

BRONWYN SCOTT



WICKED EARL,
WANTON WIDOW

Undone!

Wicked Earl, Wanton Widow

Bronwyn Scott



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Herefordshire, England. 1830.

Rose Janeway had heard rumors of Killian Redbourne's prowess with women. The new earl of Pembridge was infamously wicked and utterly masculine...and just the thing to tempt the passionate widow into taking a lover. But as their days of ecstasy flew by, Rose feared that Killian would return to London, leaving her beloved community destitute and her heart broken. Unless she can persuade him to stay in town and in her bed...

This *Undone* was fun to write, especially since I wrote it during the fall and apples are such a big deal in the Pacific Northwest where I live. Herefordshire, where this story takes place, is the Orchard of England, even today. Cider enjoyed a popular existence in Herefordshire since the Middle Ages but it wasn't until the 19th century that farmers banded together to make it possible to transport cider to the cities and make it a more lucrative industry outside of the region. Today, 63 million gallons of cider are produced in Herefordshire, accounting for over half of the cider produced in England.

I hope you enjoy the story of Killian Redbourne and his feisty heroine, Rose Janeway. Peyton Ramsden, the Earl of Dursley, is on hand to help Killian with his awkward inheritance. You can read more about Peyton Ramsden in *The Earl's Forbidden Ward*, due out in North America spring 2010!

Drop by and say hello at www.bronwynswriting.blogspot.com

Bronwyn

This one is for Kerry Stoner, a great supporter of education for women. Thanks for your commitment and dedication to PEO and chapter GC's Make it and Take it. You are an inspiration to us all. Thanks for your leadership.

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Chapter One

Fall, 1830, Herefordshire, England

Killian Redbourne's kisses could make a woman swoon. They had in fact done just that two weeks ago at the theater where a Mrs. Dempsey had been caught in his arms performing said feat (a stunt many suspected she'd engineered herself). Such was the latest rumor that had accompanied him down from London.

Rose Janeway was not proud that she'd succumbed to the inclination to gossip, but it was all the people of Pembridge-on-the-Wye knew of the man who would be earl. She excused her weakness on the grounds that no one had actually seen Killian Redbourne in fourteen years, not since his last quarrel with the Earl of Pembridge and no one had expected to see him again. After all, he wasn't the heir, merely the cousin of the heir in case the unthinkable happened. But the unthinkable had happened. The heir had died a few months ago without securing the succession and the old earl had never recovered from the blow.

Tired of living with the reality that his prodigal nephew would inherit, the old earl had shuffled off his mortal coil and surrendered to the inevitable five days ago. And here they all were: a motley assortment of villagers, farmers and herself, gathered at the grave of the earl in the chilly October wind, drawn in small part out of respect for the passing of the resident peer and in larger part by the lure of seeing the rumors incarnate.

News filtering down from the big house held that Killian Redbourne and a friend, Lord Dursley, had arrived late last night in a black-lacquered carriage with wide glass panes and elegant lanterns for night travel. The carriage had been pulled by a superior set of four matched gray horses, no expenses spared and the trappings of luxury self-evident. That would have to change. If he wanted to succeed around these parts, he'd best put a damper on such a blatant show of wealth. Harvests had been poor and the day laborers who worked them even poorer these last three years.

The object of her ruminations (and truth be told, the ruminations of everyone assembled at the funeral) stood across from her, separated only by the width of the open grave. Over the edge of her prayer book, Rose covertly surveyed the rumors made flesh, concluding that in this case, the rumors might indeed not suffer from over-exaggeration even if her own rather heated imagination did. She'd been without a man four years now and the absence had been wearing on her lately. She'd even contemplated the notion of taking a lover. It was all very hypothetical. No one had appealed as a likely candidate, although since it was hypothetical, Killian Redbourne would certainly be a viable nominee.

In theory, he definitely possessed the potential to make a woman swoon. Taller than the other men gathered, Killian Redbourne drew the eye and riveted the mind. He wore his hair longer than fashionably suitable, although today, out of respect, he'd tied it back with a tasteful black satin bow reminiscent of an earlier age. His broad shoulders filled out the greatcoat to advantage, the coat itself left open to show off long legs in riding

breeches tapering into high boots, offering hints of a trim waist and a well-muscled torso. Temptation of an excellent physique aside, Killian Redbourne's best asset was his eyes; dark coffee orbs framed by long black lashes that flashed with a suggestion of laughter, and they were laughing now.

At her.

She'd been right and duly caught.

It seemed unfair that she'd been the one caught when everyone else was getting away with it. A slow sensual smile spread across his lips, igniting a certain aching warmth deep at her core and a wicked fantasy.

What would it be like to take a man such as him to her bed and ease the loneliness of the nights? Images raced through her mind of him naked and aroused, rising above her, his dark hair falling forward, his eyes hot with desire, his body slicked with the sweat of his exertions.

Across from her, Killian Redbourne winked in concupiscent conspiracy as if he knew precisely what she'd been thinking. Rose blushed. How could she not? Her thoughts were hardly fitting for a funeral. But their eyes held. Why not stare openly? There was no sense in looking away now. The damage was done.

It wasn't the first time a woman had stared at him. The fairer sex had been staring since he'd turned fifteen and the blacksmith's daughter had lured him behind a haystack. Women had been trying to catch him ever since.

He was thirty-four now and had no more intention of being caught than he had back then. It had become something of a game for him over the years. The risks had been higher in recent months, the pursuit more ardent once his prospects as the Earl of Pembridge were assured. Even so, his ability to keep his heart separate from his encounters had risen proportionately to the increased need for evasion.

Killian studied the striking woman, letting a slow smile take his mouth, the smile that said he was aware of her scrutiny and was most ably returning it. She was slightly taller than most, with a firm, high bosom (his preference) and long legs (also his preference), and her hair, what he could see of it beneath her bonnet, promised to be a rich shade of red-gold. All in all, a very nice package.

To his surprise and delight, her forget-me-not-blue eyes did not look away. Perhaps this visit to the hinterlands of Herefordshire wouldn't be without its comforts after all. The earl's funeral had inconveniently drawn him away from some deuced excellent hunting and he was eager to get back to it. But in the meanwhile it appeared Herefordshire had its own charms.

Beside him, his traveling companion, Peyton Ramsden, the Earl of Dursley, nudged him none too gently in the ribs, reminding him flirtatious shenanigans had no proper place at a somber occasion. Well, maybe not for Peyton. Peyton didn't have a reputation for the shocking to uphold.

It hardly mattered to Killian what the people of Pembridge-on-the-Wye thought of him. No doubt they'd been living on speculation and hearsay for years in regards to him. He'd hear the reading of the will, consult the steward who'd been running the estate for ages, give him instructions along with an address of contact and be on his way in two days—tops, the pretty woman across the grave site notwithstanding. Still, two days was a long time to be alone when one was Killian Redbourne.

Chapter Two

“I, Rutherford Michael Redbourne, fifth Earl of Pembridge, being of sound mind and body on this day, the fifth of September, in the year eighteen hundred and thirty, bequeath my earthly estate and all its entailments to my nephew and heir, Killian Christopher Redbourne....”

Killian tapped impatient fingers on the small table beside his chair in the private study of Pembridge Hall, seat to the Pembridge earls for five generations. With an eye to expediency, he'd requested the solicitor read the will immediately following the funeral. The sooner everything was signed and the title officially transferred the better. His uncle had never liked him, nor he his uncle. There was no need to stand on the pretense of grief and delay realities.

Killian had no title of his own, his father being a second son. But he'd never coveted Pembridge for himself, never wanted to trade places with his cousin, Robert, who'd grown up with the assurance of a place in society. Killian was proud to have made his own way in the world, his birth allowing him to straddle a delicate fence between the world of the ton and the world of trade. Now, his inheritance firmly entrenched him on one side of that fence. At the age of four and thirty, he was an earl, whether he wanted to be or not. If his uncle could have chosen, he would have preferred not. It was grim consolation to imagine his uncle turning in his grave at the thought of his black-sheep nephew inheriting lock, stock and proverbial barrel.

The solicitor stopped reading, the ensuing silence drawing Killian's attention. “Is that all? Are you finished?” Killian inquired. The solicitor was looking at him oddly over the rims of his wire spectacles as if he were expecting some kind of reaction. Admittedly, Killian had not given the reading his entire attention; he had saved some of that for introspection on his uncle and some of it for the lovely woman at the ceremony. But what he had heard was all as expected, quite de rigueur as wills went: a listing of assets to be considered as the entail and an outlining of debts requiring payment.

The man coughed. “Mr. Redbourne,” he began, then hastily corrected himself, “Lord Pembridge, I said the estate is penniless.”

That got his full, undivided attention. Killian raised an eyebrow in challenge. “I beg your pardon?”

“The estate, milord, is, in the common vernacular, without a feather to fly with.”

Killian sat back in his chair, letting the unexpected news penetrate. Those were words no businessman liked to hear. He had not anticipated this. He’d always imagined Pembridge as he’d known it during the infrequent visits of his youth: vibrant with bustle and consequently financially viable. “How is that possible?”

The solicitor steepled his hands and assumed the tone of a bored schoolteacher re-explaining basic principles to an errant student. “Harvests have been poor these last few years and there hasn’t been enough work available. Tenant revenues have decreased and cottage rents have gone up to compensate for the loss. Workers have been displaced and ‘living in’ on the larger farms has faded out in these parts. It has not helped that your uncle invested heavily in farm machinery that limited the need for laborers. There simply hasn’t been enough money in rents to keep the estate running beyond a minimum. Surely, you’ve noticed such economic changes even in London?” The last was said with a patronizing tone that Killian did not like. He did not care for the solicitor’s obvious perception that he did nothing more than fritter away time and money in debauched city living. In fact, his life was quite the opposite. He was up early most mornings and to bed late, overseeing his shipping line. His recent hunting trip was a rare exception to the usual hustle of his day.

Killian fixed the solicitor with a hard stare. Politics over the succession of the new king and the subsequent election that needed to follow had kept him in London all summer. He was all too aware that without new reforms, the situation facing rural England was only going to get worse. “Mr. Connelly, I am well aware of the social and economic situation facing the country these days. I was, however, unaware of how those conditions had affected Pembridge. My uncle—” Killian gestured meaningfully to the papers spread on the desk. “—did not communicate with me on such matters.”

Duly reprimanded, Mr. Connelly made a great show of shuffling papers and ahemming. “Quite so,” he said, regaining his composure. “However, the fact remains that the estate hasn’t a penny once the bills are settled.”

Killian dismissed the concern. When something in business cost more than it was worth, it was minimized or sold off. Since entail prevented selling, that left minimizing. “No matter, I don’t plan to stay here. We’ll shut the house up and that will decrease expenses immensely. I have my own funds, which are considerable in their own right, to fill in any gaps.”

Mr. Connelly gaped at him. “But milord, what about the tenants? What about the farm? They will be penniless too. As the lord goes, so does the peasantry.”

Ah yes, noblesse oblige. Killian sighed. He'd never cast himself in the role of a peer before, not even after Robert had died last spring. But surely his business skills would be suitable for remedying the circumstance. "I'll tour the estate and assess their needs. I'll see what I can do to provide for them." Even if it means dipping into my own reserves. He was a businessman, but that didn't mean he was heartless.

In his mind, the situation was easily resolved. He would take care of the remaining tenants, see them off to a new life or make provisions for them to continue here, and be away, not in two days, alas, but surely within the week. With Peyton here to help him, it would go quickly, but they were both strangers. Gaining an entrée with the locals might be tricky given the reputation that preceded him.

Inspiration struck. "Is there anyone here who is well-acquainted with the people? Perhaps someone who could ease my way with the tenants and villagers?" The last thing Killian wanted was to come up against the stubborn pride of farmers. It would slow him down immensely.

The solicitor took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose in thought. At last he said, "Mrs. Janeway would be able to do that, milord. She's run things here pretty much for the last two years since the old earl stopped going out on account of his bad leg. She knows everyone, visits the sick, takes food to the shut-ins, runs her own farm since her husband passed. Best apples in the county."

A paragon indeed and a widow to boot. Killian could imagine what this Lady Bountiful looked like right down to the eternal widow's weeds and steel-gray hair scraped back into a no-nonsense bun. Lovely. Not only had his uncle interrupted his hunting season, he'd saddled him with a broken estate and now a bossy Mrs. Janeway.

He'd been wrong—his uncle wasn't turning over in his grave. No, his uncle was laughing his bony arse off.

Chapter Three

There were worse days for a ride. The wind of yesterday had died down and the sun had deigned to shine. With a blue sky overhead and the crispy crunch of fall leaves beneath the gig's wheels, Killian was happy to be out of doors, even if it meant he was on his way to collect Pembridge-on-the-Wye's model citizen, the Widow Janeway.

The estate's gig could only seat two and Peyton, no doubt seeing a way to avoid the task of going, had generously volunteered to stay behind and look over the books. Killian turned at the fork in the road and tooled the gig down the short drive leading to the Janeway grange.

In the drive, he pulled the gig to a halt in front of a neat, well-kept brick-and-timber house and jumped out, reminding himself the day was beautiful even if Mrs. Janeway was not.

A knock on the heavy door of the grange brought his fears to fruition. A stout, gray-haired woman answered the door, wiping her hands on an apron.

“Mrs. Janeway?” Killian inquired with all the charm at his disposal, only to find it didn’t work. The woman skewered him with an assessing eye, looking him up and down with a slight air of disgust. He assumed her disgust stemmed from having been interrupted on what was clearly baking day judging from the smear of flour on her cheek and the voluminous apron.

“Dressed awful fancy for work, aren’t you?” She jerked her chin to the left behind the house. “Mrs. Janeway’s out in the orchards. You can see if she’s still hiring.”

The door shut before Killian could give his charm another try and disabuse the woman of the impression he was looking for employment. All the same, he was relieved; Mrs. Janeway, whoever she was, couldn’t be worse.

The orchard behind the house hummed with an activity that took Killian quite by surprise. Apple trees spread in long straight rows, ladders against their trunks, their branches alive with pickers. Calls rang up and the down the rows for basket runners to come collect full bushels. Even children were employed to gather up apples that had fallen or been shaken onto the ground.

He’d forgotten the time.

For the last fourteen years, he’d been a city man by necessity, his kind of business more efficiently conducted near banks and the Exchange. He’d forgotten the rhythms of the country. It was October, and to the people of Herefordshire it was time to pick the apple crop. At the sight of such industry, a deep-seated desire for the satisfaction of manual labor, of seeing the physical results of one’s efforts, stirred. Something that had lain dormant since he’d left his father’s home began to awaken in Killian.

He asked a passing basket-carrier for Mrs. Janeway and continued on his quest, although now it seemed unlikely Mrs. Janeway would be able to accompany him on any rounds. A tour of his tenants would have to wait.

But things were looking up. He found Mrs. Janeway atop a ladder, her mind engrossed in the picking, her long legs and delectable derriere encased in a tantalizing pair of trousers. Things were looking up indeed, and not all of them had to do with ladders. Mrs. Janeway was turning out to be quite a surprise. He’d not expected a tree-climbing paragon.

“Hallo down there, I need another basket.” She called without looking.

Killian grabbed up an empty basket at the base of the tree and passed it up, appreciating the view, a more than apt compensation for the harridan who had met him at the door. “Mrs. Janeway, might I have a moment of your time?”

She turned to take the basket and halted, momentarily stymied upon recognition of who stood at the bottom of her ladder. The expression on her face clearly indicated her rushing thoughts: how did one greet a peer when they showed up at the harvest?

Mrs. Janeway passed down her basket and nimbly descended, apparently having decided since there was no known protocol to cover such a contingency she'd behave normally. She stripped off her heavy gloves and reached a hand up to pull off the cap she wore, red-gold hair tumbling in a rich waterfall over her shoulders, blue eyes challenging his right to interrupt her harvest.

It was Killian's turn to be surprised for the second time since entering the orchard. Mrs. Janeway, the village paragon, was the woman who'd stared so boldly at him yesterday. Hmmm. Events were taking an interesting turn.

He gave her a slow smile of acknowledgement. "Mrs. Janeway, I feel as if we've already met."

"Looking for work, Pembridge? I haven't got any. There's barely enough to go around as it is." Rose replied coolly, ignoring the implication that he was going to make her accountable for yesterday's unguarded moment.

"Looking for you, actually. I'm afraid I'd forgotten what time of year it was. I've caught you at a bad time but I'd appreciate it if you could take a stroll with me. I've a proposition for you and it won't take long."

His dark eyes danced with deliberate mischief. Proposition indeed. He'd used the word on purpose, she decided. Well, she wouldn't bite and give him the satisfaction of having made her all hot and bothered with his innuendos. Not yet anyway.

"I won't even pretend to match wits with you, Pembridge. I would be out of my depth in no time. No doubt you've made a career of such dazzling wordplay in London while I've sharpened mine not at all. However, a proposition implies there's something in it for me, so I'm willing to listen."

Rose gestured toward a quiet place at the corner of the orchard where they might talk in relative privacy and she could keep an eye on the activity. The crop had ripened late this year and every day before the frost counted if the apples were to be saved. If he expected to be taken inside for tea and scones, he'd be sadly disappointed.

He was not fazed by her business-like demeanor. "Are you really so indifferent, Mrs. Janeway? Yesterday, I rather thought you weren't." His voice was low and private, far too seductive for the orchard.

She was conscious of his eyes on her as they walked. Her first line of defense was being eroded with astonishing speed. She was well aware that she had the full sum of his attentions. Acutely so. The woman in her fired too easily to the flattery of his scrutiny. Her fantasies were within her reach if she dared.

She opted for the truth. "I'm not indifferent, as you well know."

"I'm glad to hear it, Rose." He'd paused ever so slightly before saying her name. That did unnerve her. A bolt of want shot through her at the sound of her name on his lips, intimate and personal.

"Is this your proposition?" She asked, trying to regain her equilibrium. Sparring with Killian Redbourne was an undeniably heady experience.

He shot her a teasing glance and she saw an appreciation for her bold, honest wit. "Rose, I don't have to bargain for a woman's affections."

"Well then, what do you have to bargain for?" Rose fired back, matching his tone with a light sauciness of her own.

They reached a quiet niche of the orchard, out of earshot and out of the way of wandering eyes. He stopped and turned so that he stood very near her, close enough that she could smell the spices of his toilette.

"I need a guide to show me around and help me meet everyone. My uncle's solicitor, a Mr. Connelly, suggested you would be best suited for that role. It should not take more than a day or two."

It was as she'd feared. He had no intention of actually being the earl. He was going to claim the title and go without a thought for what he left behind. Pembridge-on-the-Wye needed more than a handsome face.

"And then you're back to London, just like that?" Rose snapped her fingers, the light sassiness that had peppered their encounter earlier overcome by the reality.

"I have my own business to look after," Killian explained.

"There's plenty of business here to look after too." Rose reprimanded sharply.

It did the trick. The playful charm was instantly muted in his eyes. Good. Life in the country was serious business these days. There'd been reports of machine-breaking in Kent and swing riots in East Anglia. Another bad harvest was all it would take for the unrest to spread here where there were more laborers than farms that could employ them.

Her hands were on her hips and she was conscious of the defiant picture she must present in her trousers and boots. "These people will expect you to look after them."

“I’ve heard you’re doing a superior job of that.” Pembridge broke in. “They don’t need me.”

“I’m just the squire’s widow. I can bring them food baskets and hold their hands when they’re sick. But I can’t solve their real problems.”

“And I can?” Pembridge queried, putting her on the spot. If he was going to force her to spell out his duty to him then she would.

“If you can’t, then no one can. Have you wondered why so many people turned out for the funeral yesterday in the middle of the apple harvest?”

“Curiosity, I suppose, if your behavior is anything to go on.”

Rose snorted. “It takes more than curiosity and respect for protocol to drag a farmer away from his crops at harvest. They came because you’re their last hope.”

Pembridge leaned back against a tree trunk in casual repose, his legs showing to advantage in his buckskin trousers and high boots. They were as long as she’d imagined yesterday beneath his greatcoat and far better muscled than her imagination gave them credit for.

“Bravo, Mrs. Janeway. You should be an actress. Although I must admit, while your performance is inspiring, it feels rather over-dramatic.”

Rose gestured to the orchard beyond them, her agitation rising. “There hasn’t been a good harvest since 1827. Last year there was snow in October. Even if legislation in Parliament and the Enclosure Laws weren’t conspiring against the average farmer, the issue of the weather would be enough to cause these folk grave concerns. At this point, it’s not a matter of making economies to get through the winter. It’s a matter of surviving. For some of these families it’s not a foregone conclusion that they’ll make it. That’s why their children are out here working alongside them.”

“I will meet with them. I will do what I can for them to see them settled for the winter. Let that appease your conscience. But Mrs. Janeway, I do not intend to be an earl in residence. I rather doubt anyone thought I would be, whatever other expectations they had. I haven’t been here in fourteen years.”

“You’re here now.” Rose said coldly, disappointment swamping her. The disappointment was all her own. Unlike the others of Pembridge-on-the-Wye who’d given up, she’d hoped the new earl would take an active interest in the estate, that maybe he’d have some magical solution to their problems. They needed an additional source of income that could last beyond the harvest.

Pembridge gave a curt nod. “Good day, Mrs. Janeway, I seem to have let you down. That was not my intention.” He moved past her, probably wanting to get away from her

company as fast as he could. No wonder. By all social standards, she'd behaved abominably. She had no right to scold a peer. But Rose had never been one to bow to social mores when right was on the line, and it was on the line now.

"You haven't let me down, Pembridge. You've merely lived up to the rumors. I am at fault for stupidly wishing for more. I imagine that's the difference between expectations and hope."

She regretted the harsh words the moment they slipped out of her mouth. If she hadn't alienated him already, she'd surely done so now. She barely knew him and it was unfair to make him the whipping boy for her shattered hopes.

Pembridge paused in his departure and turned back to face her. Rose squared her shoulders. She could not take back the words. She deserved whatever he said next. There was an unmistakable look of challenge on his face and she braced herself.

Chapter Four

Rose watched perplexed as Pembridge shrugged out of his coat and slowly rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt, an expensive one, made of fine lawn. Men around here didn't have such shirts except perhaps a lucky few who saved them for church. Surely he didn't mean to work in it? If not, what did he mean to do?

A horrible thought came to her. Did he mean to spank her? She hadn't been spanked since she was four, and she'd deserved it for talking back to the minister. You deserve it now, a little voice prompted. You never did know when to keep your thoughts to yourself.

Pembridge stepped towards her and she instinctively backed away, although a wicked thrill replaced her initial reaction at the prospect of a spanking. Her cheeks flushed at the image of her own naked buttocks on display across his lap.

He laid his jacket over a low limb of the tree; her eyes followed his every move. His hand tested the strength of the branch. "Good solid wood."

Rose sucked in her breath. Dear lord, what was happening to her with all these heated, sordid thoughts? She hoped he didn't have any inkling of the lust he was stirring in her beyond that which he already guessed at.

He cast a brief glance at the sky overhead, blue and sunny. "Snow in October, you say? I'll take your word for it. In that case, you'll need all the help you can get."

That was not at all what she'd expected to hear. It took a moment to drag her thoughts away from spanking. "What do you mean to do?" He was not nearly as angry as he should be after that stinging retort of hers.

“My dear Mrs. Janeway, I mean to change your lowly opinion of me.” The Earl of Pembridge favored her with a dark-eyed wink. “It may surprise you to note that I am not entirely unaccustomed to labor, although you and Mr. Connelly seem inclined to believe I live the raciest of lives. I hate to disappoint you, but between mistresses and gambling dares, I manage to help off-load cargo from my ships in London.” He gave a jaunty bow in her direction, a laughing smile on his lips and sauntered off into the depths of the orchard, scooping up an empty bushel basket as he went, his shirtsleeves rolled up.

Rose watched him go, manly swagger and all. What a man! He exuded sexual possibility at every turn—each look, each word a seemingly calculated attempt at seduction. Yet, she sensed an honest man beneath the winks and slow smiles. A man who didn’t claim to be more than he was, who liked women and took opportunities to enjoy them. There was intelligence beneath the surface too. He’d built his own business after all.

It put her in something of a quandary to feel such an attraction to the man who could save Pembridge-on-the-Wye and wouldn’t. Pembridge-on-the-Wye was her passion. She wanted it to be his too, because he had the connections and the ability to do something here. And yet, he wouldn’t stay. While that was good news for any potential affair (it would be best if her lover could simply disappear after they were finished. Lingering would create complications), it went directly against her larger priorities.

That was putting the cart before the horse. He wasn’t in her bed yet. Still, Rose couldn’t help but feel such an event was inevitable. He wanted her, had indicated that he found her interesting. Even after her scold, he’d not run away from her. He’d walked with the cocky assurance of a man who knew he was going to get what he wanted.

A man like that was dangerous to the feminine mind. She’d do best to keep an eye on him and that would be no hardship at all.

As surprises went, this was the most pleasant one she’d had in some time. It was also the most distracting. Everyone had recognized Pembridge immediately and shyness had fallen over the orchard like a blight. Wonderful. The stubborn man had found a sure way to destroy productivity. They’d never get the crop in at this rate and while Rose wasn’t worried about snow this year, she was worried about frost. There was a bite in the air suggesting the first frost was not far off. But Pembridge was cognizant of his effect on the orchard and moved immediately to dispel it with his easy manner. Within a half hour, all was miraculously restored to its proper order and Rose breathed easier.

It appeared he’d been telling the truth about off-loading cargo. Unafraid of hard work and heights, he volunteered himself for the taller trees, agilely climbing up and down the ladders with athletic grace. He carried filled bushel baskets on one shoulder with ease. Rose saw him stop on numerous occasions to relieve women struggling with heavy baskets; he was a gentleman and a laborer all neatly rolled into one exquisitely male package.

Pembridge was indeed undeniably male, a fact made self-evident by the sweat of his efforts and the thinness of his shirt by late afternoon. More than once, she stopped to admire the play of his muscles through the perspiration-soaked shirt as he lifted and hauled. He hadn't the usual stocky build of the laborer, but the muscled leanness of an athlete. He bent to retrieve an apple from the ground, his buttocks flexing at the motion, setting sinful notions running throughout Rose's head, enough to start a slow heat low in her belly. Again.

Rose blamed her unseemly fascination with him on the rumors. She never should have listened to the gossip. It was only natural to wonder about such things when so many of the rumors surrounding him were sexual in tone. But she'd rather not be so consumed by them out in public.

From up near the house, she heard her housekeeper, Mrs. Hemburton, ring the bell, signaling the end of the work day. Mrs. Hemburton would have cider casks out with plenty to drink before the workers headed home. There would be a short bit of socializing over the cider, a chance to celebrate the day's labor before it was too dark to travel.

It was a good day's work too that they'd put in, Rose noted, taking stock of the trees as she trudged through the rows. By the end of the week all would be harvested, safe and sound. She was lucky; her apple harvest had been good. But she knew many around her who had not had the yields they'd expected.

Pembridge was already at the casks, surrounded by men as if he were another local at the pub. His shirt was dirty (probably unsalvageable) his dark hair loose from his queue. The utterly masculine sight of him sent a small jolt of desire through her. The image of a hard-working man was a potent one. She tamped it down with a reminder; this was only one day. He still meant to leave as soon as he possibly could. He had no plans to make a long-term commitment here. His long absence and his estrangement from his uncle proved he viewed Pembridge as nothing more than an unwanted inconvenience. To be fair, he was not the cause of their suffering, that had been in place long before he'd come.

And when he looked at her with those laughing dark-brown eyes and sensual smile, she couldn't think of anything but the pleasure he promised. It gave one ideas and set one's mind to wondering what it would be like to be indulged by such a demigod of a man. Why not seize what the moment provided?

And then what? Moments had consequences. Reality intruded. An earl might dally with a squire's widow while rustivating in the country, but nothing more. What did she expect would happen after an affair? He might not be the marrying kind now, but his title was new yet. He'd have to change his mind sooner or later and beget an heir. When he did, it would be with some suitable London girl with rank. These were crazy thoughts indeed.

Rose took a mug of cider to clear her thoughts and waited for the crowd of workers to ease away. It was clear she was not the only one affected by the earl's presence. There was a wave of energy among the people gathered for cider. He'd certainly boosted

morale. She feared it may also have boosted their flagging hopes for change. A man of power who worked beside them was an intoxicating prospect.

“You did well today.” Rose approached him as the last of the workers disappeared down the lane. She needed to make peace for her earlier behavior, regardless of her mental dilemma.

He turned his slow smile towards her. She couldn’t help but smile back. His charm was contagious. “Why, Mrs. Janeway, is that an apology?”

Rose laughed, catching the teasing tone beneath his drawl, and met him head-on. This was the second time he’d held her accountable for her bold actions. “Do you never let a woman forget her foolishness?”

He considered her for a moment with thoughtful eyes. “I like a woman who can be honest with herself, Mrs. Janeway, as you were yesterday. You didn’t look away even after you’d been caught in the act.”

“There seemed no reason to stop since the damage had been done.” Rose tossed him a coy glance and gave him back a taste of his own wit, “After all, I told myself, he doesn’t seem to mind.”

She was actually flirting with the enemy. No, enemy was too strong a word. Pembridge wasn’t opposed to her—just the opposite, in fact. He wanted her. It was just Pembridge-on-the-Wye he was opposed to.

Pembridge laughed outright, his laughter a rich, full-bodied sound that filled the night air and wrapped her in its warmth. How long had it been since she’d laughed with anyone? There’d been so many cares of late, and only she to carry them.

“Mrs. Janeway, you are a delight. Thank goodness your wit is not sharper or it would cut me to threads. As it is, I will bid you good night and retreat with what dignity is left to me.”

“No, wait.” Impulse came to Rose sudden and swift. She didn’t stop to think. “Now it is my turn. I have a proposition for you.” That got his attention. His eyes perused her face in a casual study that caused her to flush. Perhaps she’d been too bold this time.

“I like the sound of that, Rose.” He was back to first names with her and she was mightily encouraged.

“Stay for dinner. Mrs. Hemburton has made shepherd’s pie and I hate eating alone. It’s the least I can do for your services today.”

“And the most?” He’d stepped closer to her, his eyes on her lips, creating the sensation that he was already kissing her in his mind.

“The most? I’m not sure I follow.” He was hunting her again with his eyes, as he had in the orchard, hot and direct, making it impossible for her to think straight.

“You said dinner was the least you could do. What is the most?” Was he intentionally opening up a seductive gambit? Or perhaps he just couldn’t help himself? Flirtation must come naturally to a man like him. Heaven help her, all the logic in the world could not keep her fantasies at bay. She ran her tongue over her suddenly dry lips. “Mrs. Hemburton baked fresh sugar biscuits today as well. We can have them for dessert with pears from the orchard.”

He took another step towards her, his voice a soft, low tease. “I prefer something a bit tarter for dessert, something with a little bite to it.”

Rose’s heart hammered in erotic excitement. His kisses weren’t the only things that could make a woman swoon. But she didn’t want to appear over-eager. She wasn’t out of her depth yet when it came to matching wits. “I think we’ll leave that open to negotiation.”

Chapter Five

The only thing standing between her and the promise of unbridled pleasure was shepherd’s pie and sugar biscuits. He was leaving the ‘negotiations’ of what was to come up to her, she realized. She’d scolded him, worked him hard, ruined his shirt, insulted his lifestyle and somewhere during the day he’d decided he wanted her anyway.

Did she want him? The primal woman in her clamored yes. A man like Killian Redbourne was a treat to be savored even if only for a night and, who knew, maybe she could change his mind about leaving. But that was a dangerous fantasy. If she chose to embrace such whimsy, she’d be opening herself up to great hurt. Her heart would be at risk, she could see the inevitable now if she went down that road. It would be all too simple to love a man like Killian.

The soft light of the candles in the dining room served to enhance his looks, and Rose was tempted to forego the shepherd’s pie altogether. He’d taken time before the meal to sluice off the day’s grime at the pump. She knew because she’d watched him from her window upstairs, biting her nails as he’d stripped out of his stained shirt, all glorious, naked muscle in the light of the rising moon. Now, he sat across from her in an old shirt rummaged from a trunk in the attic, his dark hair loose on his shoulders, turning the shade of a polished walnut thanks to the combined efforts of candlelight and water droplets.

“You look like a highwayman.” Rose ventured.

He gave her a skeptical stare, mischief at home in its usual place in his eyes. “I hope not, unless of course you mean the romanticized highwaymen in the ballads. Real highwaymen tend to be dirty and ill-kempt.” Rose laughed at that and took a bite of the shepherd’s pie.

He gave her a bone-warming smile. “Today, you looked like a highwaywoman in your trousers and shirt and those high boots you wore.” He chewed and added as an afterthought, “Very appealing. Very distracting, if I might be so bold.”

“At least we both have future careers in crime assured.”

Pembridge laid aside his fork and sat back in his chair. “I may be reduced to that. The estate is broke. I haven’t told anyone else, except Peyton of course. I’m not sure I want word to get out and create more panic than is necessary. But I thought you should know.”

Because she’d accused him of not caring, of treating the responsibilities of the estate callously, Rose thought. “I didn’t know.” It was a throwaway line. What else could she say? Perhaps she had been hasty in her conclusions.

Pembridge lifted one shoulder in a shrug, dismissing her guilt. “The estate could be faring well and I still wouldn’t be staying. Even if I wanted to stay, I’m not Rumpelstiltskin. I can’t spin straw into gold for these people. I have my own fortune from business ventures, but it’s not of the magnitude needed here.”

Rose smiled wanly in agreement. “The only gold around here is red-gold.” He raised his eyebrow in question and she explained. “The apples in my orchard are called Redstreaks. Local legend has it that a Lord Scudamore brought the pips for Redstreaks back from France with him in the 1600s. They’re known for their reddish-golden hue.”

“Like your hair.” Killian said softly, reaching across the table to wind an errant curl about his finger. “It’s the most original color I’ve ever seen, not blond but not really red.” He gave her a hot look and dropped his voice. “It makes a man wonder if perhaps all your hair is lucky enough to share the same hue.”

One well-placed remark and dinner was over. Sugar biscuits would have to wait. There would be no more negotiations, although in truth, Rose knew she’d reached her decision long before she’d invited him to dinner.

Killian rose from the table and extended his hand to her, the gesture both blatant and eloquent in its message; I want you. Tonight, I will be your lover and you will be mine.

Rose took his hand and all it offered. She let him lead her upstairs, the brace of candles in his hand casting their shadow along the staircase wall, his other hand gripping hers with his warm strength.

In her room, he quietly shut the door behind them although there was no one to see or hear. But the very act of doing so created an intimate sense of privacy that said he was hers alone and she was his.

He came to her, bending slightly to kiss her at the base of her ear and to whisper, “Watch me, Rose.” He drew back, his eyes holding her to the request, and slowly began to remove his clothes.

The shirt went first, button by button, until his torso was revealed in all its anticipated glory. She’d only seen his back at the pump. He was beautiful, all sculpted muscle, the definition of his abdomen tapering to the trimness of his waist.

“Come help with my boots.”

There was a familiar intimacy in helping a shirtless man remove his footwear, Rose thought, tugging at the boots. They gave easily and he ordered her back to the bed, his hands already at the waistband of his trousers, pushing them down his hips and kicking them off his legs.

What legs they were, shaped by long hard muscles. He must have spent ages in the saddle to have calves like that, thighs like that. Her eyes moved up his legs to his rampant masculinity—proof, had she needed it, of how desperately he desired her.

Wonder filled her, peaceful, inexplicable wonder that a stranger could provoke such a reaction in her and she in him. She was a practical woman, an earthy woman. She’d lived around the cycles of the seasons her entire life. She knew the power of the harvest. It was no coincidence that so many babies; foals, calves, and lambs were born in the spring. Humans mimicked their pattern as well. One had only to look at the plethora of summer birthdates in the parish register to see the lure of the harvest season.

Perhaps she and Killian (it was impossible to think of him as Pembridge in the intimacy of the moment), were nothing more than strangers looking for the succor of another’s body.

He was reaching for her, drawing her to him. She could feel the heat of his naked body, but her curiosity would not rest. “Why do you want me? You hardly know me.” She whispered.

“I know you better than you think.” His breath feathered against her ear, his mouth moving to take her mouth in a long kiss. She opened her lips to him, letting his tongue tangle with hers until she was caught up in the need rising between them, the kiss growing stronger, more insistent as it progressed. His hands worked the bodice of her gown loose, shoving it off her shoulders before his warm hands took her breasts in their palms. She moaned against him, feeling the power of his erection hot through her clothes. She wanted release from the garments, from the pressure building inside her.

He gave it to her, sliding her gown to the floor and making quick work of her under things so that she stood naked with him. He bent her back towards the bed. “Lie down for me, let me see you.”

She started to protest, suddenly uncomfortable. She'd never been openly, blatantly naked with her husband. They'd relegated their lovemaking to the dark anonymity that existed beneath the blankets.

"You're too beautiful to hide," Killian coaxed, coming down beside her on the bed. He ran his hand the length of her body, from breast to hip, hip to that most private place and there his hand rested in the red-gold arbor of her curls, gently exploring, teasing.

"Touch me too, Rose." He encouraged. "I'm as much yours as you are mine."

She needed no further invitation. Her hands ached to touch his body, to feel the paths of his muscles beneath her fingers. Her own hands traveled downwards as his had until they found the length of him. His eyes lit with desire at the contact, a groan of appreciation escaping him.

She stroked him, learning his rhythm until he begged for mercy. His pleasure made her audacious and suddenly she couldn't wait any longer. She widened her legs and whispered, "Come into me, Killian."

No other summons was required. He growled and moved over her at once, entering her in one fierce thrust. She bucked hard against him, his penetration full and intense. It had been ages since she'd taken a man into her body and her

body welcomed him as if in homecoming, as if he had always been meant to be there. She gasped in delight and felt him tense.

"Did I hurt you? Do you need me to stop?" She heard the grit of restraint in his voice and doubted he could have stopped even if she wanted it. She didn't. Stopping was the furthest thought from her mind. Passion had her in its throes. She could only think of going forward to the great paradise each thrust of Killian's brought closer.

She raised her hips, urging him onward until they were there, on the crest of their desire. She had only time to gasp once more and they were at the top, hovering in the wake of a shattering bliss, and then they were falling together towards peace and oblivion.

Chapter Six

The gray shadows of morning teased Killian into waking. He stretched, arching his back in well-rested satisfaction. Then it hit him—where he was, what he'd done and with whom. Rose. But the bed felt empty. A quick roll to his side confirmed his suspicions. She was already up. Her side of the bed was cold, suggesting she'd been up for quite some time.

It couldn't be later than seven o'clock in the morning judging by the pale light. But he was in the country now. The country kept different hours than the city and this was a working farm. Crops and harvests didn't grow on banker's hours.

Killian sighed, blowing out a deep breath of air and fell back on his pillows. Yes, he was in the country now and more than the hours of the day were different. The social rules were different too, in some ways more lax and in other ways more strict. Would the residents of Pembridge-on-the-Wye permit him to dally with their Widow Janeway without imposing negative consequences on him or her?

He was fairly certain he could get away with it. But Rose? The last thing he wanted was to leave her under a cloud of censure while he simply departed back to his life in the city. Departed.

So much had changed in the span of one day. Yesterday morning he'd been eager to leave Pembridge-on-the-Wye. He'd gone searching for a woman who was supposed to help him expedite that goal. Instead, he'd ended up picking apples and this morning he was in no immediate hurry to leave.

Last night, he'd expected to remain detached from the encounter beyond the physical gratification it brought and yet, making love with Rose had touched him far beyond that. She was a generous lover, giving herself over entirely to their mutual pleasure. Beneath the sheets, his cock thrummed in remembered knowledge of it—the way she'd touched him, the way she'd opened to him and unabashedly joined him in mutual climax. He'd been with women he'd known a short time and women he'd known much longer before they'd coupled. But in neither instance, had he ever felt the way he'd felt last night. It had been more than simple physical pleasure. He'd felt connected in some fundamental way with another human being, and he found he wanted to feel that way again.

This was not going as planned. Usually bedding women he was attracted to and knew little about worked out well for him. He'd get up in the morning, ready to walk away. Last night had started that way, but it hadn't ended with his regular level of detachment.

He'd told her he knew her better than she thought. Maybe it was true, and maybe it was just something a man said to get what he wanted. After last night, Killian doubted the latter and was puzzled by the former. What did he know about Rose Janeway? She was a widow with vast orchards she personally worked herself if yesterday was any testament. And she was beautiful. That was the list. The list of things he didn't know about her was far longer.

He didn't know her favorite color, her favorite food, her likes or dislikes. He knew none of the things friends know about one another. And yet, they'd shared an intimacy that exceeded friendship. It was strange how little time had been needed to stoke his desire for her to a fevered pitch. Stranger still were the remnants of that possession.

Usually when he took a woman on short acquaintance, his ardor was quickly cooled. Not so in this circumstance. He wanted her again and with such immediacy he was about

ready to go in search of her and drag her back to bed. When it came to Rose Janeway, his ardor was far from slaked.

Hard to say if he would have acted on that impulse. He didn't get a chance to find out. The door to the bedroom opened and Rose entered, shutting the door with her hip, her hands wrapped around a basket of folded clothing. She looked enticingly fresh in a dark-blue skirt of heavy fabric for everyday wear and a white blouse, her hair draped over one shoulder in a tight braid that lay provocatively against the swell of her breast.

"No trousers today?" Killian queried, wondering if she'd notice the tenting bulge beneath the sheets.

"I've come up to change."

Ah, no help for him there. He was already imagining the buttons of her blouse coming undone one by one, each one revealing a larger show of the cleavage beneath. His hands already itched to hold the weight of her breasts in his palms.

Rose set the basket down at the foot of the bed. "I unearthed some more clothes in the attic for you. I thought you might like them for work."

It was a nervy statement. Leave it to Rose to so masterfully introduce the prickly topic of 'what next' with the subtle offer of a shirt and trousers. He knew precisely what she was asking him.

Killian found he liked her presumptions. Perhaps it was a sign she didn't think as poorly of him as she had the day before if she was thinking he'd stay and help pick apples. He knew too, this was not just about apples. She was offering him her bed for the duration of his stay; an offer that had merit and one he'd gladly accept.

But he had to tread carefully here too. Too many assumptions on her part might lead to a precarious situation when he prepared to leave. He was going to leave. It was a foregone conclusion. The only question was when.

Certainly not before I drink my fill of this woman. His body throbbed. Even the simple act of watching her fold laundry and put it away was painfully arousing. She stretched up to put a stack of clothes on top of the wardrobe, the reach drawing the fabric of her blouse tight against her breasts. But the reach was awkward for her to manage easily, even with her height. Without thinking, Killian threw back the covers and went to her aid, steadying the teetering stack of linens.

"Thank you." She said, her color suddenly rising beautifully in her face as her eyes took in his naked body and obvious state of arousal.

Killian shrugged, at ease with his own nakedness and body. He turned to face her fully, utterly unashamed and smiled at her, his eyes sparkling with an unspoken question.

Her blue eyes darted towards the window, uncertain. "The workers will be here by eight." She stalled.

"We don't need very long, I think." He dropped his gaze to her lips in deliberate contemplation. "I'm already undressed and you were going to change anyway." He bent to kiss her, to silence any other half-hearted protests and because he couldn't wait any longer to do otherwise. She melted into him, assurance that her protests were pro forma at best, that she wanted him too.

He bunched the hem of her skirts in one hand and rucked them to her waist, seeking the wet heat of her core. She was long past ready, making him wonder what exactly she'd planned to do all along when she'd come up to the room. It was clear neither of them were going to wait for her to undress.

A moan of distress escaped her lips and her attention momentarily focused on the window. He heard it too, the sounds of a wagon jangling into the drive. He'd not survive the day if he didn't take her now. He'd not experienced apple picking with an erection, but he didn't think it would be pleasant, let alone easy to explain. "Don't worry." His voice was ragged.

He maneuvered her against the flat surface of the wardrobe doors, her arms tight around his neck, and lifted. Instinctively, her legs wrapped about his waist and he thrust deep inside her, her excited cries muffled against his bare shoulder. He could feel the desperate nips of her teeth against his skin, an intoxicating delight of erotic proportions. Killian pumped once, twice more, the pressure of his culmination rough and savage as it built. He felt her convulse around him and he let himself go.

They were both breathing hard in the aftermath, her eyes wide with wonder, a certain elation coursing through him at having been the one to put the wonder there. Killian pushed a strand of loose hair back from her face, his hand caressing her cheek. "I'll go down first," he murmured, latent desire still evident in his voice. "It will look as if I merely arrived early and am awaiting you. Take your time."

Killian let her down gently and grabbed his borrowed shirt from the bed. With a little luck, she'd take him at his word and take time to change. With more luck, it would be enough time for the well-kissed puffiness of her lips to go down. If not, he'd soon find out how tolerant the citizens of Pembridge-on-the-Wye could be, because there was no mistaking the look on Rose's face for anything other than what it was: the look of a woman who'd been well loved.

Chapter Seven

When had she become such a wanton? She'd always been an honest woman (as Killian had phrased it) about her passions. But never had she indulged them so thoroughly. Just the remembrance of last night was enough to heat her cheeks.

Rose quickly undid the buttons of her blouse and sponged down her skin with a cool cloth. She rinsed the cloth in the basin on the washstand and washed her face, trying to restore some calm to her racing body. She had workers waiting in the orchard for her command. She had crops that needed picking. There'd been no time for a morning dalliance, and yet here she was, struggling to cover up the signs of having been well and thoroughly tumbled. The mirror over the washstand didn't lie.

Rose slipped into her work shirt and pulled on her usual trousers. But even the manly garb carried its own reminders of the passion that had ruled her judgment of late. Killian thought the trousers gave her the air of a highwaywoman, an air he rather liked. Her mind, her room, was full of reminders of Killian's presence. His ruined lawn shirt lay folded in the basket she'd brought up, along with his trousers. The smell of his sex lay heavy and alluring on the sheets. She would never be able to look at the old wardrobe again without recalling what they'd done there.

Rose tugged her boots on with a fierce pull. She had to get the apples in. They were far more important than a bout in the sheets with Killian Redbourne. They would be here, providing for her, long after he was gone. Handsome is as handsome does, and Killian had no reason to stay beyond the deal they'd struck. Really, seeing as how things had turned out between them, his leaving was for the better. They could have their nights of passion without any tedious strings attached. She told herself to think of how awkward it would be to see Killian regularly after what they'd shared, knowing he had no plans of building on that night and she had no right to expect it.

But knowing and doing were two different ends of the stick. Rose knew herself well enough to know she would indeed expect what he had not promised if he stayed around. Knowing he was near would only serve to raise her hopes. How could it not, when last night had been every woman's fantasy? It had certainly been her fantasy. He'd been a lover nonpareil who'd given her the whole of his attention. She'd seen it in the depths of his eyes, felt it in the stroke of his hands, the caresses he lavished on her body, exploring her, learning her as if she were the most priceless of treasures. With him, it had been more than a sex act done for the purpose of procreation. With him, it had been a search for and a claiming of pleasure, the ultimate pursuit of mind and body. Wanton or not, she wanted it to be that way again, something extraordinarily different than the practical couplings she'd shared with her husband. Nightfall could not come fast enough.

Over the next few days, Killian knew he was only moderately successful in keeping his thoughts on his work. Any time Rose was near, his attention strayed. Once he nearly fell off his ladder. Another time, he'd almost collided with a basket carrier who happened to cross his path. It was all for a good cause, though. Rose Janeway fascinated him. She was a woman who was not bound by convention. Perhaps it was the freedom of the countryside that made such a lifestyle possible. During the day, she was an admirable leader directing the activities of the extensive orchards. By night she was extraordinary lover. Killian found himself counting the hours until sunset, eager to hold her.

There were so many ways to make love and she was open to them all. One night, he'd come upon her unawares as she bathed. It had been the height of voyeuristic eroticism to watch the water sluice over her body, her washcloth moving over her breasts and between her legs. He'd watched until his own arousal was at its peak and then he'd carried her to the bed, dripping wet.

He could not always wait until after dinner or until they reached the bedroom. There'd been a night when the sight of her in a soft pink wool dress had been the undoing of him. He had not waited for the meal to be finished before the table had been engaged in double duty.

Other nights, their need had been too great to wait beyond the shutting of the front door. She'd shaken with desire as he shoved down her trousers, baring her bottom and thrusting deep within from behind while she cried out her release bent over the arm of the sofa.

It wasn't just the sex that made his time with Rose so memorable. In the night, they had time to talk, time to think about something besides apples. Sometimes talk was serious. He'd asked about her husband, curious to know what kind of man had married Rose Janeway. She'd asked about his life in London and his business. Sometimes talk was more humorous but no less insightful.

"What were you thinking the day I came to the orchard? Right after you'd scolded me for my lack of interest in the estate?" Killian ventured one night after a particularly satisfying bout of lovemaking. He twirled a lock of her hair around his finger, watching it spring back against the white flesh of her breast. They were naked in her bed, warm with the flush of their passion, the sheets riding low on their hips.

Rose smiled wickedly, a finger tracing the aureole of his breast. "You'd stepped towards me and were suddenly interested in the quality of the apple wood. I thought you were going to spank me." Her eyes lit with a seductive blue flame that stoked the embers of his arousal. He was already coming to life again when she added, "And I thought a spanking from you wouldn't be entirely unpleasant."

Killian chuckled. Rose continued to surprise and amaze him at every turn. To discover a woman so confident in her own sensual appetites was a rare find indeed. "You must have thought you'd been very bad."

"Well, I had given you a dressing down that was most out of line."

"Then we have something in common. About that same time I was giving you a dressing down in my mind of another sort entirely." Killian tucked her beneath him and rose up on his arms.

"You're not appalled then? About the spanking thing?"

Killian laughed. “Aroused is more like it. In case you haven’t noticed...” and then there was no more talk for quite some time.

But all good things come to an end and Killian’s week had flown by filled with the contentment of days spent in hard work and nights filled with unequaled passion.

The orchards were close to picked. Only a day or two remained, Killian noted ruefully as he watched Rose deal with the workers, offering encouragement when a job was well-done, redirecting when tasks were performed less efficiently. The people respected her. She took time to bend close and listen to the things the children told her or to look at a treasure from their pockets as she strode through the orchards. She was less patient with the weather. Several times he’d caught her watching the sky with narrowed eyes as if trying to gauge how much time she had left.

“What worries you?” He asked, coming to stand by her on one such occasion. The afternoon was waning, the sky gray overhead instead of yesterday’s blue. It was colder too. He rubbed his hands together and tucked them under his armpits for warmth.

“The frost.” She replied grimly, balancing her gaze now between the apples that remained and the lingering hours of daylight. We won’t have another day. We’ll have to work late tonight. There’s no other choice, but at what cost?” Her voice trailed off, fighting worry and desperation. They’d been so close to beating old Jack Frost.

Something foreign and possessive awoke full-fledged in Killian’s gut: the sudden recognition that these were his people, his woman. If they needed this crop in, if she needed this crop in tonight, he’d move heaven and earth to see it done.

Chapter Eight

The workers were tired. She’d lose the women and children when dark fell. Children needed to be fed and put to bed. With the work force depleted, the men would have to work even longer. Killian knew what to do. “Let me take care of this. Can Mrs. Hemburton get torches ready?” He grabbed an older boy by the shoulder as he passed. “Can you drive a gig?”

“Yes, milord.” The fourteen-year-old bobbed his head with adolescent pride. He was a big lad for his age, his boast was probably true. “Good, I want you to take the gig and the pony that are in the barn and drive to Pembridge Hall. Tell them you want to speak with Lord Dursley, tell him we need help getting the crop in. He’ll take care of the rest. But tell him to hurry.”

The boy ran off and Rose began to protest. “Really, we’ll be fine. We’ll manage something. There’s no need.” She was full of stubborn pride. Killian recognized it at once as a landowner’s pride.

“I know you can manage, but why just manage when we can do it well? He answered with a smile. “Get the torches ready and have Mrs. Hemburton set up the shed as a staging area.

Within three hours, the sun had set and the orchards had been transformed. Torches safely lined the rows and various intervals to give light to the pickers. Trestle tables had been set up the length of the shed, laden with food packed down in hampers from Pembroke Hall. A space had been cleared for a bonfire so that basket carriers could warm their hands before setting off into the orchard with empty containers. Children who were too tired to pick apples up off the ground any more were tucked into makeshift haystacks along the wall of the shed, warm and drowsy.

Outside the shed, Killian silently congratulated himself. It was almost a party-like atmosphere. The little lines of worry that had creased Rose’s brow had disappeared and he took a sense of pride in knowing he could take responsibility for that.

Peyton appeared at his side, his shirtsleeves rolled up. He’d been directing the unloading of baskets of apples at the cider press. “I brought you some clothes, by the way.”

Killian chuckled. “How did you know?”

Peyton fixed him with a knowing stare. “There are only a few reasons why a man doesn’t come home at night.” He paused and Killian sensed he was waging a debate with himself. “I hope you know what you’re doing. This isn’t London and you’ve been away a long time.”

“Rose and I understand each other. She knows this is just an affair and a short-lived one at that.” But even as he said the words, Killian heard their emptiness. What did he want after their agreement was over? What did Rose want? Did she want him to leave? Was he only a convenience?

“Just so, Killian, be aware these are dangerous times. There is unrest afoot. They’re breaking machinery in Kent and burning ricks. I would caution you not to lift these people’s hopes only to have them dashed when you’re gone, which will be all too soon for their tastes. The estate is indeed broke, but for your sake I’d still not like to see it burned.”

Killian nodded solemnly. The swing riots had started over the summer in East Anglia. In addition to machine-wrecking there’d been accounts of arson and blackmail. The rioters were usually led by people of decent social character finally fed up with the state of the economy and the government’s inattention to fixing the problem. The government was too busy these days worrying over the new revolution in France to focus enough of its attention on the rioting poor and out-of-work laborers.

Thanks to Killian’s efforts, the evening of work came to a close around nine o’clock, the last of the pickers straggling in from the orchards, tired and dirty. Although it was late,

Rose had insisted on paying everyone before they departed. Normally, Killian would have protested, arguing for a payday to be set for the morning. But after Peyton's pointed reminder of the unrest around them, he said nothing, only positioning himself solidly behind Rose's chair at the makeshift pay table and letting her work.

She paid them in coin and in kind. Along with cash wages, workers also received casks of cider and a few bushels of apples, useful food items to have in one's cellar against the oncoming winter. Killian noted Mrs. Hemburton deep in conversation over all the country delicacies one could make from apples. He had no doubt that pantries throughout Pembridge-on-the-Wye would be stuffed with variations of everything from apple jelly to apple butter.

The whole process was quite humbling. The people lined up in front of Rose's table were grateful, the apples and casks carted away like treasures, the coins carefully tied in handkerchiefs for safekeeping on the ride home. The harvest was over, Killian realized. Whatever money these laborers had hidden away at home would have to last them until spring when they could find work hiring on to plow fields and begin the process all over again—six long, cold months away. How did they do it on a few cider casks and coins? Almost all of them had families to care for.

He'd never lived that way, even though his father had not been a wealthy man by ton standards. They'd been rich though, in ways he had not appreciated. There'd been no worry about where the next meal would come from or whether there'd be new warm clothes to wear, and there'd been money for his education. Truth be told, standing there in the dark behind Rose, he felt more than a little guilty, not so much because of what he'd had, but because of what he'd hadn't noticed. Until tonight, he'd been blissfully unaware.

He watched Rose slide an extra coin into the pile collected by the young boy who'd driven the gig to Pembridge Hall. She squeezed the boy's hand as she pressed the extra coin into his palm unnoticed by all but him. "Promise you'll send for me if your father takes a turn for the worse." She said in a low voice so as not to shame him.

But Killian was ashamed. Not for the boy, but for himself. He'd been unaware his whole life, but Rose wasn't. She knew these people, knew their individual needs, like those of the fourteen-year-old boy who'd been out doing a man's work in place of a father who couldn't, a father who must be lying at home worrying about what his family would do without his wages. She was doing what she could for them, and as a widow on her own with no substantial wealth to her name she was not necessarily well-placed to do it.

Rose Janeway was not rich. Her neat stone manor was nicely kept, but it was old. He'd taken stock over the week of her circumstances. Her furnishings were well-worn. He'd be surprised if the scarred wardrobe they'd made love against that first morning was less than two generations old. In all likelihood it was probably more. In the country, furniture was handed down father to son, mother to daughter. These homes were not like the townhouses of London's elite, redone according to whim and fashion.

No, Rose Janeway was not rich. But she was doing what she could with what she had, and Killian guessed she was doing so at some expense to her personal comfort. In Kent, the laborers earned fifteen pence per week, and she'd paid out an average of twenty pence for a week's worth of work.

At last, the workers were gone. Even Peyton, who'd stayed until the end, had left. A thrill ran through Killian at the thought of having Rose to himself and the sensual celebration they would carry out in private. He was imagining how he would take her on the soft bed upstairs, her hair spread out on the pillow, her body completely naked in the candlelight, her lips wet with kisses, when Rose closed the cash box and held out her hand. "Come with me, Killian."

At her touch, he hardened immediately, but she did not lead him upstairs. Instead, she led him into the cider shed. The sweet smell of apples assailed his nostrils; the shed was warm and crowded with barrels of fruit waiting to be made into the region's preferred drink. He'd never seen so many apples in one place before.

"What are we doing here?" Killian asked, trying to combat the dual senses of urgency (he wanted her desperately) and disappointment (since it appeared they weren't headed directly upstairs).

She turned and smiled at him, a wide, generous smile that fulfilled all his preconceived notions about her mouth. She pressed her body against his and wrapped her arms about his neck before dropping a hand between his legs and squeezing gently. "We're doing this." Then she took his mouth in a deep kiss that fired his imagination while leaving nothing to it.

Chapter Nine

She'd never taken a man. Before this week, she'd never taken a lover either. Her husband had been a comfortable man and their marriage solid, but he'd been so much older than she, and there'd been little room for romance amid the practicalities of their daily life. Killian had shown her there was a difference between the two aspects. Whatever else Killian Redbourne could or could not be to her, he was her lover, and, in that sense, her first.

Rose slowly undid the buttons of his shirt, careful not to let her nerves, her excitement, give her away with fumbling fingers. It was warm in the shed, perhaps not warm enough to dispense with clothing altogether, but maybe a few garments.

Access at last! She ran her palms over his chest in smooth circles, feeling his skin and the ridges of the muscles beneath. This was what the body of a man in his prime felt like, all hard muscles and contours. "You're beautiful." She looked up at him. Could he see the awe in her eyes, the abject appreciation? Who'd have thought a man's body was to be worshiped?

“I think there should be more poetry written about a man’s body.” Rose teased, her voice soft and coy. She let a thumb drift lazily over his nipple, feeling it harden beneath her caress. “I wonder why it is that there’s so many sonnets written to a woman’s eyes, but the male gender seems to have been missed altogether.”

Killian laughed, a warm, seductive sound in their lantern-lit paradise. His arms were linked loosely about her waist in casual intimacy. “Do you suggest an ode to a man’s chest?”

“That rhymes. I think you may be off to a good start. I’m beginning to believe you have many hidden talents.”

“Like what?” He bent to kiss her, a little nip on the column of her neck that sent her pulse racing. It was incredibly simple to be this way with him, as if they’d been lovers for ages, acquiring an effortless comfort that only comes with long familiarity. And yet it had only been a few days. That was part of his charm, this ability to put a woman at ease.

“You’re fishing now, looking for compliments.” She replied, dropping her hand back to the waist of his trousers, seeking an entrance to the heat of him.

“I’m not the only one fishing.” His voice had taken on the gratifying husky qualities of a man well-aroused. There was a certain power in knowing she could stoke him to readiness. He was a man who could have any woman he chose, and, for the time being, he’d chosen her. But for how much longer? The crop was in. Their implicit arrangement was at an end.

Her hands worked his trousers free, boldly pushing them over narrow hips and firm buttocks. He was ready, but where to put him? She’d not thought of that when she’d begun her seduction. She’d only thought of how warm and wonderful-smelling the shed would be, how lovely to couple with him amid the bounty of the harvest. She’d not thought of any actual place, merely images.

“I think the table would do nicely.” Killian whispered naughtily at her ear. He gave it a quick perusal for splinters, but it was a sturdy work table of heavy cherry, smoothed from years of use, and there were none.

He backed up to it and dragged her to him. “Now, I believe you were about to climb on top of him.”

“Why I believe I was.” Rose laughed, the awkward glitch neatly dealt with before embarrassment could damage the ambience.

His hands were warm at her hips, holding her firmly, guiding her discreetly, she noticed as she stripped out of her own trousers, and she came over him with only her shirt on, feeling the air of the room caressing her bare skin.

“Slowly, Rose. I want this to last. There, sink down now. Take me deep inside you.”

She did as she was instructed, feeling decadent and utterly female as she joined her body with his. This was something she’d only dared to imagine. Killian let out a contented “Ah,” and she could feel the coarse rub of his man’s hair against her bare buttocks.

Rose moved experimentally, but Killian halted her.

“Wait, give your body time to stretch, time to know its mate.” His hands were at her shirt front, fumbling uncharacteristically in his haste, making no secret of his rising need. “I want to see your body, Rose, I want to feel the weight of you in my hands as we make love.” His eyes were black with desire. Her own need for him spiked at his words. These were not the words of a practiced libertine; his body attested to the truth of them.

His hands were at her breasts now, cupping them in his palms, his thumbs stroking her nipples into an erection of their own. She started to move over him and this time he did not stall her. She rocked her hips gently, back and forth at first as if she were out for a Sunday ride. The first tiny notes of physical fulfillment grew in her, lapping at her core like small waves against a shore. She changed her gait and began to move up and down on his shaft, crying out in wonder when she rubbed a place deep inside that released the most exquisite sensation of pleasure-pain.

A knowing smile took Killian’s mouth at the sound of her gasp. “I didn’t know...” she stammered.

“Now you do, my dear.” But his own pleasure was rising fast, and he could manage no more words.

She delighted in the sound of his moans, in the feel of his body beneath hers giving itself over the primal release bearing down on them both. His hands at her hips urged her on faster now, her breath was coming in pants, their bodies were pushed to the limits of anticipation. Then she took them there, to the top of their pleasure, and they were overcome with the power of it.

She collapsed on top of him, exhausted from the physical efforts of the long day and the emotional wellspring of their lovemaking. She was boneless against him, unwilling and perhaps even unable to move. Why move when paradise was contained on a tabletop, she thought dreamily.

Rose was vaguely aware of Killian rising, assembling his clothes into some decent array and then lifting her in his arms for the journey to the house.

How he managed the trip up the stairs, she could not guess. She was capable of little else but basking in the drowsiness of satiated satisfaction.

Chapter Ten

Rose woke slowly the next morning, her body filled with the lazy exhilaration of knowing there was nothing to do, at least nothing that had to be done. The apples were safely stored. There was nothing that could not wait one more day. After the hard work of the summer and the harvesting of the autumn, she could take one day and relax. The thought of a full day stretching out before her with no expectations seemed like a gift from the gods.

Beside her, Killian stirred, his arm seeking her in his sleep. She turned towards him and smiled, reveling in the chance to study her lover up close in the light of day. His hair was loose, falling over his shoulders, dark and sensual, framing his face. Longer hair on a man was undoubtedly sexy, Rose thought. Not that Killian's hair was truly long. It wasn't long at all compared to a woman's. Her own hair unbound reached the small of her back. Killian's hair merely graced his shoulders, enough of it that it could be neatly pulled back without looking straggly.

She stroked a length of it, pushing it back behind his ear. It was enough to wake him. "Good morning."

"You've been watching me sleep." Killian teased in a gravelly voice still filled with the effects of slumber.

Rose propped herself up on one arm, "I've been wondering all sorts of things about you."

"Like what? Or should I be frightened?" Killian traced her hip bone through the sheets with slow hands, and her need for him started to rise at his touch.

"Did you really make Mrs. Dempsey swoon?"

Killian's mouth made a playful, scolding frown. "What a leading question." His hand kept kneading the curve of her hip in a most delightful, possessive manner that would soon render the issue of Mrs. Dempsey de trop.

"Well," Rose pressed. "Did you?"

Killian rolled his eyes. "Suffice it to say, Mrs. Dempsey is a woman with an overinflated sense of her own charms."

"Hmmm." Rose pretended to reflect on the comment, studying him. "Sounds like a certain man I know."

"Does it? I'd agree with the overinflated part just now." Killian rejoined. Rose's eyes dropped to his waist, speculating about what she might find if she lifted the sheets. "Lusty wench." Killian grinned, following her gaze. "The problem with you, wench, is that you need kissing. Badly, unless I miss my guess." He drew her to him, the evidence of her speculations confirmed.

“The problem with me, is it?” Rose said coyly, laughter rising up with her words

“Thankfully,” Killian said in mock seriousness, drawing a finger up the back of her leg. “I know precisely how to solve your kind of problem.”

Rose yelped. “That tickles!”

Killian’s eyes brightened, and she knew she’d made a tactical error. “Oh no, oh no, you wouldn’t!” Rose cried as Killian launched an avid search for more tickle-spots.

They were wrestling now, kicking at the covers, grappling for pillows, laughing, screaming out their delight in the impromptu tickle war that ensued.

They didn’t hear the pounding of booted footsteps on the landing until it was too late. The door flew open and Rose’s latest scream died a squeaky death in her throat. She grabbed up a sheet in a belated attempt at modesty, feeling her cheeks heat to a beet-red. Killian merely put down his pillow shield and drawled, “Good morning, Peyton. What brings you out so early?”

They might as well have all been dressed and sitting in the parlor for tea, Rose thought, the ridiculous image causing an embarrassing bubble of laughter to creep dangerously up her throat and threaten to burst. But what Peyton had to share was no laughing matter.

“There’s been a fire at a Mr. Franklin’s place. The barn burned. He claims there’s reason to believe it’s arson.”

Rose’s heart was in her throat, replacing the errant bubble of laughter. It could indeed be arson. She heard the implied message behind Dursley’s terse message and all that went unsaid. A barn burnt meant necessities lost: a winter’s supply of hay for the animals, perhaps even livestock itself. Franklin was not well-liked. He’d paid his day laborers poorly this year, citing the exigencies of a smaller crop, and had hoarded the profit for himself. People felt he had dealt with them unfairly.

“What do you want me to do about it?” Killian said, his strong gaze matching Dursley’s in challenge.

Dursley raised a supercilious eyebrow, a practiced move, Rose was sure he’d done a thousand times. It was no doubt quite effective in getting results. “In case you’ve forgotten, you’re the damned magistrate in these parts now, Redbourne. You need to get out there and handle this before your little part of Herefordshire falls victim to swing riots.”

Killian rose from the bed and drew on his discarded shirt, anger simmering in his taut muscles. “You don’t need to tell me my duty, Peyton. I know it full well. I’ll be downstairs in five minutes.”

Chapter Eleven

“You have some answering to do,” Killian fumed precisely five minutes later in the small parlor of Rose’s home. Peyton sat on the worn sofa, one leg elegantly crossed, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “You cannot come barging into someone’s home like that and walk into their bedroom, where God knows what’s going on.”

“Clearly.” Peyton said.

“Stop doing that eyebrow thing you do. You’re going to do it again, I can tell. I’m not one of your errant brothers, you know.”

“Leave my brothers out of this.” Peyton said with a coldness that made Killian regret his words. Perhaps he had gone a bit too far with the comment, but deuce take it, he was furious with Peyton for interrupting a most private pleasure and for unnecessarily taking him to task in front of Rose.

“I am sorry, Killian, for barging in. But this news is serious, far more serious than playing Tup the Widow.”

“Don’t be crass.” Killian cut in. “It’s not like that.”

“Oh? How is it then? You’d hardly been in town two days and you were in her bed and haven’t been home since. What do you think this is? She does understand that you’ll be leaving as soon as you possibly can? That she’s just another notch in your illustrious belt, nothing more than a sidelight compared to your conquests in London.”

“I will not be provoked, Peyton.” Killian grimaced. “My relationship with Rose Janeway is not the issue on display here. It has nothing to do with these claims of arson.”

“If you think that, you’ve not been a nobleman very long.” Peyton took a small measure of pity on him.

“About one week, by my recollection.” Killian replied dryly. “I’m a businessman. I know how to make money. I don’t imagine I’ll ever really be a peer, regardless of what the title says.”

Peyton nodded. “A businessman is very bottom-line by nature. You see profit margins and risk, balance sheets where neat columns line up with calculated answers and assurances. A nobleman’s view is quite different. A nobleman must see all things as interconnections, interconnections that all, I might add, lead back to themselves. A businessman is a private citizen, but a nobleman is not. He must answer to his subjects on all levels. There is no private sector in this life, Killian. Even my mistresses are fair game for common knowledge. It is the same for you as it is for the rest of us. You’re something of a celebrity now. You must go and deal with the question of arson fairly and honestly, if for no other reason than to keep Rose Janeway safe. You would not want to bring the

wrath of the rioters down on her head simply because of her association with you.” Peyton counseled.

“He’s right.” Rose spoke from the doorway, pale and worried. Killian had the uncomfortable sensation she’d been standing there longer than he would have liked, perhaps hearing things best left unsaid until matters were sorted and heads cooled. But her shoulders were straight and she’d dressed in a subdued dress of blue wool with tight sleeves and a high neck trimmed discreetly with white cotton lace, her hair netted and tamed in a chignon at the base of her neck.

“I have water on for tea and toast in the oven. After breakfast, we’ll go out and settle this matter.” She said matter-of-factly.

Killian started towards her. “Rose, I think it would be best if you stayed here.”

She shook her head. “No, you need me. You don’t know these people. You came here a few days ago seeking me for just that purpose didn’t you?” she reminded him in a tone that brooked no argument. “Now, gentlemen, come and eat. Justice is hard to come by on an empty stomach.”

One would have thought Rose Janeway was in the habit of entertaining lords in her kitchen from the way she settled them at the long work table with tea and toast and a few sausages she adeptly fried up. Killian found a new level of appreciation for her, watching her in the kitchen. His Rose was quite versatile. She could run a farm, bring in the apple harvest and cook (apparently the redoubtable Mrs. Hemburton had the day off), to say nothing of the passion she brought to bed at the end of the day.

Quite honestly, he’d never met a woman like her. The women who populated his circles in London were elegant rich women of varying stations, but all were obsessed with the same thing—themselves. Rose’s thoughts were for others. Even last night, her thoughts had been for him, for bringing him pleasure. Of course, he’d seen to it that he’d not gone alone into that world of ecstasy. But her intentions had touched him greatly.

Over toast, she briefed them on Franklin, telling them about the low wages he’d paid out and the situation concerning Herefordshire agriculture in general. One thing was clear: desperation levels were on the rise.

Connelly had not lied when he’d told Killian Rose was the one best placed to help him get to know the area. She was an astute farmer herself and a keen observer of human nature. Such traits spoke to the kind of life she must have led as the local squire’s wife, Killian thought. A surge of jealous possession went through him. It was hard to picture her as another man’s wife. In the time he’d known her, she’d become entirely his, and the recognition of that truth rocked him to his core. He’d never felt such possessiveness over a woman before.

“We’re all worried. No one wants the swing riots to occur here, but there’s only so much any one of us can do and a mob is a rule unto itself,” Rose was saying.

Reflexively, Killian reached out a hand to cover hers where it lay on the table, wanting to give her comfort. “They won’t come here, Rose. You paid more than fair wages last night. People cannot blame you.”

“Not philosophically anyways.” She gave a weak smile. “But who’s to stop them? Philosophy and logic are poor shields against hungry men trying to get justice for their families.”

Perhaps she did not mean it as a personal jab, still he couldn’t help but feel the sting of her words. A lord in residence might keep the peace simply through his presence. Without him, who would be on hand and willing to step into the breach if disorder broke out? An awkward silence descended on the table.

“Let us go and hitch up the gig for you and Mrs. Janeway.” Peyton suggested. He turned to Rose.

“Will ten minutes be enough time? We should not delay longer than needed.”

Chapter Twelve

The barn was a cindered remnant of its former self, a black frame against the sky. Several people were milling about the wreckage when they arrived. Killian hoped bits of useful evidence hadn’t been destroyed or altered by their presence. He jumped down from the gig and immediately strode forward, taking charge.

“Everyone, step back from the remains,” he commanded. “We need to look around to see if we can spot anything that might have started the fire before we can go further.”

Mr. Franklin stepped forward, a bluff, florid-looking man in his late forties, an expression of smug satisfaction on his face at seeing Killian. “I’m Pembridge.” Killian said, extending his hand to the man.

“Now we’ll get somewhere.” Mr. Franklin’s voice was loud and menacing, as if he were threatening those about him. “You’ll all see you can’t take matters into your own hands. I’ve got a suspect too,” Franklin said to Killian. “Jeppeson over there has been uppity since August, complaining about my wages.”

Killian shot a quick glance at the man indicated and raised his brow in questioning disbelief. “And he’s come out to help you salvage? That doesn’t initially strike me as the action of an arsonist. But I’ll reserve judgment until we’ve established it was even arson at all. Please excuse me, I want to take a look at the site.”

Killian strode through the charred debris, kneeling down in places to sift through the ash and burned wood. He was aware of Peyton talking with people off to the side, away from where careless footsteps could further disturb the remains. It took a while, but finally Killian found what he was looking for. A wave of relief swept through him. He'd been ready to prosecute if he'd had to, justice had its point after all. If he was to be taken seriously, he had to act swiftly and decisively no matter what the case. But he doubted Mr. Franklin would appreciate his findings as much as he himself did.

Discreetly, Killian approached Mr. Franklin and walked off into privacy with him. The man had lost a barn, a valued commodity in the country. He deserved to hear the news first and alone. "Mr. Franklin," he began, "it appears a lantern was the cause of the fire."

"A lantern put in my barn by Jeppeson." Franklin said resolutely.

"No, I think that is not the case." Killian pressed on, showing Franklin the blackened metal he'd picked up. "I found this at the hottest part of the blaze. The trademark on the metal is the same as other pieces from other lanterns used in your barn. This lantern is yours."

"How do you know it's from the hottest part of the fire?" Franklin queried, his anger rising.

Killian jerked his head towards the ruined barn frame. "Because it's still smoldering there, and when I bent down to touch the remains, they were still hot, unlike the remains in other places which had already cooled. I will tell you something else too, Franklin. The hottest part of the fire came from the middle of the barn, not from an outside wall where an arsonist would likely start a fire so they could get away quickly. This blaze started inside. It's my conclusion that the peg this lantern was on probably gave way and the lantern crashed to the floor."

Franklin sputtered. "But who will pay for my barn? Where will my animals live this winter?"

Killian didn't have those answers. Franklin would have to decide that for himself. Killian looked around at the people assembled. "Well, there just might be some people here looking for work who wouldn't mind helping you raise a barn."

Franklin's eyes bulged at the prospect. "You don't understand, milord," he stammered in incoherent argument.

Killian placed a steadying hand on the big man's shoulder, remembering the things Rose had shared at breakfast. "Oh yes, I do. I understand better than you think."

Poetic justice, divine intervention, whatever one wanted to call it, Mr. Franklin had been served up his just desserts. If he wanted a barn by winter he'd have to pay those he'd

cheated on wages earlier in the year. Killian thought the outcome quite fitting. He'd had his first trial as Pembroke and he'd passed admirably in his opinion.

Others seemed to think so too. By the time they'd said good-bye to Peyton at the turn in the road, and made their way through the village in the gig, he and Rose had picked up a following. By the time he'd parked the gig near the town commons, they were surrounded by merchants and day laborers who wanted to meet the earl in person.

Sensing the prospect of some extra income, the innkeeper discreetly rolled out a keg, followed shortly by a few trestle tables on the commons, leaving no doubt in Killian's mind the day had become an impromptu holiday of sorts. It reminded him of the medieval court days he'd read about in history books with the lord of the manor sitting in judgment over disagreements and quarrels.

He sat at a table, people of the village on all sides of him. Someone thrust a mug into his hand, and he listened. He offered feedback. Then he began to plan. The comments all had one constant theme—the need for regular sources of income that existed beyond the seasonal opportunities of farming. Even the merchants were affected by the seasonal funding of their local economy. If people didn't have money to spend, they couldn't buy the goods stocked in the village shops.

Killian raised the mug to his mouth, expecting to taste ale. To his surprise, it was cider instead—a sweet, smooth cold cider, delicious and wet. He didn't need more than a second swallow to know it was the finest cider he'd ever tasted. He caught sight of Rose moving through a crowd of women, someone's baby on her hip, her bonnet askew from the baby's antics and her lovely hair peeking out.

Red-gold.

The idea he'd been searching for finally came to him in concrete detail. Rose's shed full of red-gold apples. Red gold. She wasn't the only one. Practically everyone grew apples here and made cider. Cider was commonplace here.

Red gold.

The Redstreak apple.

Cider.

A cider cartel.

There was a market for cider if one could get it to the city.

"Do you send cider up to Hereford?" Killian asked, his mind alight with ideas.

“Yes, milord. But that’s only one city. There’s not too many big cities around here.” It was true. Pembridge-on-the-Wye was closer to Wales than it was to London. Killian smiled. A farmer alone could not think of the expense of sending his cider to London. That’s where they needed him. He could show them how to mitigate expenses by working together, and once London got a taste of this cider, it wouldn’t want to buy anything else, no matter how much closer it was. His mind was spinning fast now. Who was to say they couldn’t also go into Wales? Their little cartel could become international, would become international once he got done with it.

Chapter Thirteen

Killian was quiet on the drive home—all his attention riveted on the horse and the road perhaps? Or were his thoughts elsewhere? Rose wondered. Had he figured out that he didn’t need her at all? He didn’t. He’d been fine on his own, magnificent in fact. From the moment he’d stepped down from the gig at Franklin’s barn, she’d seen a different side of him, a side that made her wince with embarrassment when she recalled the rough dressing down she’d given him that first day in the orchard.

She’d listened to rumors, seen the playful light in his eye and taken that to be the sum of him, a man more interested in the light pleasures of lazy society. She’d judged him on his appearance, determined to find him shallow because he’d been handsome and absent to defend himself against the rumors that had drifted down from London over the years. But Killian Redbourne was much more than that.

Today he’d been the earl. He’d actively sought justice for the fire. He’d given of his time to those who needed his ear. He’d sat for hours with the people, listening to them. When he’d risen from the tables, there’d been a new sense of purpose to the crowd. The grim expressions had been transformed into something more hopeful. Change was in the air.

What did that mean for her? He’d done it all by himself. He had not needed her introductions as he’d feared. The men liked him for himself. Why should they not? His command had been impressive today. She had watched him whenever she could. She could not help but feel proud in ‘her man.’ But that was where the fantasy ended. He wasn’t her man. He’d never be her man. Whatever he’d been before, a businessman of sorts, he was an earl now and out of her league.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Rose ventured cautiously. They were nearly home. She mentally cringed. How easy the idea of them together had slipped into her way of thinking. This wasn’t their home. It was her home, and it would be her home after he left.

“I’ve been thinking of all that needs to be done.”

“For what?” Rose felt as if she’d entered a conversation halfway finished and was missing vital information.

“To set up the cider cartel, Rose.” He explained the details to her, how they would transport the local cider into cities year-round. “We’ll probably have to grow more apple trees to keep up with demand once we get established.”

There was no missing the excitement in his voice, and it was contagious. They pulled into the yard and he came around to help her down. She put her arms about him and kissed him full on the mouth. “You’re brilliant.” With Killian at the helm of the project, she had no doubt it would succeed in ways local farmers could not hope to achieve.

“I have you to thank for the inspiration.” His eyes twinkled as he set her down, still holding her close, the heat of his body comforting and solid against the evening chill. “Red gold you called it, and so it will be. Now, as I recall, we have some unfinished business upstairs from this morning. Shall we?”

There was an extra edge of euphoria to their lovemaking that night, Rose’s thoughts of a dismal future without him firmly pushed away in the wake of Killian’s ardor and the hope that the cartel might give him a reason to stay. Maybe she wouldn’t have to say good-bye after all.

Perhaps if she’d known him longer, she would have sensed the underlying urgency in his lovemaking. Perhaps she’d have realized the ardor that drove him was fueled not only by exhilaration over his plans but by the imminent approach of their good-byes.

As it was, she had a rather rude awakening the following morning.

The bed was empty. Killian stood bare-chested, dressed in trousers before the open wardrobe, carefully folding the spare shirt and clothes Dursley had brought down for him. It took a moment or two for Rose’s sleepy mind to register that these weren’t the actions of a man called away on an emergency; such a man would be stuffing clothing haphazardly into a valise. These were the actions of a man who’d planned a departure.

“What are you doing?” Rose managed to ask. She’d not expected to wake like this. She’d expected a cozy morning in bed, picking up where they’d fallen asleep last night, safe in each other’s arms.

Killian turned from the wardrobe, a smile on his face. “I’m leaving, Rose.”

As if that was cause for a smile. Her stomach plummeted. “Leaving? For where? Why?” Rose sat up in bed, shoving handfuls of hair out of her face.

“I can’t stay here forever if we’re to get the cartel up and running.” He shrugged into his spare linen shirt, looking elegant and graceful, a stark reminder that he’d worn clothes far beneath his station since he’d arrived at her doorstep. So this was how it would be. He

would return to his rightful station and she would be left in hers. No plans for them crossed his lips.

He put on the hunting jacket he'd arrived in and pulled on his boots. Each action led him closer to farewell. Rose's throat tightened. She'd known he would leave her. She'd just hadn't known it would hurt so much. He snapped the valise shut and came to the bed, dropping a quick kiss on her cheek. "Everything will be all right, you'll see."

He was too cheerful for her taste. It would certainly help if he felt even a twinge of sadness at going. Rose merely nodded. "Take care of yourself," she managed. He wouldn't want tears. It would make him regret their time together. Regrets were not what she wanted him to remember.

Rose heard the front door shut and hurried to her window. She'd torture herself a bit longer and see him leave. She pulled back the lace curtain to watch him harness the pony and throw his bag up onto the gig before swinging into the seat. He slapped the reins and was off.

Rose sighed, her breath frosting the window pane. She'd meant to give herself an experience. But he'd taken her heart.

Chapter Fourteen

It was impossible to get Killian Redbourne out of her head, out of her house or off her land. Everywhere she looked, there were reminders. Some physical—the dining-room table where they'd eaten that first dinner together—others mental images of things he'd said, things they'd done. Even the orchards weren't safe from memories of him. He was simply everywhere.

After three days of trying to prepare the press for the annual cider-making and succeeding only minimally, she finally gave in and contrived an excuse to drive up to Pembridge Hall in the old farm wagon. She dressed with conscientious care, not wanting to look overdone for a casual call upon a neighbor. She didn't want Killian to suspect she was moping, pouting or in anyway sulking due to his absence.

She loaded two small casks of cider in the back of the wagon and set off under the flimsy pretense that she'd not yet paid him for his work in the orchards. Not that the earl needed payment, of course. But he might appreciate the humorous gesture anyway.

Pembridge Hall was a monstrous sprawl of a house, big and intimidating. The old earl had liked to intimidate people, he'd wanted those around him to feel the weight of his consequence. He'd been a skinny, bony bag of a man and had had to do his intimidating through avenues other than his size. Pembridge Hall was proof of that.

She summoned her courage and knocked on the door. A stuffy butler answered it; she vaguely recalled him from the few times she'd visited on formal occasions. "I'm Mrs. Janeway. I've come to see the earl."

"Right this way, please." At least that was something, Rose thought. She'd not been turned away and, in fact, had been easily admitted. Killian didn't plan on ignoring her then.

The butler led her to a small sitting room done up in various shades of yellow, and she sat down to wait, her confidence surging a bit over the decent reception.

"Mrs. Janeway, how delightful to see you again." It was Dursley who spoke from the doorway. Her hopes fell. It was the wrong earl. How awkward.

Disappointment must have shown on her face. "You were expecting Pembridge?" Dursley inquired kindly. "I am afraid he's not here."

Luck was not with her. First the wrong earl, then Killian was out on some errand. It was probably no less than she deserved, traipsing over the countryside hunting down a man who'd made it clear their brief interlude was over. She'd never thought much of women who made cakes of themselves over men. Now she'd become one.

Rose gathered her dignity. "It's no problem. I brought him some casks of cider. I thought he might need them." She couldn't think of why he'd need them. Hopefully, Dursley would throw her a scrap of mercy and not ask. "If you could tell him when he returns?"

"I will, Mrs. Janeway, although it might not be for a while." Dursley was looking at her strangely. "I can see you don't know. He's gone. He left for London a few days ago."

Rose was thankful she was sitting. Otherwise she might have fallen over completely. Killian was gone? In London? "How long will he be gone?" She couldn't bear to ask the other question on her mind: Will he be back?

Dursley shook his head patiently. "I don't know. He didn't say. I'm sorry, I assumed he'd told you."

Rose was numb. Killian had simply disappeared back to London. When he'd said he couldn't stay here, she had thought he meant at her house with her. But he'd meant it in a far bigger sense. He couldn't stay in Pembridge-on-the-Wye. It hadn't been clear to her, but then it had all happened so fast. They'd been making love and then he'd been gone.

She managed to get home before she broke into tears in the privacy of her room. The best she could hope for now was that he didn't mean to betray the villagers who'd believed in his cartel. It was clear to her that he meant to run the cartel from London, from the terminus of the supply line instead of at its onset.

In hindsight, it made sense. He was a man of business with other interests he could simultaneously oversee if he were in London, and he'd said the estate was broke. Dursley must be tying up loose ends for him before heading back.

She knew she should be thankful. Killian had found a way to be the absent earl he wanted to be and to help the people find the income they needed. He'd discharged his duty on terms acceptable to all—except perhaps her.

Rose punched the wet pillow. She'd been such a fool.

Chapter Fifteen

London, November 30, 1830

Killian lifted his hand from the stationery, setting aside the quill as he debated what more to add. His letter to Peyton was mostly complete. The villagers could celebrate the upcoming Christmas season with glee. He had contracts for cider with over fifty inns in the greater London area, with the promise of more next year. The letter contained the details, along with the delivery date for the first shipments and an order to start the cider presses. Between pressing and carting, they'd have all the work they wanted and more just to fill these initial contracts.

He'd tell them himself except that speed was of the essence, and he wanted to stop along the way home and cultivate a few of the inns that ran along the Herefordshire-London road. The letter would arrive before he did, and the villagers would need all the time they could get.

Killian felt well pleased with his efforts. But he felt more pleased with the idea of going home. For the first time in his adulthood, he had a place he wanted to call home. He picked up his quill and hesitated again. He wanted to add a postscript for Rose, to tell her he was on his way home, on his way back to her, that he'd missed her tremendously. Time without her had provided him with a perspective on what she'd come to mean to him.

He decided against it. This letter would be passed around, everyone wanting to hear the details of the cartel. This missive was not the place for personal disclosures.

"Milord, the messenger is ready to leave." A footman entered the room to collect the letter. There'd be no time to write a second one privately. Killian carefully folded the heavy paper and closed it with the Pembridge seal, something he was still getting used to.

He wished he was leaving with the letter, but he still had another day in town before he could depart.

Killian closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. He was tired of London. Even with all the comforts of his own home, Killian longed for the simple pleasures of Rose's soft bed

The visions of her in his mind were strong. He could see her in the fields, all boots and trousers, her hair tucked up beneath a cap, challenging him. He could see her beside him in the gig in her blue dress with the lace at the throat, ready to stand by him and ease his way if need be. He saw her amid the women in the village, respected as a leader in her own right. He saw her at the coin box, in the cider shed on the work table and in his arms up against the wardrobe, her hair loose, her passion exposed. And he saw her rumpled with sleep that last day when he'd kissed her good-bye.

She did understand, didn't she? He was coming back. She did understand he wouldn't leave her? He hadn't said good-bye because it wasn't good-bye. He'd be back for her. How could he not be? One did not throw away a piece of one's soul. But he worried. He had no explicit guarantee. He had only the implicit promises their bodies had made each other, the implied bonds of their midnight conversations.

In his excitement over the cartel, the scene that last morning had not resonated with him at the time. But now, as he played it back in his mind, the exhilaration of the cartel subdued, he wondered what it had looked like from Rose's perspective, and prickles of doubt began to nag at him. Had she thought he was saying farewell to her? To them?

More than ever, Killian wanted to get home.

Fate conspired against a speedy journey. It was December now, after all, and the roads were muddy. What wasn't muddy was slippery. He was thankful for the Dursley equipage, the finest available. The traveling carriage was well-sprung and had all the best refinements. But Killian wanted speed, and he chafed at the slow progress of his journey. He felt helpless sitting for hours on end, doing nothing. He couldn't read. He couldn't think. He wanted Rose in his arms. He wanted to know she was still his.

He wanted to see her face light up and her blue eyes glow when he gave her the little gift he'd found in London. He'd brought other gifts for her too. He'd spent his last day in London shopping for her. He wanted to strip her out of the silk negligee (what there was of it) that he'd purchased and make slow love to her. Alas, now he was alone and aroused. This was possibly the most miserable trip he'd ever been on.

Three miles out of Pembridge-on-the-Wye and dark coming on fast, a wheel axle broke, proving even the Dursley wealth was no match for Mother Nature, though it had given her a hell of a run for her money. Killian swore, and jumped down to lend a hand.

The driver and his nephew, along with Killian's muscle, were able to get the carriage to the side of the road. But there was no question of going further without help. They

unhitched the horses, agreeing to ride the rest of the way and send a team back for the carriage later.

Despite the setback, Killian's heart soared at the sight of the town steeple coming into view in the dusky twilight, the lights of the main street glowing. His town. It took an effort of supreme will to ride past the turn to Rose's and keep going towards Pembridge Hall, but he had his duty to Peyton. He couldn't leave Peyton's carriage lying in a ditch. Killian chuckled to himself. His duty to Peyton did have its limits though. He'd tell Peyton about the carriage and then let him deal with it.

Peyton laughed at his report. "Apparently, you find humor in the wreckage of your very expensive carriage?" Killian said, doing a fair imitation of Peyton's lordly eyebrow-raise.

"No, it's you that has me laughing. You can't wait to be off to Mrs. Janeway's. So it's finally happened, has it? The legendary Killian Redbourne has fallen in love?"

There was no sense in denying the truth. Killian shrugged. "It would seem so. But I wouldn't laugh too hard. It will happen to you too, just wait and see if it doesn't." Peyton looked dubious over this pronouncement, but Killian was too happy to care. He was free at last to see Rose.

She wasn't at the grange. The house was dark. Disappointed, Killian stopped in at the pub. The innkeeper would know where everyone was. As it turned out, he didn't need to ask. The pub was thronged. It took Killian a moment to realize the pub's patrons weren't the usual. Tonight, there were women and children, families, gathered around the tables.

He grabbed one of the barmaids. "What's going on?"

"We're celebrating our cider contracts, sir!" Then she paused, recognizing who she was talking to. Killian imagined he didn't look quite himself after days on the road and forgave her for the oversight.

"It's him, everyone! It's Lord Pembridge!" She shouted in her excitement.

All eyes swiveled towards him. Killian smiled, although this was not the discreet homecoming he would have wished. He'd have preferred something more private with Rose. But as Peyton had said, his was a public life now. He searched the crowd for the only set of eyes that mattered. He found them at the back of the room. He started moving towards her, shaking hands and clapping shoulders, accepting good wishes, acutely aware that he'd truly come home, that he was building his future here. But, always, he was moving forwards. He wouldn't really be home until he reached her.

Rose's breath caught. Killian was back! He looked dirty, his greatcoat spattered with mud at the hem, his dark hair loose and tangled, his beard stubbling on his chin. He'd never

looked more handsome to her, and Rose very physically felt her hard-won control shatter. She'd had a month to make all the necessary justifications to herself, a month to relegate Killian Redbourne to the status of an unforgettable experience. But that was the problem with the unforgettable. One always remembered. And now he was here, walking toward her with a look of single-minded determination in his coffee-colored eyes.

His purpose was clear: he wanted her. He'd come back for her, cartel notwithstanding. What should she do? She had only moments to decide. Could she risk her heart again knowing that he could not offer all her heart demanded? Would he make her choose between him and Pembridge-on-the-Wye?

Killian stood in front of her, tall and strong, desire pulsing through his frame. He took no pains to hide it. Rose bit her lip. No wonder Mrs. Dempsey had swooned. Any woman would kill to be looked at thusly by a man.

Killian took her by the hand in front of all those assembled. "I need a word with you." He said softly, although Rose knew everyone would have heard him even if he'd whispered. He led her to one of the private parlors and shut the door firmly behind them.

"Killian, what..." She did not get any farther. He enveloped her in his arms, his mouth possessing hers, her body held tightly against his, and she gave herself over to it. There was no denying the joy her body took from his. But it was more than that. There was a joy in being with this man that transcended the physical. She knew instinctively no other could provide her the joy she found with him.

"I missed you. I don't want to be apart from you like that again." He whispered between kisses, "I didn't like wondering if you were still mine. I realized I might have left my intentions unclear."

"I thought you weren't coming back." It had to be said.

"It occurred to me, rather belatedly, that you might think that. So I've brought you something to convince you otherwise." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet-covered box.

"What's this?" Rose asked, her emotions threatening to get the better of her. The evening had turned into a whirlwind of surprises.

"Open it," He pushed the box into her hand.

Rose slipped open the lid and gasped. It was an exquisitely crafted brooch—a ruby shaped in the form of an apple lay on black velvet, a sliver of jade carved to represent a leaf. "It's beautiful." She said softly.

"It's for a countess who's crazy enough to let her husband run a cider cartel." Killian's voice cracked over his next three words. "Marry me, Rose."

Rose looked at him in amazement. By the saints, the great Killian Redbourne, possessor of swooning kisses, was nervous. And that was all the persuasion she needed.

“I’ll never be a fashionable countess.” She said.

Killian smiled, relieved hope starting to creep into his expression. “But you’ll be mine. And we’ll be here in Pembridge-on-the-Wye together. London’s had me for fourteen years. You can have me for the rest.” His hands shook slightly as he pinned the brooch to her dress. “Say you’ll be mine?”

“Yes, Killian, I’ll be yours.” Rose grinned up at him, her arms about his neck. What an extraordinary man she’d found. He’d understood her dilemma before she’d even voiced it and had removed it from consideration. She cocked her head in contemplative fashion. “Do you think they’d miss us, if we slipped out the back?”

Killian gave her a stare of mock seriousness. “Yes I do, which why I propose we stay right here. But don’t worry, I have it on good authority that tables can be put to several diverse uses.”

“I wish I’d thought of that.” Rose tugged impatiently at his waistband.

Killian winked, moving down on top of her. “Someone once told me wishing makes all the difference, my dear, between expectation and hope.”

Bronwyn Scott is a communications instructor in the Puget Sound area, and is the proud mother of three wonderful children (one boy and two girls). When she's not teaching or writing, she enjoys playing the piano, traveling—especially to Florence, Italy—and studying history and foreign languages. You can learn more about Bronwyn at www.nikkipoppen.com

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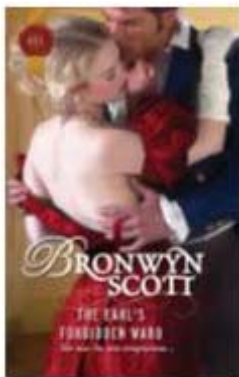
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Wicked Earl, Wanton Widow

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