

CAROLS
AND
CHAOS

The title is presented in a highly decorative, calligraphic font. The word 'CAROLS' is written in a large, elegant serif font, with the letter 'C' being particularly large and ornate. The word 'AND' is smaller and positioned between 'CAROLS' and 'CHAOS'. The word 'CHAOS' is also in a large, elegant serif font, with the letter 'C' being particularly large and ornate. The entire title is set against a background of musical staves and notes, with various flourishes and scrollwork surrounding the text.

CINDY ANSTEY

Swoon READS

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chapter 1



In which there is a bullish meeting

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1817

Miss Kate Darby of Shackleford Park scowled, and yet the recipient of her dark looks was not in the least intimidated. She snorted in vexation—very quietly, of course, just a whisper of warm breath drifted into the afternoon chill. She tried to exude strength, calm, and dominance in this staring contest: to look away would be perceived as weakness . . . at her peril.

“Nothing to worry about, my friend,” she said, her words barely audible. “I will be out of your way momentarily.”

The beneficiary of this bravado was a big fellow with a broad forehead, prominent eyes, and curly black hair. He wore a look of irritation that was growing more passionate

with each passing moment. The threat that his mood would escalate into fury, and the dire consequences that would accompany this rage, was all too real.

Standing some twenty feet apart, Kate knew that the distance was too close for comfort—for both of them. The bull could cross that divide very quickly despite his size and weight; there would be no outrunning this huge battering ram. And so she stared, willing the behemoth to stay just where he was, shoulders hunched, pawing the ground.

Slowly, in small moves, Kate inched backward. The gate leading to Wattage Lane was behind her . . . somewhere. If only she had been paying better attention.

So intent on correcting a mistake, she had slipped through a narrow opening on the east side of the field, leaving Marie by the road. Distracted by eager anticipation, Kate had not assessed her surroundings properly. There had been no animal in sight when she had glanced around the large enclosure. She had seen, but not signified, the large hoofprints in the hardened mud.

Foolish and foolhardy, she had skipped across the meadow, loudly calling to the cart rolling past the far side of the enclosure. Perhaps if she had moved with deliberation, quietly with stealth, she might have made it across the wide expanse without incident.

It was a moot point.

The rightful occupant of the pasture had heard her hal-

loos and drawn near, likely to investigate first, and then, having found an interloper, to challenge. If Kate did not find her way out of the enclosure fast, she would suffer the consequences of her imprudent distraction.

“This is a rather sticky situation,” a familiar deep, melodic voice said softly. It wasn’t a whisper, but the statement was spoken in a gentle tone in recognition of her precarious position in the standoff.

Keeping her expression passive, Kate fought the urge to turn. “Ah, Mr. Harlow. You heard me call.”

“Indeed, Miss Darby. I believe they heard you all the way back to Tishdale. I’m sure every hen in the neighborhood just stopped laying.”

Kate almost laughed—almost. “Please, Mr. Harlow, do not be amusing. It would be to my detriment.”

“Oh, I do apologize. The hens are likely fine. You, on the other hand . . . well, definitely sticky.”

“I’ve dealt with worse.”

“Really?”

“I have three older brothers.”

“Yes, indeed. Far more dangerous than a raging bull.”

“I’ve always thought so. This is merely a modest predicament,” she said airily, and then swallowed with difficulty when the bull snorted. “How far am I from the gate?”

“Not far. Shift a little to your left—yes, exactly. And now, straight back ten feet or so.”

There was a squeal of metal on metal behind her—hinges.

“What are you doing?” Kate asked, though she had a fairly good idea.

“It might be easier to slip out of an open gate than to barrel through.”

“Excellent idea.”

“I thought so.”

“You’ll close it after me?”

“Should I? I thought the big fellow might want to gad about . . . looking for cows.”

“What he might want to do, and what is best for everyone in the area, might not be the same thing. He should probably stay in the field.”

“In that case, I will swing the gate closed behind you.”

“Excellent. Are you ready? I will count to three—oh. Oh no.”

Lowering his head, the bull snorted again. It was the final warning, and Kate knew it. The standoff was over.

Pivoting, Kate ran. She could hear the pounding hooves advancing on her. A scream built in her throat, and she tensed, readying for the blow. Suddenly, a shriek split the air and the pounding halted abruptly.

Surprised, Kate glanced over her shoulder and blindly careened into Matt Harlow. Momentum propelled them awkwardly through the gate, but Matt quickly regained his footing. They stuttered to a stop a few feet from the enclosure, still standing but with Matt’s arms wrapped around Kate. Then, seeing the bull turn his head in their direction, Matt leapt forward. He slammed the gate shut, knocking his

cap to the ground in the process. Both stared across the field to the figure that was standing on the far wall, shrieking and flapping her burgundy cloak.

Kate giggled, a little longer than warranted. There was a touch of mania to the sound. “That’s Mary . . . I mean, Marie,” she said quietly, looking up at Mr. Harlow. Realizing that he was much too close for propriety, Kate shifted away and turned back to the far side of the field, lifting her arm in a large swooping wave.

“Thank you, Marie! I’m fine now,” she shouted. “All is well!”

Seeing her friend jump down from the stone wall, Kate dropped her voice. “Thank you,” she said again, directing her comment this time to Mr. Matt Harlow.

“Most welcome,” he said with a broad smile. “Wouldn’t want to see you laid up this close to Christmas.”

“Or laid out.”

They stared at each other for some minutes. “That, too,” he said quietly, ignoring her teasing tone.

Kate smiled, strangely pleased by his brief frown.

Her memory had not played her wrong, not embellished the appealing aspect that was the Steeple valet. Matt Harlow was indeed the handsome young man with broad shoulders, medium brown hair, and hazel eyes that she remembered. He did dress impeccably and yet have a slightly disheveled look about his hair. More important, his impish yet charming smile had been reaffixed.

While Matt bent to retrieve his cap, Kate set about

straightening her cloak as it had twisted to the side. Once completed, she tugged her mittens back into place. Then they turned in unison to greet each other properly—civil expressions on their faces as were dictated for persons of such a short acquaintance.

“Good afternoon, Miss Darby,” he said formally, nodding his head in a respectful bow.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Harlow.” Kate bobbed a curtsy.

“Fine day for a stroll,” he said with a raised brow.

“Indeed. And a drive from the coast. Did you have a pleasant journey?” Kate asked.

“Well, the trip was far less eventful than the last few minutes.”

He seemed to wait for Kate to explain . . . which she didn’t do. It was far more fun keeping him wondering. “Yes, I can imagine that’s true.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Miss Darby. Why were you shouting across the pasture? And why were you giving that poor bull a hard time? Invading his territory and all that. You could have been killed.”

“Yes, that was a mistake . . . though an honest one. Farmer Gibbs took his animals off the field some weeks ago. He must have thought the day too fine to waste and put them, or at least him, back on.”

“Which still doesn’t explain why you felt the need to cross the field in the first place. There is a perfectly good road on either side.”

Kate laughed. Now they were at the heart of the matter.

“Yes, however, the road *I* was on leads to Shackleford Park. The road *you* were traveling leads to Wattage.”

“I beg your pardon? We were on the wrong road?”

“Yes. I was in Tishdale with Marie.” Kate turned, looking over her shoulder to see the top half of Marie Whynaught standing behind the stone wall. The hood of her cloak had fallen back to reveal dark blond curls and a furrowed brow, conflicting with her pert features.

Facing Matt once more, Kate used her chin to point toward the opposite road. “You missed the turn. We were on our way back to Shackleford Park when I saw your cart across the pasture. You would have realized your mistake at Wattage, but it would have taken you three-quarters of an hour out of your way and then again to return. It seemed reasonable to save you from traveling hither and yon on a deplorable road for nothing. Hence the shouting for your attention . . . and thereby gaining the bull’s interest.”

“Thank you for putting your life in danger to save me from an hour and a half of pointless travel.”

Kate laughed. “Yes, well, it was quite unintentional—the danger part, not the helping part.”

“I should hope so.”

“So what’s all this, then?” a new voice called from farther down Wattage Lane.

Matt winked at Kate and then turned his head. “You were taking us down the wrong road, Johnny. You’ve never been good with directions.”

“Me? *You* was the one here in the summer.”

Kate shifted so that she might see Johnny—last name unknown. Wearing the green Steeple livery, he was about Matt’s age—nineteen or so—tall and lanky, as most footmen tended to be, with a striking countenance if not handsome. His eyes were a trifle too deep-set to complement his thin lips, and yet there was an appealing hint of mischief about him.

“Had you been attending properly, I wouldna made the mistake, now would I?” the footman said. “You were too busy waxing on about the charms of—”

“Shall I introduce you?” Matt interrupted with a glare.

Johnny laughed, not in the least slighted. He stepped forward and doffed his hat. “Johnny Grinstead, third footman to the Steeples of Musson House . . . for near on three months.”

“Kate Darby, lady’s maid at Shackleford Park. It’s a pleasure.”

“Indeed it is, Miss Darby,” he said, stepping closer still and dropping his voice to an intimate whisper before reaching out to take her hand. “Lovely country you have here,” he crooned.

With a smile, Kate agreed and glanced at Matt to see him shaking his head. She grinned as he shouldered Johnny out of the way, pulling her hand free from the grasp of his companion and tucking it into the crook of his elbow.

“You can show us the way to Shackleford Park,” Matt said, leading her down the lane to where the cart waited.

“It is simple enough,” she said as she minced through a patch of mud. “Turn around, and take the first left off the main road.”

“Simple enough for someone who has lived in this area of Kent all her life, but for us poor coastal souls . . . well, we would appreciate your guidance.”

Kate didn’t argue further. After all, spending a few minutes with Matt Harlow in the intimacy of a pony cart before being inundated with people and duties was a rather pleasant notion.

The pony cart, tied to a gorse bush by the side of the road, was of a good size, though not quite a wagon. Packed to a level above the rails, the cargo was hidden and held in place by canvas tied in the corners. The cloth was heavily soiled, likely in an attempt to demean the contents. The road from the coast was not known for highwaymen, but it would be beetle-headed to take a chance with the precious food-stuffs being sent ahead by the Steeple family.

Glancing up the road, Kate congratulated herself on her quick thinking—willfully ignoring her close encounter with the Gibbse’s bull. The road to Wattage was a disaster at the best of times—with the surveyor of that parish paying little heed to its ruts and crumbling bridges—but it was doubly so in the winter.

Yes, there were plenty of reasons for her impulsive sprint across the pasture. It had nothing to do with Kate’s enthusiasm to see Matt. They barely knew each other; they had

shared a few significant looks in the summer but not much more than that. She was drawn to him as *anyone* might be. A handsome stranger with an infectious smile was a rare commodity at Shackleford.

“—Bailey.”

Kate jerked out of her reverie. “I beg your pardon?”

“If you could hold Bailey,” Matt said, passing her the reins to the pony, who was now unhitched from the bush as well as the cart. Kate nodded, leading the large pony—almost horse-sized—farther down the narrow road out of the way.

Matt and Johnny soon had the cart facing the right direction and Bailey reattached. Kate was handed up to the driver’s bench and they were off. Squished between the young men, Kate was acutely aware of Matt’s leg pressed against hers—Johnny’s was as well, but it wasn’t as distracting.

“How was your journey thus far?” Kate asked Johnny.

Johnny proceeded to describe the lengthy, though uneventful, trip in such harrowing terms that he had her smiling all the way back to the main road. He turned left at her direction, and they pulled up along the east side of the Gibbsses’ pasture, where Marie waited . . . looking none too pleased.

“You ought not to have run across the field,” Marie said without preamble as they pulled up before her. She had pulled her hood back over her head and was partially hidden in its shadows. Her mittened hands were tucked under her crossed arms. They were held tightly against the front of her

burgundy cloak as she leaned against the wall in a half-standing, half-sitting posture.

“I said much the same, miss.” Matt nodded as he helped Kate alight. “Though I have it on good authority that we were destined to a miserable hour and a half journey had she not done so.”

“Exactly. Hardly worth the eff—”

“Thank you for distracting the bull, Mary—”

“Marie. You keep forgetting; it’s Marie now.”

“Oh yes . . . You are right. I must be more flustered than I realized.” Kate lifted her cheeks, hoping to appease her companion, who was a gem at the best of times—and a bitter pill at the worst. “It’s only been a few weeks.”

“Nearly a month now,” Marie huffed.

Similarly to the way Kate had been elevated in the spring, Marie had been raised from her former position as a housemaid to lady’s maid; Mrs. Beeswanger’s previous maid had left service to be married in November. However, when Mary had stepped across the divide into the domain of the upper servants, she had shaken the detritus of her previous duties behind her, raised her chin in the air, and adopted a French pronunciation to her name. Marie no longer wished to associate with those at the lower table, did not want to laugh and chat as Kate still did.

It was a rather rigid approach to the social hierarchy below stairs that Kate hoped would soften over time. She quickly introduced Marie Whynaught to the travelers.

“Hang on, now,” Johnny said, still sitting on the cart’s bench. “I thought Darby, here, was the lady’s maid.”

Kate’s smile was genuine this time. “There are ladies aplenty at Shackleford Park,” she explained. “Marie’s duties are to Mrs. Beeswanger, while I care for Miss Beeswanger and Miss Chively.” She caught the shared look between the two young men. Imogene Chively was betrothed to their Ben Steeple of Musson House . . . though it was unlikely that Johnny had met Mr. Ben, as the young gentleman had been apprenticing in Canterbury since September. “The two youngest daughters are not yet out.”

Johnny looked confused. “Are there no gentlemen?”

“Of course, Mr. Beeswanger . . . and Jasper. Though one can hardly call him a gentleman, as he is a dog.”

“But an important part of the family,” Matt said with a laugh. He offered Marie a hand.

She looked at it as if it were a rotting fish. “Yes?”

“Would you like some assistance, Miss Whynaught? Onto the cart? We are going the same direction. It will give you a nice respite.”

“We don’t need a nice respite, do we, Kate?”

“Yes, that would be lovely, thank you,” Kate said even as Marie bristled. She reached for the parcel sitting at Marie’s feet and passed it to Johnny to set under the bench.

“It is to your benefit that Mrs. Beeswanger thought that the girls will need warmer shawls this evening,” Marie said as she hiked up her skirts and used the wheel hub as a step.

“Otherwise, we would not have been coming back from Tishdale and seen you go past on the wrong road!”

Kate cringed. Marie’s tone was decidedly caustic.

“There’s no room up here,” Marie continued. “There is barely room for two, let alone three. I don’t know how you did it, Kate.”

“It was a mite tight,” Matt said, offering Kate a grin. “Perhaps we will make ourselves comfortable in the back.”

Johnny leaned forward so that he might see past Marie. “Not sure you’ll fit there, either.” He had a mischievous smile.

At the back of the cart, Kate let down the tailboard, eyeing the space speculatively. The box was, indeed, filled to capacity with little room to sit. Only the edge offered any possibility of a perch. To stay aboard, they would have to cling to the sides, leaning into each other. Such a shame!

Matt helped Kate aboard with a flourish more befitting a great lady. She settled her cloak and skirts out of Matt’s way and he jumped up, trying not to jostle her. Their feet swung with the cart’s motion, and they shared a smile whenever they bumped persons . . . which was not a rare occurrence. Kate might have exaggerated the motion a little, but she was fairly certain Matt did as well. Flirting was a most marvelous invention.

“I was rather surprised when Mrs. Lundy told me that you were coming ahead of the family,” Kate said, staring at the view behind the cart. It was a quiet stretch of the road

with no farms or cottages for another quarter mile. The fields broke through the trees at irregular intervals, affording a pretty sight of the surrounding countryside.

“Mrs. Lundy?”

“Shackleford Park’s housekeeper. You would have met her in the summer.”

“Ah yes, I remember. Very short, rather stern-looking woman.”

Kate laughed at the erroneous description. “No, indeed, that would be Cook. I’m referring to a tall, affable woman who jangles as she walks.”

“Ah yes, I remember her well.”

“Clearly.” Kate shook her head with a giggle—a tiny one. “I would have thought that Mr. Ernest would have need of you . . . that you would have come later with the Steeples.”

“Ah yes, but Mr. Ben has need of me more, or so Mr. Ernest thought might be the case. Mr. Ben is arriving from Canterbury tomorrow. He wants to see Miss Imogene as much as possible before returning to his duties in the new year.”

Kate looked up to see Matt waggle his brows at her, and she laughed again.

“As to coming early, someone had to accompany Johnny to prevent him from gorging on these preserves.”

“I heard that!” Johnny called from the front of the cart.

“Mrs. Lundy will be happy for the goods and the extra hands,” Kate said, grinning. “She has been running around since Stir-up Day, making sure the puddings were made, the rooms spotlessly clean, and the decorations ready to go up.

Now that there are only twelve days until Christmas Eve, she is in a tizzy.”

“Tizzy?”

“Yes, most definitely. This will be the first occasion with both families together—”

“Of many.”

“Yes, exactly. And Mrs. Lundy, being rather old-fashioned—of a superstitious bend, if you know what I mean—she feels *this* Yuletide season, more than any other, must flow smoothly. A good omen for the future.”

“Really?”

“Well, that is Mrs. Lundy’s belief.”

“And Cook’s,” Marie added from the front of the cart, half turned in her seat. “She wants everything done according to custom to ensure that 1818 is a prosperous year.” Her harrumph left Kate wondering if Marie had the same conviction.

“It seems we are here, my good fellows,” Johnny said.

Kate glanced over her shoulder and waved to the gardener as he pointed Johnny toward the service drive; the large manor was visible through the trees. Shackleford Park was not an ancient building. The original fifteenth-century house, a shoddy place with uneven floors and chimneys that smoked, had been torn down ten years earlier. A new, chateau-style manor with a mansard roof had been erected in its place.

Kate had no recollection of the old house. There had been no purpose to visit before, having been hired on as a scullery maid at the age of fourteen. When, at sixteen, she

had taken on the duties of a housemaid, she had enjoyed the benefit of cleaning a house without the rot of age and layers of ash from years of fires. Positions at Shackelford Park were the envy of the neighborhood.

Upon arriving in the stable yard, Kate slid from her perch, dropping a full six inches to the cobbles. As she turned to untie the ropes, she was surprised to see Mrs. Lundy, wearing neither a cloak nor a shawl, rushing toward them from the service entrance of the manor. A boy of ten followed in her wake. The patched coat and dirty face identified him as a village child—Kate knew him as the boy hired for outside work at her mother’s cottage.

“There you are,” Mrs. Lundy said, looking at Kate. “Colby has just this minute arrived. Your mother has urgent need of you. You must away immediately.”

Kate, stunned and silent, blinked at Colby.

The towheaded boy blinked back. “There were an accident, miss.”

“Quickly, my girl, quickly.” Mrs. Lundy waved her hands as if to shoo her off.

Kate nodded, pivoted, and then glanced over her shoulder. “Might I cut through the deer park, Mrs. Lundy? It will save me a full ten minutes.”

“Of course, of course. Mr. Beeswanger will not mind. You must see to your mother.”

Kate nodded again and without another word lifted her skirts and raced back down the drive.

chapter 2



In which a porker, an ewer, and a dirt floor suffer the ravages of a helpful neighbor

Kate was across the road and into the Shackleford deer park within minutes. But there she paused, waiting for Colby Jordan.

“Colby! Please hurry, or I will have to leave you behind.” The boy wasn’t dawdling but neither was he rushing.

Though spurred by her words, Colby shouted for her to go ahead. “Don’t worry about me, miss!”

“All right. I’ll run ahead . . .” Kate’s frown deepened. “What happened, Colby?”

“A fire, miss,” the boy said, panting with the effort of his newfound haste. He must have seen Kate’s start, for he quickly added, “Out, it’s out. Not too much damage, but Dame Darby were burnt.”

With those ominous words, Kate whirled around and raced down the path that led deep into the woods. She had no

cause to worry about mantraps, as all knew of Mr. Beeswanger's abhorrence of the contraptions, but there were plenty of other obstacles to avoid. Fallen branches, mud holes, icy puddles, and even a few snowy patches forced Kate to dodge and watch her footing.

Within ten or so minutes skirting the south side of the park, the blue skies were once again visible through the trees as they thinned out. Soon the hedge-groves that lined the Vyse-on-Hill fields were visible and the path widened to the south lane. Kate grabbed the marker post for a moment to catch her breath, ignoring the stitch in her side as best she could. Colby was far enough behind that she could no longer see him.

With a great gulp of air, Kate set off again. The way was clearer from here on, as the lane ran up the hill between the hedges. At the crest, she could see her mother's cottage nestled below among the yews, looking unscathed and quite normal. It was a great relief.

The ivy-covered stone wall that edged the yard was too high to vault, but the white gate was near enough and led directly to the kitchen from the garden. Stooping to avoid knocking her head on the low entrance, Kate rushed in. "Mam," she called before coming to a halt just inside the door.

It wasn't a large room, but it was comfortable and held the necessities. With a low-beamed ceiling, the old wooden table took up much of one end and the huge fireplace domi-

nated the other. Wooden chairs and a bench sat on the near side of the fire and a door to the sleeping chamber on the other.

A short, plump woman standing next to a cast-iron pot in the fire smiled. Her graying hair spilled out from under her cap in a haphazard cascade, and she squealed with delight. “Katey!”

Panting and frowning, Kate held her hands pressed into her sides. “Mam. Colby. Said. You. Were. Hurt. An. Emergency.”

“So glad he found ya, Katey-bird. I be in great need of your help.”

Glancing around, Kate noted a pile of mending on the table, new blackened soot on the wall behind the chair, a puddle on the stone below it, and a collection of broken pottery piled next to the door. All seemed to be under control. And then her mother reached over to stir the boiling pot with a wooden spoon, exposing a coiled bandage that covered her arm from her wrist to her elbow.

Kate threw her mitts on the table and rushed over. “Mam, what have you done?”

“This? Oh, this is nothin’.” She waved her daughter away. “Bit of a burn, nothin’ to be concerned about.”

Taking the spoon, Kate shuffled her mother away from the fire. Then, holding back the flaps of her cloak with one hand, she stirred the pot with the other. Her mother shifted to the nearest chair, groaning as she did so.

“Why didn’t you ask Colby to send his mother over?” Kate asked. “I’m sure Mrs. Jordan wouldn’t have minded helping you.”

Mam clucked and then sighed. “She was here.” She shook her head and gave Kate a significant look. “Not in Tobarton anymore.”

Kate turned her frown back to the pot. She knew the direction of the conversation; it was a well-worn path. Her mother was not happy in Vyse-on-Hill.

“Agnes came over as soon as she saw the smoke—the porker was fatter than I thought an’ it spilled out somethin’ fierce. Splashed across the wall an’ caught. It were a mess, but I was handlin’ it just fine when she storms in here. Knocks over me clay ewer that were sittin’ on the table, an’ throws water against the wall. Bossy woman, made me sit and wrapped up me arm so tight I can hardly move me wrist. How’m I to sew without me wrist?

“Then she tells me to not worry about the soup, that she’ll bring over supper. But the woman cuts her carrots sideways. How’s a person to eat a carrot cut up all wrong? An’ she doesn’t use enough potatoes. She brought over a rabbit stew last week that was all turnip and onion. I ask you, what is that?”

“Kindness?”

“Kindness! No siree. Agnes is puttin’ on airs. Like I’m a charity case now that me sons want no part o’ me.”

Kate banged the spoon on the side of the pot, then set

the utensil on the shelf above the mantel and placed a lid over the bubbling concoction. She turned and squatted in front of her mother, who glanced at the floor rather than meet Kate's gaze.

Taking her mother's undamaged hand in her own, Kate waited until she looked up. "The boys care a great deal about you, as you know very well. Are they not paying for this fine establishment? Do they not drop by to see you two or three times a week? You know they would have had you in the village if there had been a cottage to rent there. It is not their fault that this was the only place available on Lady Day. Perhaps next March there will be something closer—but Tobarton is only a twenty-minute walk."

"Not goin' ta move around like a vagabond. I shoulda been able ta stay in *my* cottage where *I* raised up my babies. That were *my* place—not Peggy's. Moved in there when your pap and I married—kept it after he passed away. Always made rent. There was no need for me ta go."

"We have been through this before, Mam. It was the only cottage big enough for Henry and his family, what with three little ones and another on the way. It made the most sense."

"I coulda slept by the fire."

"No, you could not have, Mam. You know that." Kate did not have to say anything about Peggy, her oldest brother's wife. They did not get along at all. It was Peggy more than

the overcrowding that had the Darby boys looking for a place for their mother. The bickering had been getting to everyone. Her two other brothers, Merle and Ross, often took the children to their place next door to get away from the constant battle of wills.

The Vyse-on-Hill cottage had seemed like an excellent solution—quite roomy for one. But her mother was lonely no matter how often the boys and Kate visited. She said it wasn't the same.

“You know this is only temporary. We'll be out of here soon enough. Into Tishdale.”

“Not soon enough for me,” her mother grumbled, looking both angry and hurt at the same time. “Ten years don't be very temporary. You'll work at the big house while I twiddle me thumbs waiting to open our dressmaking shop. An' I know one day you'll decide to stay on at Shackleford, leaving me high and dry. I'll 'ave waited for nothin'. Ten years is a long wait for nothin'.”

“It might be sooner, Mam,” Kate said, ignoring her mother's pessimism. Kate had no intention of working for others all her life; she looked forward to her own place in town with great eagerness. Something her mother had yet to understand. “It all depends on how much I can save . . .” Kate glanced out the window to see the shadow of the leafless apple tree stretching across the yard. Sundown came early at this time of year. “And I have to keep my job in order to save. I have to be getting back. The misses

will be needing me to get ready for dinner. What can I help you with before I go? Why did you send Colby after me?”

“That.” Mam pointed at the table.

“Your mending?”

“Told Mrs. Lundy that I would have the linens ready by Monday. Not going to make it now. I needs you ta help.”

Kate stood for a moment, fighting the sharp retort that wanted to launch from her tongue. This was not the first time that her mother had claimed an emergency that had sent her on a panicked rush to the cottage for nothing.

“You know I cannot sit here and do your mending, Mam. I have to be at the Park, should the girls need me.”

“But it won’t get done for Christmas day, Katey-bird, if you don’t help me. What with so much company comin’—Mrs. Lundy needs her linens.”

“That’s true, Mam. But I have to get back. I’ll ask Mrs. Jordan if she might help, and tell Mrs. Lundy that they will be a little late. Will that work?” They would have to be laundered as well—the whole room reeked of smoke. The linen would have sopped up the odor.

“It will have ta, won’t it? If that’s the best ya can do.” She did not look mollified.

With a quick peck on her mother’s cheek, Kate grabbed up her mitts and opened the door. “I’ll see you next week? At the big house?”

“Thought that they was holdin’ the open house in the

barn this year. Too many workers ta feed in the servants' hall now."

"Yes, indeed. You're right. Mr. Snowdon has the tables ready to set up, and Cook has picked out the geese and started the mincemeat tarts. It'll be grand."

"Will your brothers be there?"

Kate huffed—ever so quietly; her mother was trying to demonstrate how little she saw of her children, and therefore knew nothing of their plans. It was far from the truth.

"Of course. You know Merle would not miss roast goose!" Waving over her shoulder, Kate crossed the threshold and closed the door. She thought she heard a murmur as she did so . . . It sounded as if her mother had said *I might see you sooner*, but that didn't make sense. If her mother thought she could entice Kate back to Vyse before the new year, she had another think coming.

Rather than turn back toward the deer park, Kate headed into the hamlet and crossed the road to the Jordan cottage, Mam's closest neighbor. The good woman must have been watching for her, as Kate had barely stepped onto the walk when Mrs. Jordan came to the door—wiping her hands on a cloth. She was a thin, tired-looking woman with a sour expression when her face was at rest. However, whenever her eyes came in contact with any other human soul, Mrs. Jordan stood straighter and smiled; it changed her entire countenance.

"Beggin' yer pardon, Miss Darby." Mrs. Jordan addressed

Kate as a lady's maid of the great house, not as a neighbor's daughter. "Had I known she sent Colby for ya, I woulda put a stop to it. I know yer busy what with the fine company comin' for the season an' all."

"Not to worry, Mrs. Jordan. But I must get back. Mam is concerned about the linens."

"They'll be done by Monday, miss. Already told 'er I would help."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jordan. You are very kind. I will let Mrs. Lundy know." Kate returned to the road and waved her good-byes to both Mrs. Jordan and her mother, who was peeking out of the cottage window as Kate passed.



MATT FROWNED, staring after Kate as she rushed away. He felt ineffectual, wishing he could do something. Glancing up at the housekeeper, who was staring after Kate as well, he was bewildered by the woman's expression; it was resigned rather than anxious.

"Would the cart be faster?" he asked, stepping toward the vehicle.

Mrs. Lundy turned toward him with a quizzical expression. "Faster?"

"Than running across the park."

"Oh. Oh no. Very kind of you to offer. No need. The roads being what they are at this time of year, walking—or rather running—is much quicker. Though I imagine it is a

tempest in a teapot. Usually is . . . but one must act accordingly. Not assume. You know how it is. As soon as you assume . . ." She paused and then gave her head a slight shake. She must have seen the confusion on Matt's face at her rather disjointed conversation. "Let's get you inside and warmed up, Mr. Harlow. No need to stand in the cold." And in so saying, Mrs. Lundy turned, taking herself out of the cold.

Matt looked up the drive again. Kate was now a mere speck; she would soon be lost behind the curve of the road. He stared for some minutes more and then straightened his shoulders and pivoted. Johnny had unfastened the ropes holding the canvas and was passing various foodstuffs to the Shackleford Park footmen.

Cook from Musson House had sent all of Sir Andrew's favorites, not wanting the old gentleman to do without the special treats as *she* made them. Mincemeat, plum pudding, shortbread, and marzipan were all staples of the season, but Cook believed hers to be the best. After all, Sir Andrew had been saying so for years. Add to that a haunch of pork, a basket of sole, and an array of jams and preserves, and the Steeple contribution to the celebration of Yuletide was rather substantial.

Matt reached over the rail and retrieved his bags, nodding to Johnny as he did so. Then, rather than follow the food through the kitchen court, he made his way to the service entrance in Mrs. Lundy's footsteps. Once inside the long narrow corridor, he headed to the far end, where he knew

the servants' hall to be. While he could easily find his way up to the guest wing without guidance, he knew better than to assume that Mr. Ernest and Mr. Ben would be in the same rooms as they had been in the summer.

The servants' hall was well occupied. Two maids sat on a bench at the long table playing cards; one looked up at him with a huge smile and elbowed her seatmate as she did so. Another woman sat by the window mending, and a young, somewhat disheveled boy with dirty nails played jacks by the fire. Next to him, a man with his back turned to the door stared at an unlit candle on the mantel. Matt had arrived during that brief hour when duties were at a minimum—just before the staff entered the hectic confusion of dinner and then labored into the night.

“Excuse me, does anyone know the room assignments?” Matt asked the room at large.

All looked toward the fireplace where the man with his back to the door stiffened. With an audible harrumph, he turned. In his middle years with a sharp chin and curled lip, the man arched his left brow and tendered Matt a sardonic appraisal before speaking. “Ah, you have returned, Mr. Heathrow. Welcome,” he said in a tone that held no warmth.

Matt nodded, not bothering with a correction of his name. “Thank you, Walker.” The Beeswanger butler did not intimidate Matt. He knew from what kind of cloth the man was cut. The only time Walker smiled or even chuckled was

in the presence of the Beeswangers or their guests; to the staff he was a terror. “Same rooms as before?”

“Indeed.” Walker turned back to the fascinating unlit candle.

With a shrug toward the gawking maids, Matt reentered the corridor, bypassing the narrow spiral stairs that led to the front of the guest wing. He chose, instead, to make his way to the far end of the house and up the back stairs nearest the room he would be using during the Steeples’ stay.

Glancing into the hallway first, to verify that none of the family was in the vicinity, Matt sauntered down the carpeted corridor, admiring the paneled walls that had sent Mr. Ben into raptures when they had visited in the summer. Mr. Ben, as an architect’s apprentice, saw much value in such embellishments. There was no doubt that the house was both well designed and well appointed. Matt was quite certain that Sir Andrew and Lady Margaret would be impressed. It *would* be worth the effort of bestirring their weary selves away from the warmth and comfort of their own hearth—a sentiment Matt had overheard when Sir Andrew had complained of the need to travel.

Between the doors, partway down the main hall, Matt stopped. He had counted three doors and therefore . . . He reached into the paneling and pulled at a hidden handle. A section of the wall swung forward, revealing a small but cozy room sandwiched between the two guest rooms that had been assigned to Mr. Ernest and Mr. Ben.

Stepping through, Matt quickly closed the door lest a member of the family catch sight of him. As a gentleman's gentleman, Matt was not under the same rules of invisibility as the lower staff, but being as unobtrusive as possible was always good practice.

The room had been nicely prepared. The narrow bed sported not one but two rough blankets, and a fresh rushlight had been placed on the diminutive table under the window. A wardrobe of adequate portions sat opposite a small fireplace—which waited at the ready. Indeed, it was to Matt's relief that Mrs. Lundy, not Walker, was in charge of the manor's guests and their servants.

Rubbing his hands together for warmth, Matt considered lighting the fire but decided to wait until later. There was enough coal to see him through the night if he did not start it too early. So instead, he set about unpacking. It was a rather odd happenstance to be sent ahead of the family. But Mr. Ben would arrive on the morrow, and Matt could go about his usual duties. Until then, he was at loose ends. Though organizing his brushes and polishes took a fair amount of time.

As the sun started to go down, Matt dug into his supplies and pulled out a candle, setting aside the rushlight in case he needed it in the middle of the night. Having just stacked his books on the table and pulled down his waistcoat in an all-done manner, there was a quiet knock on the hallway panel.

“Mr. Harlow? Are you there?”

Recognizing the voice, Matt rushed to the door, opening it to the smiling countenance of Miss Darby. “I am indeed. Is your mother well?” he asked, keeping his relief hidden. He doubted Kate would be smiling in such a lively manner had there been a problem at home, but it seemed politic to ask.

“Yes, indeed. A small fire that was already out by the time I got there. Tempest in a teapot,” she said, likely unaware that she was repeating Mrs. Lundy’s words.

Unfortunately, she instantly wiped the smile from her face, setting it to a serious expression. Matt much preferred to see her elven features full of merriment.

“Miss Imogene would like to speak with you.”

“With me? Really? Do you know what it is about?” Imogene Chively, a close friend of the Beeswanger family, was staying at Shackleford Park.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. Miss Imogene has been pacing about her room for a quarter hour with two letters in her hand. Going back and forth between the two. I hope nothing dire has occurred . . . but no, I know not. She simply stopped in the center of the floor, nodded, and then sent me to fetch you.”

Matt frowned. A young lady rarely, if ever, requested to speak with her future husband’s valet . . . though in truth, Matt was more Mr. Ernest’s man now. Still, two different worlds—never the twain should meet. “I’ll come right away,”

he said, blowing out his candle and giving his room a quick glance to make sure everything was in place.

He followed Kate down the corridor, trying to ignore the enticing sway of her hips and focus on why Miss Imogene might need to speak with him . . . to no avail.

chapter 3



*In which there is an embarrassing
set-to regarding mistletoe*

Matt entered a good-sized room with a generous window overlooking . . . well, it was too dark to see, but he believed it to be the side garden. A glowing fire provided ample warmth, and Miss Imogene Chively sat in a chair next to it, using the lighted candles on the mantel to read a letter in her hand. She was a pretty young lady, with blond hair and blue eyes and a reserved manner about her. A black dog lay curled up on the floor beside her.

Standing by the door, Matt glanced at Kate while they waited to be noticed. She bobbed her brows in his direction; he smiled, and they both started when Miss Chively cleared her throat to get their attention.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Harlow. I do so appreciate it.” She gestured him closer and picked up another letter that

had been sitting on her lap. She waved them both in the air. "I have news," she said, and then dropped her volume to a near whisper. "And a request."

"Yes, indeed." Matt waited and waited. "Yes, Miss Chively," he prodded.

Imogene Chively produced such a heavy sigh that Matt was fairly certain that he knew the news before she announced it.

"There has been a delay, I'm afraid. Mr. Ben will not be arriving until Monday now. You will be footloose and fancy-free for two days, Mr. Harlow."

Ah, he had been right. "That is a shame, miss."

"You don't want to be at loose ends for two days?"

Matt chuckled. "A shame that Mr. Ben has been delayed, miss."

Miss Chively sighed again, her eyes glazing over with a faraway look.

"And the request?"

The young lady frowned as if confused momentarily and then gave her head a little shake. "Oh yes. It is a great favor I must ask of you, Mr. Harlow, as it will require you to go out of your way."

"Indeed?" Matt could say no more as he really did not know where this was heading.

"Yes. Did you pack for Mr. Ben when he left for Canterbury?"

"Of course, miss." Now Matt was thoroughly bewildered,

but he did not say so. He wanted to look toward Kate, see if she could elucidate by way of an expression. Or she might mouth an explanation. Or perhaps he merely wanted to see that he was not the only confused person in the room. He stared at the edge of Miss Chively's chair instead.

"Excellent. Did he take any books with him?"

"Yes, architectural books, of course." Mr. Ben was not a great novel reader, as Mr. Ernest was, but he did appreciate the dusty tomes from the Musson House library about old buildings and foundations and the like. Not to Matt's taste but—

"Oh, wonderful. Then you *can* advise me after all. Excellent, most excellent." With a grin, Miss Chively bounced out of her chair, fairly dancing. "I was afraid that I would get it wrong."

This time Matt did glance toward Kate. She lifted her shoulders in a very unhelpful shrug.

"Being my first gift, I so want to get it right," Miss Chively continued, as if she were making sense. Finally, she looked up to meet Matt's eyes. "Oh, I should probably explain."

"That would be appreciated, miss."

"Yes, of course. Well, I have decided on the perfect gift for Mr. Ben. A book about architecture—well, some aspect of it, at least. I wrote to Mr. Gupta—he is the bookseller in Tishdale—and he has just informed me that he has over ten books on the subject. Which is a marvel and a dilemma at the same time. I do not want to present my beloved with a gift on Christmas day, only to discover he already has it.

Would it be too much of an imposition to ask you to look at those books? To ride into Tishdale tomorrow, see if you recognize any? Perhaps hone the number to three or four. I will, of course, make the final choice, but . . . well, is it too much to ask?"

Matt smiled, relieved that the request was of such a benign nature. No snipping a lock of hair or stealing a waistcoat to find a matching neckcloth. "Not at all. I can walk there in the morning."

"Or hitch a ride. I believe Mrs. Beeswanger said something about the mistletoe coming in on the stagecoach."

"Yes, one way or another I will visit the bookstore. But I should probably point out that I do not know all the books that Mr. Ben has read on architecture, and that he might have acquired one or two while in Canterbury."

Miss Chively nodded. "There is that . . . Well, we can only try our best." She pursed her lips and snorted. "Try *my* best," she clarified, sitting back down. She lifted one of the letters closer, rereading it yet again with a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. It had a small sketch on the bottom.

Matt felt a soft touch on his elbow and realized that the interview was over. He turned, exited, and discovered that Kate had followed him.

"I'm afraid you missed tea, and supper is not until eight thirty, after the family has their dinner. Are you hungry?" she asked, one hand on the partially closed door. She was standing across the threshold.

“Not at all. Johnny and I stopped at an inn along the way.” He *was* a bit peckish, but not enough to put anyone out. Always best to stay on a cook’s good side; requesting an unscheduled bite would not be appreciated.

“Excellent.” Kate leaned as if she were about to go inside the room and then shifted back. “Do you know your way to the servants’ hall from here?” she asked.

Matt smiled. Was Kate prolonging their conversation intentionally? He set a serious expression on his face. Frowning, he nodded. “I believe I shall retrace my steps.” He made a show of looking around and then pointed in the wrong direction.

Kate grinned, no doubt remembering that this wasn’t his first time at Shackelford Park, even if he had not had cause to be in the family wing before. “Right at the bottom of the corridor,” she said, pointing left.

Matt nodded, maintaining his frown.

“Kate?” Miss Chively’s call interrupted their nonsense, and they turned immediately, Kate into the warmth of Miss Chively’s room, and Matt to wend his way back from whence he came.



“THAT WAS VERY kind of him,” Miss Imogene said without looking up from her letter. “He need not have agreed. It’s not part of his duties.”

“I believe Mr. Harlow likes to be helpful . . . at least that

has been my impression thus far.” Kate sauntered across to the wardrobe, trying to exude a calm she did not feel. Matt Harlow’s presence was proving to be a most excellent diversion, offering her ample opportunity to flirt. It was an art Kate greatly enjoyed and yet could seldom practice.

“And quite personable.”

Kate glanced over her shoulder and met Miss Imogene’s sparkling eyes. “Indeed,” she said, instilling the ambiguous word with a great deal of warmth.

“One might even say handsome.”

“Yes, one might say so . . . if one paid mind to such things.” Kate’s casual reply was . . . too casual.

“One? One such as a young lady’s maid?”

Kate reached into the wardrobe, putting her hand on a soft purple dinner gown. “Not sure Marie noticed, miss. The lilac for tonight?”

“No, I’ll save that one for Monday. Not the rose dress, either . . . let’s go with the Pomona green.”

“Very good, miss.” Kate pulled the gown out of the wardrobe, careful not to catch the lace at the neck or the tucks around the sleeves. It was a lovely, though lightweight, gown that had been sent over from Gracebridge Manor. “You’ll need your new shawl, for certain, with this one.”

“Yes, I think you might be right.” Miss Imogene’s voice sounded distant, as if she was lost in thought again. “Yes, it was very kind of Mr. Harlow,” Miss Imogene repeated, but in a different tone. Almost questioning.

Kate frowned. She turned back to find the young lady fixing her with a worried stare. “Miss?”

“Be careful, Kate, please. Don’t give the Beeswangers cause to notice.”

Kate shook her head as if confused, when in fact she knew exactly to what Miss Imogene referred.

“Mrs. Beeswanger is a gem. Look how she has taken me in and treated me like a daughter—better than, in my case. A marvelous, generous person to be sure, but she will not be comfortable—well, she likes a smooth-running household and—well, a dalliance would be disruptive in so many different ways.”

“It would, miss. And I would never do anything to put my future in jeopardy. Saving up for a dress shop with me mam. You need not worry. I might flirt a bit, but I know where the future lies.”

Miss Imogene sighed, looking relieved. “Excellent,” she said in a lackluster tone.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1817

“No! I SAID so before and I say so again and there’s an end to it.”

Walker stabbed at his breakfast plate without looking up. It afforded the others at the housekeeper’s table the opportunity to exchange glances without arousing his disapproval. Kate met Matt’s questioning frown and shook her head. She

hoped it conveyed an *I'll explain later* message. His answering shrug was equally ambiguous.

Kate dropped her eyes to her plate and grimaced. It would have been lovely, and unusual, to start the day without a set-to between Mrs. Lundy and Walker. Days such as those were few and far between, but given the benevolence of the season, Kate had been hopeful. And yet here they were, arguing about authority—authority over Johnny, the Musson House footman. He had been sent to assist with the Yuletide preparations, but did he fall under Walker's direction—being that he was a footman—or Mrs. Lundy's, since she had the lion's share of the extra duties brought on by the season? Cook didn't step into the fray whatsoever, despite the fact that Johnny had delivered foodstuffs and could be seen as an addition to the kitchen.

Really, it was most uncomfortable . . . and embarrassing.

Kate swallowed and turned her eyes toward the busy wallpaper festooned with cheerful spring flowers. It was just as well that the upper and lower servants ate their meals separately—except the midday dinner, of course. It would have been difficult for the female staff to offer the butler the dignity his position demanded, if they witnessed this constant petulance every day. Rumors, of course, were rife. But Mrs. Lundy countered Walker's demands regularly and protected her girls with the tenacity of a mastiff. Though the men knew Walker's temperament rightly enough; they experienced it firsthand.

“It is a shame that you feel so strongly about the matter, Mr. Walker,” Mrs. Lundy said, not sounding in the least apologetic. “As Johnny has already agreed.”

“I am going to send Bernie this afternoon. That will be soon enough.”

“No, it will not. My girls need to sort through the mistletoe and start the kissing boughs in between their other duties. The stagecoach from the midlands is due within the hour; Johnny will be there to meet it.” Mrs. Lundy smiled as she spoke, clearly not indisposed by Walker’s mood. She lifted the pot beside her and turned to Marie. “More tea, my dear?”

Startled by the sudden attention, Marie dropped the tiny spoon that she had been about to use and the salt on it sprayed across the tablecloth. In no more than a blink, Mrs. Lundy and Cook reached across, grabbed a pinch from the table, and tossed it over their respective shoulders.

“Can’t be too careful at this time of year,” Mrs. Lundy said to the amusement of the younger staff. Cook nodded emphatically.

“Well,” Mrs. Lundy said, pouring out the last of the tea to Norbert, Mr. Beeswanger’s valet. “I’d best make haste.” She pushed away from the table. “Please excuse me, I have to speak with the mistress.” She nodded to all but Walker and left.

Silence flooded the room, filling her void. It lasted for ten minutes or so, becoming increasingly awkward until they

all rose at once to vacate. Livy, the scullery maid, stepped through the door to begin clearing and Kate pulled Matt aside in the corridor . . . after watching Walker march toward the front of the house.

“Please, pay no attention to their bickering, Mr. Harlow. Walker and Mrs. Lundy have very different approaches in caring for the family and the house. I’m sure it was thus when you were here in the summer.”

“Yes, I believe so. Though there seems to be more tension than there was before. Has something occurred?”

“No, not really. Though Mr. Walker does seem to become testier during Christmastide. It might be the added chores, or he looks at the more relaxed atmosphere of the season as an abomination.” Kate laughed, trying to hide her discomfort. She remembered Musson House being in possession of a much more congenial atmosphere below stairs.

“Ah, there you are,” Mrs. Lundy said, coming back down the corridor toward them, her keys making a distinct jingle as she walked. “So glad I caught you.” She frowned marginally as she glanced from Matt to Kate and back again. “I beg your pardon, but I must ask a favor.”

“Of course,” Matt replied before even learning what was involved.

Kate smiled. Kind and helpful. Very impressive.

“Mrs. Beeswanger has handed me a list of wines she wishes to have available over the holidays. As I understand that you are going into town with Johnny, might I imposition

you to visit the wine merchant on Mrs. Beeswanger's behalf?"

"Of course, easily done." Matt nodded. "Not an imposition at all . . . if you give me the direction."

Mrs. Lundy smiled. "Fortunately, Tishdale is not overly large; most shops and places of business are on the main road. Mr. Niven will deliver, so there is no need to wait."

"Not a problem, Mrs. Lundy. Think on it no more." He took the list and then turned to face Kate as Mrs. Lundy wheeled around and headed toward the kitchen. "Might you need a jaunt into town, too, to pick up . . . something? There is a possibility that we will lose our bearings yet again and be destined to appalling winter horrors. We will need the guidance of one who knows the area well." His impish expression indicated that he knew very well that she would not be able to do so. "We could end up wandering the woods in the cold, hiding from bears intent on doing us terrible harm."

"You need not fear . . . at least not of bears, Mr. Harlow. Though I do recommend staying out of Farmer Gibbs's field. His bull is rather tetchy."

Matt Harlow grinned in a thoroughly charming manner. "Yes. So I have heard."



"THERE BE NO shortage of pretty girls at Shackleford Park," Johnny said much too casually, as he slapped the reins against Bailey's rump. The pony ignored him, plodding along the road to Tishdale at his own comfortable pace.

“Indeed.” Sitting on the cart’s bench beside his friend, Matt shrugged. The winsome personage of Kate Darby came entirely unbidden to his mind, and he turned his head slightly to hide any betraying glint in his eyes.

“Yup, yup. Pippa has been makin’ sheep’s eyes at ya since we got there.”

“Which one is Pippa?” Matt asked, playing the game.

“The redheaded housemaid, cute little thin’ with lots o’ curls an’ a pert nose. Saucy as all get out.” He glanced over at Matt and smiled. “You could chat her up an’ see how it goes.”

“I could, indeed,” Matt said, being excessively agreeable.

“Maud might be a little long in the tooth for ya, but what about Gwen?”

“Gwen is?” Matt’s mind was still focused on Kate—her trim figure, thick dark hair, lively smile. “Hmmm? Pardon me, I was thinking of something else.”

“Or *someone* else?”

“One never knows.” Matt turned back in time to see Johnny shake his head. He was clearly trying to goad Matt into revealing a leaning, a preference . . . anything that could be fodder for teasing.

“Thought that Miss Darby mighta caught yer eye. She be quite fetchin’.”

“No more than the others,” Matt said too quickly and then tipped his head side to side, nonchalantly stretching his neck. “Nothing to make the blood stir,” he lied.

Johnny laughed and turned his eyes back to the road. It

took Matt a few minutes to realize that Johnny was still talking.

“I did so want to give ’em something. A token . . . you know.”

Matt frowned. “Them?”

“Camille’s little sisters. Thought a box o’ candy or a pretty ribbon might do it up proper.” He snapped his tongue and then heaved a deep sigh. “But I’m cleaned out.”

Matt shook his head, understanding all too well. “Good fortune abandon you again?”

Johnny was an uncomplicated soul but for two weaknesses: love and cards. Unrequited love and unlucky cards, to be exact.

Johnny was smitten with Camille LaPierre, Lady Margaret’s personal maid. A pretty French girl with fine manners and dainty ways, she was appreciated by the entire male staff of Musson House—young and old. Fighting to be noticed in the crowd of admirers, Johnny had played the clown, but Camille had not been impressed. He had treated her like a lady, helping her down from the carriage whenever she accompanied Lady Margaret, and wiping the bench before she sat for dinner. Camille was indifferent. He lent her a book of poetry—the flowery, useless, romantic sort—and offered to explain it to her. Camille denied him the pleasure.

So now Johnny had decided to play the benefactor. Gifts. But it would be unseemly to bestow a gift on a young woman who was not a sweetheart. It created an obligation; however,

a gift to a child brought with it no expectation and was, therefore, quite acceptable.

Unfortunately, Johnny's appreciation of luck, especially as it pertained to cards, was nearly as strong as his attraction to Camille. He invariably lost in that arena as well.

"You know, Johnny, you are going to have to choose," Matt said. "Miss LaPierre will never look at a penniless footman."

"Won't look at a footman, penniless or otherwise. The only way I got her talkin' to me was to say I was gonna be an under-butler soon."

"Well, that was a little foolhardy. You've only been at Musson House three months."

"*Soon* is a relative kinda word. Could be next year."

"Or the one after that?"

"Exactly. See. One day it'll 'appen. And that'll be soon enough." He smiled brightly, clearly pleased with his own cleverness.

"I'm not sure Miss LaPierre will see it the same way."

"Sure she will. *Soon* as she sees what a fine fellow I can be—givin' little gifties to her sisters an' all."

"Well, I suppose a flawed plan is better than no plan at all."

"Flawed?" Johnny looked genuinely puzzled.

"Didn't you say that you were tapped out?"

"Oh. Yes. That's right." He frowned fiercely at Bailey's swishing tail.

Passing Farmer Gibbs's field, Matt craned his neck to stare beyond the wall, but the bull was nowhere to be seen. He smiled, recalling the sight of Kate Darby taking on a bull four, if not five, times her size. He almost chuckled but glanced toward Johnny and swallowed his mirth.

They approached Tishdale at the leisurely pace required by a deplorable road pocked by frozen puddles and the occasional hollow of snow. The Gambling Goat sat on the edge of town, just off the main thoroughfare. As they pulled into the yard of the post inn, Matt could see a number of people milling about in clutches of two or three. When he inquired within, he was not surprised to learn that the coach was late.

"I'll walk to the booksellers," Matt told Johnny, joining his friend outside again. Matt patted his coat to ensure that he had the wine list. "Mr. Gupta can direct me to the wine merchant. If I don't see you on the street, then I'll meet you back here."

Johnny nodded halfheartedly. He was staring at a dark-haired young lady across the yard waiting with an older version—likely her mother.

"Thought you were taken, Johnny boy. Devoted to Camille."

"Hmm, what?" His friend turned back, grinning sheepishly. "Right. Books, wine, meet here."

Mr. Gupta's bookstore was in the second block of the rowed redbrick shops with black doors and large mullioned windows with white shutters. Flower boxes, devoid of flowers,

sported sprigs of holly leaves with cheerful red berries. It was a picturesque market town, with plenty of hustle and bustle despite the cold weather.

The bell jangled with a discordant clang when Matt entered, and a large mustached gentleman from India stepped through the back curtain to greet him. The store was lined with bookshelves, and the wares looked dusty and disorganized. However, looks can be deceiving, for no sooner had Matt explained his purpose than Mr. Gupta led him to a particular shelf where Matt could browse. There was a larger selection of architectural books than Matt expected, and it took some time to whittle the choices down to three. In fact, he decided on four that might suit Miss Imogene's purpose—but it was all a guess.

The wine merchant was a mere two shops farther down the main road, where the overly affable Mr. Niven looked at Mrs. Beeswanger's order and declared her an aficionado of wines. Matt found this amusing since the listed selections in the man's store were not diverse. There was little doubt that the Beeswangers were aware of what was available and ordered accordingly.

By the time Matt returned to the Gambling Goat, Johnny was tying up the tailboard of the cart, and a large crate marked with the Beeswanger name sat in the back. The coach had finally arrived.

"Can't believe my luck," Johnny said as Matt approached. He waggled his shoulders, his eyes alive with excitement.

Matt glanced around for the dark-haired young lady but only met the glare of an old codger standing by the inn's door. "Oh?" he said in a noncommittal way.

"Get in, get in. I'll tell ya on the way. Walker is gonna be right put out that we've been this long. I've got ta polish the dining room candlesticks when I get back."

It would seem that the struggle about authority over Johnny had been resolved, and Walker had taken the upper hand.

"I can buy something for the little ones after all," Johnny said as soon as Matt had pulled himself up on the bench beside his friend.

"How did that come about?" Matt asked. He held on to the side of the cart as it started to move.

"Sold me ring. You know, the one from the harvest fair. Not worth a penny. But this here fella paid me a full shilling for it."

"What? The tin one with the stag's head stamped on it?"

"Yup, that's the one. I were leanin' on the rain barrel, gettin' more than a little tired o' waitin', when this here red-headed fella comes over an' stands right next ta me. Seemed right put out. He bleats about waitin' for the coach an' how cold it is. Went on an' on somethin' awful. I were just about to move off when he looks over at me and says, 'It's Yuletide, ya know,' as if I were arguin' with him. A bit dicked in the nob." Johnny tapped at his temple with his index finger.

"What has this to do with your ring?"

“I’m gettin’ there; don’t rush me.” He flicked the reins, only to be ignored by Bailey yet again. ““I should get some-thin’ for my hard work,’ this here fool says, as if all folks got gifts for Christmas.”

“Something for himself?”

“Yup. Like I said: dicked in the nob. Anyways, I asked if he fancied me ring, ’cause I were lookin’ for some funds. Well, wouldn’t ya know, the feller offers ta buy it . . . This road?” Johnny pointed.

“Yes, that’s the one. Don’t want to miss it again.”

Johnny grinned, directing the pony toward Shackleford Park. “So I starts to dicker, askin’ high—*a shilling*, says I. This here fella frowns at me an’ then pulls one outta his coat pocket—no bargainin’, nothin’.” With a sharp jerk of his head, Johnny straightened his shoulders. “Yup, I’ll be able ta get the little ones somethin’ worthwhile now.”

Matt smiled, caught up in Johnny’s euphoria. For once, Lady Luck had offered his friend a boon. Though it did seem a waste, for Matt was fairly certain that a box of candy for Camille’s sisters would do nothing to sweeten her resolve toward Johnny’s awkward attempts to woo.