their glorious afternoon in the Cornish sunshine, and the blissful moment of transport, the golden instant when, his body connected to hers, she had wholly entered a state of euphoria she was unlikely ever to experience again. Closing her eyes she drifted, half asleep. Dreams might be her only refuge now.

A noise startled her, the sound of something or someone tapping at her window—her *third-floor* window. She threw the covers back, slipped from bed, and ran to it, lifting the

sash; there, in the glimmering, hazy moonlight, was her lover and former fiancé perched on the railing of her narrow balcony, glorious wings outspread, aiding his balance.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, breathless, staring up at him. Her gaze traveled from his broad chest up to his intense eyes, golden brown and gleaming in the moonlight.

"I can't stand it, Charlotte," he cried, his voice crackling with emotion. "I won't let you turn me away. Please, can we talk about this? I won't leave you alone, I swear it, not until you hear me out. I'll follow you wherever you go, even to Germany."

"But you must leave me alone," she said, hammering her fist on the windowsill. "Just go!"

"No," he said, his tone hard and his expression determined. "If I leave you alone you'll leave England."

It was what she intended, though she hadn't had the courage to tell him so outright. "How do you know that?"

"Because it's the easier choice. The *safe* choice."

"When have I ever made the safe choice?" she exclaimed. She glanced back into her room, afraid her voice would carry. "When have I *ever*?" she said, in a softer tone. "I'm no coward."

"You will this time, I just know it." He balanced precariously on the railing, one foot slipping and his gleaming wings beating to keep him balanced. It was a breathtaking sight, gloriously unearthly. "Come with me for an hour!" he said. "I want to show you something."

"No!"

"Please," he said, his pearly wings drooping. "I'm *begging*."

She couldn't stand to see him so humbled. That was not what she wanted for him, she realized, to be abject and humbled by her. She sighed and said, "How? How can I go with you anywhere?"

"Step out of the window and come to me," he said. He stretched out one hand to her, his magnificent wings outspread.

She looked down three floors to the paving below. "I will crack my head open if I fall."

"I won't let you fall," he said, his tone gentle and brim-

ming with meaning. "Come, trust me. Dare to have this adventure."

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her nightgown and clambered up to the railing until she was toe to toe with him. She felt herself slipping and waved her arms to keep her balance; it was a precarious position, but he folded his arms around her, holding her close to his chest.

"I won't ever let you fall or abandon you, Charlotte," he whispered in her ear.

His warm breath tickled her ear and left her feeling oddly breathless. She was enfolded in a world of his warm, golden skin, as the sound of his wings, and the heady sensation of being lifted up and rising above the city made her giddy. He shifted her slightly so she could see, and she clung to him, curled in his protective embrace, their legs entangled as her nightgown skirt drifted in the breeze, and yet she was free to see below her the city and the river sparkling dark and sinuous, rolling its way through London.

No one else had ever seen the city this way; the Thames curled in and around it like a twisting snake, a pall of smoke clung to the buildings, and spires soared, pointing heavenward, giving hope of redemption and a blameless afterlife to all who aspired. They left the city proper, and, following the river, came to a great walled garden in Chelsea. Wesmorlyn gently descended and set Charlotte down on her bare feet on a walkway.

"Where are we?" she whispered, feeling a shiver run down her spine at the breeze rustling through a hundred trees and bringing the luscious scent of greenery wafting to her with the hushed murmur of the leaves.

He shrugged, folding his glorious wings back, between his scapula, and took her arm, guiding her down a walk. "This is the Physic Garden."

They walked and talked for a while, and he told her the history of the garden, how it was created by the society of apothecaries to identify and keep valuable medicinal plants, but soon they fell silent. The peace of the place filled her, and Charlotte wondered if that was Wesmorlyn's plan in bringing her there, that in such a green and gracious spot she would

more readily listen. If so, it was working, for she wanted to hear him again.

"You said, when we last spoke, that you would wish that we had waited for our marriage vows before we committed to each other bodily." She looked up at him as they strolled.

With a faint smile on his face he said, "And you said, that should be *your* speech."

"It should if I was a proper young lady. But I must tell you why I would not have waited." She didn't speak, though, for a few minutes, ordering her thoughts. Her whole life long she had been imprudent and hasty. What good was all that had befallen her, if she learned nothing about being more circumspect and discreet? It did not elude her notice that she only came to that conclusion when all of her wildness and vigor had a natural channel in her being a wolf sometimes.

But he didn't rush her, nor did he demand. His company, arm through hers, pace suited to her shorter steps, was calm and sweet, warm and gentle. He was different, more accepting and open, and she could feel it in the lack of tension in his powerful body next to hers. She glanced up at him again. His chestnut hair was tumbled by the wind, and his naked skin glowed golden in the yellowish light of the moon. He carried a golden aura with him, gleaming light emanating faintly from his skin. He had changed, too, and that thought gave her comfort.

"Have you always known how strong you are?" she asked, remembering his mighty heave as he tossed Lyulph the wolf at the burning building. It was certainly strength beyond what other men possessed.

"No," he said. "I'm learning much about myself that I never knew, nor even suspected." He closed his eyes for a moment, and the golden aura deepened. "This is all new, this glorying in my powers. I suppose I've always just accepted my heritage, using flight only when necessary, but now . . ." He trailed off and shook his head. "I can't explain the change. But I think making love with you had something to do with it, for I felt a shift within me then, one I've been trying to comprehend ever since. I have a lot more to learn about what it all means."

She nodded. "I understand." She decided not to share, at



that moment, the feminine ability of her kind to give the gift—or curse—of werewolfism, and how she had decided never to give it away. It wasn't important to tell him, and there were other things she wanted to say. "I discovered, while we made love, what it was to feel intimately joined to a man; I felt your body's pulse within me. It was unlike anything I've ever experienced." Or ever would again she supposed.

He closed his eyes and sighed. "I think about it all the time," he said. He glanced down at her and squeezed her arm. "But what was that beautiful act for, if not to confirm that we were meant to be together?"

She was silent for a long moment. She was tied to him, it was true, but that didn't mean she could be what he needed and wanted in a wife and lover. "I don't know if I believe in destiny anymore, or that two people are meant by some higher power to be together. I believe in choices." She stared down at the pathway beneath her bare feet.

"You don't think destiny took you away from London, and gave us our time in the sun?"

"No," she said, regretful but suddenly sure. Belief in destiny was attractive because it took away the necessity of making difficult choices and standing by them no matter the consequences. And if you could *blame* destiny for disastrous choices, you never took responsibility. "The choice I made to go to Cornwall was the result of things beyond your knowledge at the time, and even beyond my own. Lyulph Randell skillfully manipulated me. You following was your own choice. And our coming together, that was a choice, too, made by both of us. We would not have made love if something about the two of us was not matched."

"I think I prefer to believe it was destiny."

"No," she whispered, "no, I don't, because that makes it an accident of fate that we came together, when it was so much more."

"Or it's the plan of the supreme power. Do you believe in that?"

She stopped and looked up at him, meeting his warm brown gaze. She evaded the question of her belief or lack thereof in an all-powerful being. "You don't understand. I

would rather have you *choose* to be with me, than to be compelled by some supernatural force.”

A wave of emotion shuddered through him. “Charlotte,” he said, clutching her shoulders in his big hands. “I *choose* to be with you! And I don’t regret what we did. How can I, when what we did and who you are all adds up to one sum? I *love* you. The attraction I felt immediately, and the tenderness I came to feel for you, has melded into more, much more, and now, wanting you, thinking of you, seeing your honor and strength and beauty and—”

“Stop,” she laughed, holding up one hand. “I’ll get a big head if you go on.”

“No, you deserve it all. I don’t think you understand how truly fine you are, how intelligent, how compassionate. You were right about so many things. You accepted my secret life immediately, and I, to my shame, did not accept yours.”

“To be fair,” she said, on a deep, trembling sigh, “my secret life is a little more difficult to accept.”

“No, that’s not true, and if I made you feel it was so, I was wrong.” He pulled her close and held her for a long, silent few minutes. Then he gazed down into her eyes. “I’ve thought a lot about this, even since this afternoon. My whole life I’ve considered . . .” He trailed off and stopped.

“Don’t stop,” she said. She looked up into his eyes and saw them clouded with doubt. “If you’re worried about hurting me by being honest, don’t. I’m stronger than I ever knew I was.”

He nodded. “I *am* afraid of hurting you, but you must understand, what I’m about to say is what I used to feel, not how I feel now.” When she nodded, he continued. “I used to think that Randell’s werewolfism, if we can call it that, meant that he was somehow inferior. But I’ve thought about this long and hard. You and I are much more alike than we are different. Those things—my angelic heritage and your werewolf legacy—are two sides of the same coin. I won’t call it destiny, since you don’t like that concept, but we are the perfect balance for each other, earth and sky, both beautifully simple and exquisitely complex.”

Wesmorlyn stared at her, the delicate loveliness of her face, the piquant dimple in the middle of her chin, the spark of fierceness in her blue eyes, and continued, “Seeing you as

a wolf-woman frightened me. But it was not for who or what you are, but for the fear of such an intense, powerful, earthly bond it implied. I didn't know how to handle that. My whole life I've avoided such a tie, and then to have it presented to me as part of the woman with whom I want to spend eternity, I was afraid of all it implied."

"What did it imply to you?"

This was the crux of the problem, and what he had just come to understand after watching her walk away that afternoon and feeling a part of him go with her. It had terrified him that he now felt that they were part of a whole, and what would happen if she kept to her decision to leave England forever. He would follow her if she went, that he now knew. "I feared that I would never understand that part of you because I was too far removed from the natural human part of me, and yet I was more afraid of accepting that half of me was so human and needed your love. I had deliberately separated myself from that part of my being, but it's still there; it was all along. I understand now that what revolted me was not you, but myself, and the powerful need in me for you, and all that you represent."

She shook her head and frowned.

He took her shoulders and pulled her down to earth. Kneeling before her, he stroked her golden hair off her face. How could he ever explain? "When I contracted our marriage, I pictured a relationship where I would be your lord, and you my subject. There would be obligation, duty, maybe even friendship between us, but nothing more. But I *love* you." Words failed him. How could he express how he felt? He cupped her cheek and rubbed with his thumb. "What I feared was what you called up in me, my connection to the roots, to the earth, to this place," he said, waving a hand around at the trees overhead and the greenery surrounding them. "My whole life has been spent looking up, but in doing so I forgot to make roots, forgot that I'm more human than anything, and should honor that part of me."

She opened her mouth, but didn't speak for a long moment. "Oh," she finally said. Her brow furrowed. "You were afraid I would drag you down?"

"No! Oh, no, it was how I feel about you that frightened

me.” He kissed her brow, and then moved to her pink cheeks, to her nose, then sought her lips, bending to her and warming her with his body.

“How you feel about me?” she murmured against his kiss.

Peace overwhelmed him. “I love you with all my heart.” He gave himself over to it, sinking into the kiss and letting the love swell within him just as his body changed with the desire he experienced.

She gave in to his ardor and their tongues met and tasted each other, their mouths melding sweetly. After a long few minutes, she broke away, breathless, and stuttered, staring up at him, “B-but what about redemption, your family, your ancestors?”

“Redemption,” he said, looking into her heaven-blue eyes as they shone with hope, “if my family ever achieves it, will come from being a part of this world, not from separating ourselves from it.”

“But what of children?” she murmured. She cradled his cheek in her palm and rubbed her thumb over his lips, searching his eyes. “If we come together, what will happen to our children?”

He had thought of this long and hard. Semyaza had once told him that he needed to learn to trust himself, and not be so rigid in thinking he had to meet some impossible standard of perfect behavior. It had taken him a long time, but perhaps he was beginning to trust himself. If it was truly wrong for them to marry and create new life, he would know somewhere in his heart. He held her close and whispered, “Perhaps they’ll be wolf, like you, or have wings, like me, but either way, they will have someone who can explain life to them, and make a better world for them than either of us has experienced.”

“Wes, I believe you. And I love you.”

His heart soared with joy at her trembling words.

The soft warm scent of the garden, green and fresh, enticed her, and she leaned into his kiss and then pulled him down to the soft bed of greenery beneath them. She rubbed his naked shoulders, feeling his chest pressed against the filmy fabric of her nightrail and the growing evidence of his feelings for her. His broad hand ran up her leg and pushed the fabric further, as he stroked her thigh and pulled her to him, cupping her bot-

tom with his hand and pressing himself to her ardently, whispering against her lips words she could not understand, but the meaning of which became clearer as his breathing quickened.

"You're not afraid of me any longer?" she teased, closing her eyes and feeling the passion well up, coiling tightly like a spring within her.

"Yes, I'm terrified," he whispered, covering her with his body. "I'm drowning in love, and have completely lost balance, but you are far wiser than I in the balance between human and other, for you seem to effortlessly move through it."

"But I've only just begun to understand that about myself," she said, opening her eyes and gazing up at him in the moonlight. She pushed his dark curls off his broad forehead. "How can you trust me so readily?"

"That was the hardest thing for me, but I do trust you," he said, staring into her eyes. "Perhaps you've only just discovered that you can transform, but the wolf-woman was in you all along, bursting to get out. You had the balance ready long before the need for it arose."

"I'm the first of my kind in my family; no other woman has ever transformed. I don't know what to make of it, and I don't know what it means for children I may have."

"I think that was what Lyulph feared all along," Wesmorlyn said, the golden light of his skin glowing around them. "He was intent on making you his because he feared the unique power of offspring of a union such as ours. He was afraid that what he intended to create with Hannah would be ours."

"He's gone from England with or without Morwenna, Christoph thinks, perhaps forever."

"I don't care. I will handle him if need be, but he'll never touch you again. *Ever!*" Wesmorlyn said, his tone feverish as he pushed against her, ardent and yearning, hungry with love and desire.

Eagerly she sought the fall of his trousers as his lips met hers and his tongue dove into her mouth; he sucked on her lip, nipping wildly. His sturdy and willful member sprang from its prison into her hand and she touched him, stroking with unnecessary movements.

"Stop," he cried, his stomach muscles tightening as he

spasmed in need. Gently he spread her legs with his hand and touched her, groaning at the wetness he found and diving his finger in, readying her with quick, fumbling strokes and then parting her legs further with his knee as he mounted her.

The first touch of him as he pushed gently to begin entry made her cry out in delight at the sensation rippling through her body. He was bigger than before, more needy, harder, longer, much more urgent. His first stroke was vigorous and pushed her bodily, driving her into the earth, almost, with reckless abandon.

"Gently," she whispered into his ear, biting the lobe and feeling the rumbling moan in his chest as he slowed.

"I'll learn, my love, I will learn."

A ready student, he listened as she whispered hints, eagerly begging her to tell him what she needed, and she felt a veil of madness begin to descend as his quickening strokes and eager hands, tickling and kneading her until she was delirious, took her to the very brink of sweet release. "Yes, yes," she cried out, her voice echoing back to her strangely as a bird, disturbed in its slumber, took wing and fluttered away. She locked her heels behind his back to accept him deeper.

His great wings unfolded, then, and he beat them slowly, lifting her into the air until all she could feel was the sensation of him inside of her; every stroke, each teasing touch, raised the tension until the wildness erupted. She was transported, hovering above the earth, and while the ecstasy exploded within her, Wesmorlyn, driven to rapture, deepened his thrust and the juices flowed, filling her with his profound adoration with every thrust and every whispered "I love you." They tumbled over and over in air, buried in passion, transformed by love.

Then gently, he brought her back to earth, cradling her in his arms while, trembling, she felt tears pour down her face as she understood, finally, that his love was forever.

"I must take you home while my strength allows it," he whispered. He gathered her up in his arms and soared high, carrying her back over the city.

They entered her room, and he carried her to her bed, laying her gently down. Not willing to have him leave, as he clearly intended, she grabbed his arm and with a tug, pulled

him into her bed. She climbed atop him and said, "You aren't going. Not yet. Maybe not ever."

"Tell me first," he said, pushing up against her, the proof of his eagerness again evident, "that you'll marry me, or I'll *make* you say it."

"How?" she asked, breathless, the sweet darkness enfolding them, and her single word coming as a sigh. His golden glow had faded with weariness, and she could no longer see his face; his disembodied voice echoed in the dark room.

With quick movements he yanked her nightrail up over her head. He pulled her roughly toward him and began raining kisses over her breasts as he undid his own trousers this time. Straddling him as she was, she could feel him lengthen and harden as he began to slow his movements, swirling his tongue over her nipple, drawing it in, suckling and making her moan with the sweet madness that began once again to envelope her.

"Where did you learn that?" she gasped, throwing her head back. "Not from me."

"Instinct."

"Don't stop," she cried, and then moaned at the sweetness of the sensations trilling through her body.

"Marry me or I'll stop this instant," he murmured against her breast, then rubbed his lips against her wet, peaked nipple.

She giggled. "You cannot extort a promise like that from me now!" she said. "It's not fair!"

"Oh yes I can, and I don't wish to be fair." He drew her breast into his mouth and nipped the tightly budded rosette, then positioned himself to enter her again, tickling her above their juncture with his free hand. "Marry me," he said, pausing in his enticement.

"What a time to ask! I can't think," she moaned, her body feverishly hot.

"Good. I don't want to think either. We both think too much."

"But this isn't the time to make an important decision."

"Mine is already made. Isn't yours?"

"Yes," she sighed, pushing down on him. "Yes. I love you. I have since making love on the moor!"

"Then say it," he said, drawing out, pushing her up with his

other hand. He grasped her bottom and squeezed. "Say you'll marry me, and quickly."

"Yes, yes, I'll marry you, and quickly," she gasped. "Now stop teasing!"

"Never," he grunted, pulling her down onto him and taking her other nipple into his mouth, his nipping teeth almost painful in their attentions, but not quite.

"You've become quite masterful," she said, with a chuckle, looking down at him. A faint hint of light, now that her eyes were adjusted to the darkness of the room, illuminated his forehead, where beads of perspiration trickled, making his hair damp with sweat. She moved on him and was rewarded by the sight of his eyes rolling back and his body arching under her. "But now it's my turn to master you, my angel."

After, they lay in a tangle of blankets and talked long into the night. He confessed his fears, and she hers.

Could he make her happy, truly happy, that she had left her homeland? Would she miss her family too much? Those were his fears.

Would she fit in London society? What kind of a countess would she make? And what kind of mother? Her fears were more far-reaching and unanswerable, perhaps, except by time and trust.

But even as they fell asleep in each other's arms, they both knew the answers to all those questions lay in the future, and that together they would find the solutions to every problem.

MORNING came and light leaked into her room around the edges of the drapes. Charlotte stretched and yawned, but was not prepared for the sight of the door opening; a young maid bearing a tray stood in the open doorway.

Christoph following, saying, "Charlotte, I need to speak to you. Something dreadful has happened and—"

He stopped, and he and the young girl both stared at the sight that greeted them. Wesmorlyn, naked and just now awakening, was tangled in the blankets, his muscular bare leg thrust out over the covers. Charlotte held the sheets up to cover herself. "Go! Go away, Christoph," she cried, laughing and blushing.



Christoph shoved the gaping servant out the door, but stormed back in and over to the bed, grabbing Wesmorlyn by the hair. "You! You miserable sneak, what are you doing here? How did you get in? What are you doing in my sister's bed?"

"No! Christoph, no! It's all right," she cried, holding up one hand. "Let him go, for heaven's sake! We're to be married. Soon."

Christoph fell back in amazement and stared at them both. "I don't understand."

"It's true, I love him," she said, looking over at Wesmorlyn, his sheepish expression and sleepy eyes adorable to her. "We're going to be married right away."

Christoph's expression was grim. "All right. Get dressed. You, Wesmorlyn, have a lot of explaining to do. She is in my care while we are here, and—"

"Christoph!" Charlotte interrupted. "I am in no man's *care*. I'm my own woman, and I have decided to marry him."

Wesmorlyn, his face red, said, "I'll be your brother, Christoph. I've never had a brother and will be honored to call you mine."

Christoph looked from one to the other of their faces, and said, "This is what you both want?"

"Yes," Charlotte and Wesmorlyn both said, so eagerly that they ended on a laugh.

"Well Uncle Nikolas will be happy."

"And so will we," Charlotte said, winding her arms around Wesmorlyn, who was turning a brilliant scarlet, but looking very pleased with himself. "So will we. But what were you going to say, Christoph, when you came in?"

He paused for a moment, but then said, hoarsely, "Romolo is downstairs. Lyulph Randell has taken Tamara and says he will kill her unless we do exactly what he says."

"No!" Charlotte bolted upright. "What are we to do?"

"You two need do nothing. This is a challenge to me directly, for he says I must leave England, taking you with me, if she is to live. But I will allow no man to tell me what to do. No man, nor any wolf. I should have killed him when I had the chance."

Charlotte stared at her brother. She had never heard him

say anything like that before, and a glimpse at his harsh, dark expression made her shiver.

"You'll have my help whether you wish it or not," Wesmorlyn said, sitting up and throwing his legs over the side.

"And mine," Charlotte said. "We're in this together, or not at all."

"I'll see you downstairs, then." Christoph left the room.

Trembling, Charlotte asked, "What does it mean, Wes? Why has Lyulph done this?"

"I should have taken care of him years ago instead of trusting him." Wesmorlyn leaped from bed and pulled on his breeches. "This is, in truth, my responsibility, not your brother's."

"I've never seen him so angry," Charlotte said.

"I have got to take care of this. I won't have your brother harmed for my weakness."

She slipped out from under the covers and wound her bare arms around him. "I think, my love, that you must accept that we are all in this equally, for we have all had a hand in creating this particular problem."

Wesmorlyn gazed down into her blue eyes as the morning sun flooded the room with light. It was true; she was his partner now, and he would never underestimate her again. "I love you," he whispered, lowering his face to hers and kissing her deeply, sweetly.

She felt it, then, felt the bond strengthening with every moment together. He trusted her now, wholly, and she had learned to trust him. He would never let her go or abandon her. "I love you," she returned against his mouth. "And I always will. Whatever happens next, we'll handle it together."