

*England, 1820.*

Comfortably seated at a dining room table that seemed to stretch toward infinity, Fiona Heartly considered the people who'd been invited to visit Thorncliff Manor during the holidays. Due to the group's intimate size, only a fraction of the table had been set for the evening, while most of the chairs remained eerily empty. Pleasantly, however, five large oranges pricked with cloves and strategically placed in the center of the table infused the air with a seasonal fragrance of citrus and spice. The lady of the manor, the Dowager Countess of Duncaster, looked as formidable as ever. Placed at the head of the table, she wore an elaborate wig that had long since gone out of fashion. But she was known to have several eccentric bones in her body, so nobody ever minded. Rather, Fiona suspected she was considered all the more interesting on account of her peculiarities.

To Lady Duncaster's right sat the Duke of Lamont, a middle-aged gentleman whose demeanor was always perfectly somber. Fiona had yet to see him smile, but then again, she had also to spend more than one minute in conversation with him. A long-time friend of Lady Duncaster's, the pair had apparently been spending the holidays together for almost six years now. Ever since the duke inherited his title with the sudden passing of both his father and brother.

Leaning forward, Fiona glanced toward the seat at Lady Duncaster's left. Lamont's cousin Viscount Belgrave sat there, amicable as usual. He'd always struck her as being exceptionally kind and good natured, though not the sort of man who would ever stir an amorous interest in her. She needed someone more challenging – a scoundrel with a good heart. Not that she had any intention of marrying any time soon. As the youngest of her siblings, she knew she

still had a year or two ahead of her before seeking a husband became a necessity. In the meantime, she meant to enjoy what remained of her independence – the final moments of her youth.

That particular thought had her looking directly across the table at one of her favorite people, the Earl of Chadwick. He'd always humored her hoydenish streak, and he never failed to enjoy a bit of mischief as much as she did. He'd been a part of her family for as long as she could remember – ever since her brother Christopher, Viscount Spencer, or Kip as his family called him, had brought the earl home with him for a visit one year during the school holidays. They were all exceedingly fond of Chadwick. His positive outlook on life was so infectious it was impossible to be grumpy while keeping his company.

Meeting Fiona's gaze, he smiled warmly. A couple of seconds elapsed, and then he suddenly snatched up his napkin and started dressing his fork as if it were a lady putting on an extravagant ball gown. Fiona's lips quirked, more so when the fork began dancing along the edge of the table.

“Oh,” Lady Duncaster said, “How utterly delightful!”

Had they been anywhere else, his behavior would have been considered incredibly improper. But here nobody minded. Rather, they all appeared quite entranced by Chadwick's little performance, which now included a softly hummed tune as his knife swept in to partner with the fork in a waltz.

“I suppose it's no wonder you are so good at charades and other parlor games,” Rachel observed. “Playing pretend comes so naturally to you, I almost envy your ability.” Exceptionally fond of mathematics and science, she rarely found anything amusing since all jokes were usually

ruined for her on account of their nonsensical facts. But with Chadwick, she often made an exception. It seemed he had a style that appealed to pretty much everyone.

“Speaking of which,” Lady Duncaster said, taking a sip of her wine, “I would like to discuss our holiday schedule. Montsmouth has yet to arrive of course, but I see no reason why we cannot agree on a few diversions without his presence.”

Fiona instantly frowned. She vaguely recalled seeing the Earl of Montsmouth when she’d last visited Thorncliff during the summer, but he’d always lingered in the background, so she hadn’t paid him much mind. It never would have occurred to her that he might be a good enough friend of Lady Duncaster’s for her to include him in this private holiday gathering. No doubt he’d been delayed on account of the weather.

When she’d arrived that afternoon with her parents and her sisters Emily, Laura, and Rachel, snow had already begun to fall. Her other siblings, Christopher, Chloe, and Richard, had chosen to spend Christmas at their individual estates with their spouses, no doubt so they could have the privacy newly wedded bliss required. Not that Fiona minded since her brothers’ absences, in particular, would allow her to move about Thorncliff more freely and to continue her search for the treasure she still believed to be hidden there.

It hadn’t been found yet, but certain clues had, like a diamond earring linked to her own family, a code book outlining a conspiracy within the aristocracy, and a letter tying her great-aunt to the late Earl of Duncaster’s father and to some sort of strange resistance movement that had been active during the time of the French Revolution.

“Is he the gentleman who lost his snuff box in the conservatory this summer?” Laura asked, still speaking of Montsmouth.

“Yes,” Fiona’s father said.

“I find he’s always standing on the outside of things,” Lady Duncaster added, “and with both parents dead and no siblings to speak of, I thought he might like some company for Christmas.”

“How good of you to take such notice,” Fiona’s mother said, smiling.

Lady Duncaster chuckled. “Oh, I am always taking notice.” She glanced at each of them in turn, her lips curling into a secretive smile that made Fiona suspect they weren’t here by chance but that Lady Duncaster had taken particular care in selecting each of her guests. The lady regarded them each with her piercing blue eyes and then quietly asked, “How about skating for a diversion?”

The question came so suddenly, Laura looked as though she might choke on her wine. “Right now?” A touch of alarm tightened her words.

“Don’t be absurd,” Lady Duncaster admonished. Stabbing at her food, she selected a piece of meat and popped it into her mouth.

Fiona decided to return her attention to her own plate. She didn’t quite manage it, though, before catching a glimpse of Chadwick, who was now making odd expressions with his eyes. Biting her lip, she forced back a laugh and shook her head. His pout only made him look all the more ridiculous. Honestly, he could be such a child sometimes.

“I am simply trying to determine which activities you might enjoy while you’re here,” Lady Duncaster continued. “Since the lake is solidly frozen, it might be fun for all of you to go for a spin on it.”

“I would love to,” Laura said. She’d always been good at skating. Much better than Fiona, at any rate.

Lamont frowned. “I see no need to risk a broken limb.”

“It sounds as though you might have had a bad experience once,” Laura said with compassion. He paused for a moment before saying, “I simply wish to be careful.”

Laura stared at him briefly and then quietly nodded. “I understand.”

This seemed to surprise him. “You do?”

“Of course. I fell from a tree once and broke my ankle. It took forever before I chose to go climbing again.”

“At least a year,” Fiona said. She recalled the incident well enough, since she’d been up in the tree as well when the blasted branch had snapped beneath her sister’s weight.

“That was quick,” Lamont remarked.

Laura shrugged. “I realized watching my brothers and sisters enjoy the activity was worse than any fear I had of falling again.”

“Still,” Lamont murmured, “I think I’d prefer to watch the skating rather than participate in it myself.”

“Have you ever actually tried it?” Laura asked.

A look of discomfort crossed the duke's face. He sipped his wine and then turned toward Lady Duncaster. "How about a sleigh ride?" he asked, avoiding Laura's question. "Might that be possible?"

"As long as we get enough snow," Lady Duncaster said. She smiled openly at everyone. "We should also try to find a yule log soon and make some more decorations. There are pine trees and pinecones out in the woods, and the ladies will probably enjoy shopping for ribbons in the village."

"If we gather the pine before going to town, we'll be able to estimate the exact length of ribbon we need for making garlands," Rachel said. She glanced about the room, her gaze assessing.

"What a practical suggestion," Belgrave murmured.

"I see no reason not to strive for efficiency when one is able to do so," Rachel said, arching a brow. The expression made her look more like a critical matron than a marriageable young lady.

Fiona almost groaned. She'd tried to advise her sister many times before on her hair styling, clothing, and social skills, but Rachel refused to let anything but practicality and fact guide her. It made Fiona wonder if her sister knew what it meant to have fun – a thought that saddened her since having fun was so vital to her own existence.

She glanced across at Chadwick once more, unable to stop herself from smiling as she watched him tell Laura a joke. Perhaps the two would develop a *tendre* for each other during the next couple of weeks and eventually marry. It was something Fiona had considered more than

once after noticing how animated her sister became when keeping Chadwick's company. It would certainly be wonderful to finally make him a definite part of the family.

"So now that your three oldest children are settled, Lady Oakland," Lady Duncaster said, "one cannot help but wonder who might be heading for the altar next."

"Not me," Rachel said with immediate swiftness. She glanced around before explaining, "I've more important matters to see to than courtship."

"All you need is to meet the right gentleman," Laura told her dreamily. Having embarked on her second romantic novel, she loved the idea of happy endings and forever afters.

"As I've pointed out before, statistics have proven it is unlikely he even exists. And if he does, he is undoubtedly so far removed from my little part of the world, meeting him would prove rather improbable."

"Good lord, Rachel," Laura huffed. "Matters of the heart cannot be reduced to numbers and equations. You'll see when love strikes you. It will happen when you least expect it and probably with a man you would never have considered."

"That is how it happened for your mother and me," Lord Oakland said. He directed a wink and a smile at his wife.

"I was supposed to marry my husband's friend through an arranged marriage," Lady Duncaster put in. "He escorted me back to England from India, though, and we fell in love during the voyage."

"And look at Spencer, Chloe, and Richard. None of them came here looking for romance," Lady Oakland pointed out.

“I will admit, Richard has surprised me,” Rachel said. After he had lived in seclusion for five years, nobody had expected him to marry, let alone find an opportunity to meet a wife. And yet, against all odds, his wife, Mary, had captured his heart.

“It only goes to show there is hope for all of you,” their father said. “Even you, Rachel, despite your obvious resistance to the issue.”

“Very well,” she agreed. “Find me a man who will enjoy conducting scientific experiments with his wife and who would be proud of her publishing mathematical theories, and I might consider falling for him.”

“Hear, hear,” Fiona said. She’d decided to support her sister in this, for if there was one thing she truly believed in, it was finding commonality in a relationship. Without it, such a relationship would surely flounder.

Leaning forward a little, Belgrave gave Rachel a curious look. “If I might ask, what sort of experiments are you working on exactly?”

Rachel froze. Her lips parted, and it occurred to Fiona this might be the first time anyone outside the family had bothered to show an interest in her sister’s work. Rachel blinked twice, set down her fork as if doing so would help her regain her composure, and finally said, “Presently, I’m following Sir Humphrey Davy’s instructions on how to make an electric arc.”

The silence that followed was palpable, until Belgrave eventually said, “As I understand it, you will need to build a battery in order to accomplish such a goal.”



“Yes. I am aware,” Rachel said, her focus on the earl more intense now than it had been before. “I’ve purchased most of the items I require, but I am still waiting for the oil of vitriol to arrive. It should have arrived by the time I return home from here.”

“I thought your focus was mainly on,” Lady Oakland waved one hand as if the air would provide the answer, “the movement of slugs, as I recall.”

Fiona groaned and as she did so, she saw Chadwick conceal a smile. He leaned forward, narrowing the space between them as much as possible. “Parents can be so ignorant sometimes when it comes to their children.”

“I wonder what they imagined might have been in all of those boxes Rachel’s been purchasing recently,” Fiona whispered back.

“Slugs, from the sounds of it.”

Doing her best to stop from laughing resulted in a loud, indelicate snort. Fiona pressed her hand over her mouth in time to catch a look of disapproval in her father’s eyes. He frowned and shook his head, silently warning her to behave. She glanced back at Chadwick, whose expression had transformed into one of pure, innocent ignorance.

“I’ll get you later,” she mouthed.

He merely shrugged.

“—something for me to do while away for the summer,” Rachel was saying. “But it’s hardly going to get me a fellowship at the Royal Society.”

“The Royal Society?” Lord Oakland stared at his daughter. “That is quite ambitious of you since I don’t believe they admit women.”

“Someone has to be the first,” Rachel told him, as if the society’s exclusion of the female sex was only a minor inconvenience.

“I completely agree with you there,” Lady Duncaster said, “but you will likely have to make an impressive contribution of your own to even be considered. Copying someone else’s experiment is hardly going to suffice.”

“I know,” Rachel said. She set her napkin beside her plate. “Recreating the arc is only the beginning. What I plan to do is invent an electrical lamp.”

Another moment of silence descended on the room while everyone tried to process this bit of information. Fiona smiled in Rachel’s direction. Her sister might own a rigid personality, but she loved how easily she’d stunned her family and friends this evening.

“Do you think anyone would want to use such a thing?” Emily asked. “It sounds as though you’re making it more complicated for people to get light into their homes, rather than simplifying the issue. Striking a flint is such an easy task, but batteries with oil of vitriol and whatever else might be required...nobody will want to bother with that, surely.”

“Perhaps not,” Rachel said. “The only way to know is to try.”

Fiona glanced around the table and wondered what the rest of the dinner party might be thinking – if they saw how imaginative Rachel truly was. Her ability to envision the need for a new invention and her intention to try and create it were nothing short of impressive. It made Fiona wish she had such a purpose in life, something besides being a proper lady and marrying

well. Recalling the Thorncliff treasure, she determined more than ever to find it over the course of the next two weeks. Doing so would be an incredible victory for her family since it would, hopefully, see her great-aunt's jewelry returned.

“You may adjourn to the library for your after-dinner drinks, if you like,” Lady Duncaster told the gentlemen when they eventually rose from the table. “The ladies and I will take our tea in the music room in case you wish to join us there later.”

Fiona followed the group out into the hallway, her thoughts on her upcoming treasure hunt. She could scarcely wait to retire for the evening so she could set her mind more fully to the task. Perhaps if she—

The touch of a hand against her arm made her flinch, and she instinctively turned to find Chadwick walking beside her. His eyes met hers with a spark of amusement, and the edge of his mouth kicked up to form his signature smile. “I don't believe I've told you how fetching you look this evening, Fiona.”

“You don't look half bad yourself,” she replied, offering him the typical sort of rejoinder that had set the tone for their relationship over the years.

He linked his arm more fully with hers, bringing them closer until their shoulders touched. “I've missed you, you know.”

His voice was warm, his breath even warmer as it brushed along the side of her neck, producing a spark in the pit of her belly – a sudden awareness that had never existed before.

Unnerved by it, she tugged her arm away from his. “Yes.” *Good lord.* Why on earth did she sound so breathless?

Confused, she crossed her arms, hugging herself as they walked and effectively preventing further physical contact. Hesitantly, she glanced up at him, only to be met by a pair of inquisitive eyes – eyes that seemed to be filled not only with Chadwick’s usual good humor but with something else as well...something she could not quite define.

“We’ve missed you too,” she told him hastily. “A pity Kip and Richard won’t be joining us. I’m sure you would have liked to see them.”

“Of course.” A touch of humor trembled upon his lips, and for some absurd reason, it made her feel more uncomfortable than she’d ever felt before in his company. It was almost as if he knew a secret he’d chosen to keep from her, one that might see her made the subject of some wild and ridiculous joke. “But,” he added in a hushed whisper as he suddenly turned quite serious, “I was actually more interested in seeing you.”

And since they’d arrived at the music room, he did not linger to elaborate on his cryptic comment, but strode off, following the rest of the gentlemen to the library. Fiona stared after him, unable to comprehend the sudden tightening of her stomach or the pattering of her heart. He was like a brother – a dear friend and partner in mischief. Except she felt as though something between them had changed in the last second, and it bothered her to no end that she couldn’t quite figure out what that something might be.