

Perseus and the Duke

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Cover design by the author

Dedication

*To Lyn D. Rose, who wanted a very young duke and a little
white dog,
in gratitude for supporting my work.*

Chapter One

Castle Auchenben Scotland,
December 1819

Perseus escaped the kitchen and ran for the road leading down from Castle Auchenben. Master Andrew called him a “worthless ball of fluff,” and Perseus was determined to prove otherwise. Master Andrew respected the monstrous beasts in the stable, but Perseus would show him that, small though he may be, he could guard the gates as well as any canine.

He strutted across the road, slipping on a bit of ice. The run had been exhilarating. The cold, he admitted, delighted him less than the freedom. He gave his body a shake, sending icy rain and mud in every direction. Perseus’s lady would not be happy about the mud soiling his white fur, but heroes, he thought, must make do.

An interesting smell led the little dog into the bushes.

The smells in the out of doors had proven to be enchanting so far. In a few steps, a rabbit darted from the undergrowth with Perseus in swift pursuit, barking his fiercest bark. When the rabbit disappeared into a thicket, Perseus skidded to a stop, forced to admit that the intruder had left him breathless. Master Drew didn't need to know that. At least Perseus had chased the varmint away.

He trotted back toward the road, sniffing the air for trespassers and adventure. He hadn't gone far when a rider came around the bend, a man cantering toward him on a great equine, larger even than Master Andrew's. Intruder indeed. Perseus erupted in a run, again employing his most terrifying burst of sound. The horse was unimpressed. They rode past him in a burst of speed.

I am neither coward nor shirker. He followed the dastard to the castle, falling farther behind with every step, yapping all the way.



Fell Hastings has certainly improved since I saw him last!

Meg Gibbs crawled up onto the window seat for a better view. The broad shouldered arrival, taller even than her brother Drew who stood well over six feet and who had come out to greet him, seemed to her a superior example of the male physique. *Mother would have the vapors if she heard that thought.* The countess had very firm ideas about a lady's behavior and ideas, but Meg knew her own observation to be true.

"That is a fine specimen!"

Meg turned to the speaker. Her cousin, Flora Ellington, had snuck up behind her. "The man or the horse?"

Flora snorted—as if either of them cared about the horse

—and crawled up to join her at the window. “This arrival is certainly more interesting than great-uncle Mungo’s yesterday.”

“Or Aunt Adelaide and her brood,” Meg said. She saw Flora’s nod out of the corner of her eye. Their relatives, near, far, and so distant the connection hung by a thread, had been arriving for the holidays all week.

“He’s no weakling of an Englishman, riding up toward the Crianlarich Hills in this weather,” Flora murmured.

“No, that he is not,” Meg answered, her eyes never veering from her brother’s friend. Fell dismounted gracefully and turned to follow the groom who came for his horse. Drew, however, urged him to the house. The rain had turned to sleet, pattering on the window panes.

“Come on, Meg,” Flora urged. She scrambled down and hurried to the door. Meg followed her at what she hoped was a more dignified pace. Popping out from the tradesmen’s parlor into the atrium would be bad enough without running like a hoyden.

Unfortunately, Flora rushed out just as the men entered, drawing a grimace from Drew. There was no help for it. Meg came out behind her.

Dudley, their butler, issued orders, luggage was brought in, and a footman assisted the men with wet coats and hats, Fell’s a fine tall beaver, Meg noticed. She also took note of the thick auburn hair beneath it and the wary expression in his blue eyes. *Auburn? Is the man a wee bit Scots?*

Drew took a deep breath and raised his eyes to the ceiling. He glanced at Fell. “Have to make introductions,” he said apologetically. Fell merely blinked and shifted uncomfortably. *Odd that*, Meg thought. *He must be shy.*

Drew took no notice. “Lady Margaret Gibbs, Miss Flora Ellington, may I present my, ah, friend. Mr. Felton Hast-

ings. Fell, these rascallions are my sister Meg and our cousin Flora.”

Flora stepped forward boldly and inclined her head. “Pleased to make your acquaintance,” she said.

Meg hung back. Fell glanced down at her, a flicker of recognition in his eyes. Before he could speak however, a tiny vision covered in mud ran through the door, under the legs of Dudley who was attempting to close it, and right up to Fell Hastings, yapping loudly.

Drew opened his mouth to complain, and Meg, embarrassed by what she recognized as her normally placid pet, took a step to retrieve the little dog. Before either of them could act, Perseus lifted his leg and watered their visitor’s boots.

Meg froze. Dudley barked an order and Fergus, the youngest footman dragged the grubby little dog into his arms and bolted toward the kitchens.

Drew glared at Meg. Meg stared helplessly at Fell Hastings, and Flora giggled.

“Never say that monster was your beloved lapdog!” Flora laughed, turning toward Meg.

Meg found her voice. “I don’t understand. Perseus never acts that way. He never even goes outside. How could he...”

“Perseus?” Fell’s expression twisted in puzzlement.

“Obviously, the little ragmop found a way to cause trouble!” Drew clapped Fell on the shoulder. “My apologies for the manner of your welcome all around,” he said with a castigating glance at both girls. “Come upstairs. My valet will see to your boots.”

They were gone before Meg could apologize or restore her image in the slightest. Drew would tease her the length

of the holidays. She bit the inside of her lip in frustration.
Horsefeathers!



“Even the weather seemed to make you unwelcome,” Drew said. The two men sat at a small table by a third story window enjoying a restorative drink after dispatching the boots with Drew’s valet. Drew glanced around. “I’m sorry about the room, too.” Fell had been assigned a modest guest room in the gentlemen’s wing of the castle.

“It is perfectly fine,” Fell replied. “Castle Auchenben provides warmth and comfort in spite of its stone and centuries of wear.”

“You know full well my mother will be horrified when she discovers that she entertained His Grace the Duke of Stanbourn in a pokey little room, when he might have had a grand suite of rooms.” Drew sipped his brandy and raised his eyebrows.

“Not *when* but *if*. You promised.”

Drew nodded. “Has it been so horrible?”

“I feared for a moment your cousin knew the truth, but then I realized she was merely rude. The women of London are predators by comparison.”

Drew grimaced. “You did have rather a time of it last spring. You need to toughen a bit. Give yourself a few years.”

“My guardians dutifully prepared me for estate management and even parliamentary duties should I choose to take them up. Neither coached me in social skills; neither warned me about society.”

“Neglect that. There’s a skill to it for certain.”

“One was too old to care, and the other didn’t bother.

Old Bosworth never leaves his own hall if he can help it. My grandfather, who raised me, might have been better. Then again maybe not."

"They left you in the care of stewards and secretaries until two years ago when you came of age," Drew said. "It was as if you had disappeared off the edge of the earth. Running into you last spring was a delightful surprise."

"More than that for me—you were a lifeline to a drowning man. The ambitious debutantes were worse than the rapacious widows. They terrified me."

"Bringing you here constitutes one of my better ideas. Shed the title and just have fun. Enjoy the gentlemen. Learn to flirt—but not too seriously, I'm related to most of the women here. Get comfortable. Learn how to go on."

Fell sighed deeply. "I plan to try. Don't the earl and countess, your parents, remember me?"

"Of course! You came here two summers in a row before you disappeared."

"Before Grandpapa died. Then I became the overly guarded duke at fifteen." Fell shook his head.

"My mother has a chancy memory; all she said was, 'Wasn't Felton related to the Duke of Stanbourn somehow?' I agreed, but I kept it vague. I'm certain she doesn't know. If you're more comfortable without the title, you're safe here."

Fell raised his glass in salute. "My thanks, Drew. I remember your folks fondly. I never knew my own."

Drew returned the gesture, and they sipped companionably for a few moments.

"Your sister has certainly changed since I was here," Fell mused.

"Meg? Yes and no. She was twelve when you last saw her, so she's more or less grown up. Still a bit of a hoyden, though."

Fell chuckled. "And Perseus? Ambitious name, that."

Drew tipped his head back. "Watch out for that little rug rat, no matter how Meg dotes on him. He hates me."

"He seems to have taken me in dislike as well. I will tread carefully now that I know your sister has a fierce protector.

Chapter Two

Perseus graciously accepted another treat from his lady who held him wrapped in a warm towel, drying his fur. She was, of course, grateful for his guardianship even if she did deplore the mud. At least she was gentle.

That footman, Fergus, had been unnecessarily rough. So had the washerwomen in the kitchen. They got soap in his eyes and rubbed much too hard, pushing him under when he tried to escape the tub. Words were said that he didn't understand, but he suspected they were quite naughty. It had been a relief when his lady swooped in, wrapped him up and took him to their rooms.

The rubbing though gentle, went on too long. Perseus wiggled loose and jumped down, parading in front of the fire. What he could see of his fur stood out on end, once again sterling white.

"Pleased with yourself are you?" his lady asked, smiling.

He was rather. He trotted around their rooms, checking to see that all was well. The space was theirs alone, and most days he didn't leave it unless the lady took him with

her. Satisfied that none of the strangers that had gathered in the castle lately had upset his world, he returned to the warmth of the fire and settled onto his cushion, placed exactly where he liked it. Near the fire, but not too near.

When the door opened, his ears perked up, and he lifted his head. It was only that maid, Agnes, to help his lady dress. Moments later he was awoken from a nap by a caress to his ears; a wave of pure pleasure flowed through him, and his eyes drifted back shut. Adventures were wearying.

“Be good, Percy. I’m off to dinner. I’ll bring you a treat later.”

Of course she would; she always did. Dinner treats were the best. She closed the door behind her. He settled into a nap.

“Meg?”

The voice woke Perseus from his slumber. He glared at the one his lady called “Flora,” who had intruded into his space. He would have gotten up and chased her out, but she stepped back with a shrug when she saw his lady had already left.

She left the door open. Interesting. Perseus went over to investigate. The door moved when he nudged it, and he stared out. He thought of the intruder who rode in on that huge beast. That one bore watching.

It can’t hurt to find him, and inspect him a bit more, can it? Perseus padded from the room.



Meet in the main drawing room on the first floor before dinner, Drew had said.

Castle Auchenben was massive, and Fell barely remembered where the stairs were, much less a drawing room.

"Well, old boy, you can't stay here forever," he said to the empty room. Someone was bound to set him in the right direction. He just had to pluck up his courage and go in search.

After a wrong, turn he found his way down to the second floor and located the formal curving stairway that led to the first floor where he expected the public rooms to be and on to the atrium below. Before he could start down, however, a familiar yapping sound came down the hall behind him.

Meg's dog stopped and reared back, growling. Fell may have had a sheltered upbringing, but he grew up in the country. He understood animals. He hunched down and put out his hand. "Hello. Perseus, is it?"

The little dog settled when he heard his name and cocked his head, inspecting both Fell and his outstretched hand. Now clean, Fell could understand why Drew called him a mop; he was a ball of fluffy white fur. "You are wise to be cautious. You can't be too careful of strangers, especially when you are guarding your mistress."

Fell almost thought for a moment the dog nodded. The creature crept forward tentatively and sniffed Fell's fingers before peering up and meeting Fell's eyes.

"I have no treat for you this time. Perhaps when next we meet," Fell said. Perseus dipped his head and allowed a scratch to his ears. Progress.

"Shall we go downstairs and meet the family. Your lady is probably searching for you, and it will be easier if I have a friend with me." The dog sat up with a regal stare, and didn't object when Fell picked him up gently. He weighed no more than Fell's leather gloves.

Once they reached the first floor, their direction was obvious. Sounds of conversation and laughter led them to

the drawing room. The footman at the door bowed, and Fell walked in, feeling as cautious as Perseus had been. He understood dogs better than people.

"Oh that creature! I'm so sorry Felton, such a welcome you have had." The Countess of Auchen strode toward him, as warm and graceful as he remembered, but clearly distressed by his companion. She peered around as if looking for someone to take the dog from him.

"There is no problem, your ladyship!" he said.

The countess waved an imperious hand at Lady Margaret.

"Margaret Ann, kindly remove this beast from the drawing room so we can introduce our guest and make him feel at home."

The lady approached with an anxious expression.

"This fellow and I were just making friends," he said, caressing Perseus's back. "We've come to an understanding." He grinned at Lady Margaret. She smiled back, and he knew. He knew. This visit would be fine. More than fine.

"I'm so sorry about his earlier behavior, Mr. Hastings," Lady Margaret said.

"Fell." She blinked so he went on. "I was Fell when I was here before. This is an informal family party is it not?" He had no idea where that courage came from, unless it was that smile.

"Only if you call me Meg—Not Meggy as Drew does. Just Meg."

The sound of a dignified countess clearing her throat brought it home to him that he and Meg were grinning each other like buffoons. "Margaret Ann, kindly put that dog where he belongs. We've asked you to keep him in your rooms," Lady Auchen said.

Meg took Perseus from him and peered up under her

lashes. "He is supposed to stay in my rooms while the house is full. I'll be back in a trice."

She left with practiced dignity, leaving him to the mercy of the countess and the sea of relatives and friends, each of whom required an introduction.



Meg left a very smug Perseus in her sitting room, shut the door firmly, and jiggled it to make certain it stayed closed. She had been sure it was firmly shut earlier, but someone must have opened it. She would remind Agnes to keep the door firmly shut. She didn't want Percy to get lost or cause trouble.

At least Fell didn't seem to mind him. She took a deep breath. *Fell.* The boy she remembered lurked in his laughing eyes. She looked forward to getting reacquainted.

She reached the drawing room to find Dudley announcing dinner, her mother laughing with Aunt Adelaide, and Flora clinging to Fell's arm. Meg trooped into the dining room behind cousins and her parents' friends. The massive table stretched to its full length. There was no assigned seating this first night, and folks jostled around for placement.

Fell, she noticed, had been hedged in by Flora with cousin Martin's wife, a woman whose chief interests were her own ailments, on his other side. Meg found herself lodged between Jamie Gibbs and Great Uncle Mungo, who had a never ending supply of barely comprehensible Scottish brogue and stories of the highlands. Jamie, just Meg's age at nineteen, was a second cousin by some removes, and not much better as a dinner companion. His conversation consisted entirely of horses and his complaint

that her father declined to buy him colors in a prestigious regiment. In Meg's opinion, the earl was protecting the regiment.

What can't be fixed, must be endured. She weathered dinner well enough, withdrew with the ladies, and joined in the gossip. London scandal sheets were dissected before the topic turned to Fell. Any newcomer was bound to gin up interest. No one seemed to know much. Only a few remembered his visits when he was a boy.

Flora leaned in confidentially. "Your mother says she remembers that he's some sort of relative to a duke. Maybe he's a cousin or a nephew. He's certainly more attractive than *our* cousins."

Meg nodded, her mind wandering over his last visit. She had been twelve. She remembered tracking behind Fell and Drew when they went exploring up the mountain. He didn't seem like a duke to her. The few dukes she met in London two years ago were old (at least thirty), overbearing, and were not particularly attractive. She begged off going last year, but Mama informed her she had to "get serious" next spring, as though turning nineteen put her on the shelf. Fell was much more interesting.

"Hastings..." Flora mused. "Maybe we can look it up and trace the family." She poked Meg to get her attention. "Want to help?"

Meg nodded without listening. The men had joined the ladies. A refreshed trolley with the everlasting tea followed them, and Mama turned on full hostess mode. She mentioned music, but before Meg's younger female cousins could leap into the breach and offer to play, Drew rescued them all by proposing cards. He didn't wait for Mama's permission, and soon had tables of four organized for whist, the mild version suitable for the younger people that relied

on tokens rather than money. The Gibbs family played for bragging rights.

Fell seemed almost alarmed by the chaos. Meg took a step in his direction, but Drew quickly stuck him at a table with two of Aunt Adelaide's boys and Aunt Isadora, her grandmother's spinster sister, a mild-mannered dear, sure to soothe nerves.

"Bad of Drew!" Flora exclaimed. "We'll have to win so we can rotate in his direction."

It took Meg three rounds. She beat out two silly girl cousins, the vicar, and her younger brother Edward and more until, after an hour of play, she found herself seated at a table with Fell, her father, and Aunt Isadora. Papa was an absent-minded player, at least when no money was involved. Aunt Isadora, however, took the old game seriously.

Fell and her aunt won two tricks. He grinned at her mischievously. "I found the best partner," he said.

Meg slapped down the king of spades and took the next one, grinning back. "Oh yes?"

Aunt Isadora raised her nose and sniffed. "We'll see."

In the end Meg had to concede. Aunt Izzy rose in triumph and went off with Papa for some the punch that had arrived during playing. Alone at the table with Fell, Meg felt tongue tied.

After an awkward silence Fell spoke up. "So why Perseus? Is he named for the demigod or the starfall?"

Meg gaped. No one had ever asked her before. Her family just assumed the little fellow was named for the Greek hero and mocked her for it. "The starfall," she replied, her throat a bit hoarse.

"Much better. The sons of Perseus fall from his constel-

lation in summer. Perhaps your bright little Perseus is one of them.” There was no mockery in his voice.

“You know your stars. Do you watch the heavens, Fell?”

“Yes. The great universe inspires awe and fills me with peace. Do you?” he asked.

She nodded. “You can’t see them in London, but up here at night the sky is vast. You should be able to find Perseus directly overhead this month. Find Cassiopeia—she’s easier—and then—”

“Perseus follows her,” he said.

His enthusiasm delighted her. She glanced around to see if her mother was near, and leaned over the table. “Sometimes at night I go up on the battlements to simply gaze.”

Fell sank back, his eyes wide. “Battlements?”

“More like the roof. Remnants of the original keep are still encased in this place. You can’t see them when you ride up from the front. Full dark up there with an excellent view. Drew can show you the way. Or one of the footmen.”

Mama was calling for attention. “Off with you now, get a good sleep. We’re bringing in the Yule log and greens tomorrow.” A cheer went up from the cousins.

Fell rose and gave a shallow bow. “Good night, Lady Margaret.”

“Meg,” she murmured, watching him leave.

Chapter Three

The battlements were tricky to find; the footman had been easy to bribe; the location didn't disappoint. The vast blanket of stars above took Fell's breath away. He had decided to come up that same evening, knowing it would be a moonless night. Later in the month that would not be so. Hopefully, his host wouldn't object to his exploration.

He leaned against a low slanted roof panel, allowed the sky to touch his heart, and let his soul soar. He found Cassiopeia in the blink of an eye, and then, yes, Perseus. The mighty hero, son of the gods, strode across the sky as if demanding the other stars to scatter before him.

Fell lost track of time, when a sound to his left started him. Someone had opened the door to the battlements. Shock seized him at the sight of Lady Margaret—Meg—wrapped in a wooly robe against the cold, her hair bound in a tartan scarf. He scrambled to his feet.

"I apologize..." he began.

"I didn't expect..." she started at the same time, and then she laughed. "You took my advice rather quickly."

"The moon," he murmured.

"Yes. There is none to dim the stars. You are quite correct," she said, gazing up. "It is a perfect night. I thought the same."

"I'll leave you to your privacy," he said, taking a step.

She lifted a staying hand. "No, I'll leave. I have this treasure often."

"Don't." He wasn't certain what else he meant to say, but he didn't want her to leave. They gazed at each other for several moments.

She cleared her throat. "This treasure can be shared, but it shouldn't be missed. She approached and sat down where he had been moments before.

He sat back down, stuffing the voice in his head shouting "propriety" down and away. It felt right to be here in companionable silence. What harm could it do? "Would your father object to me exploring the castle?"

"Not at all. He would object loudly if he knew I came up here alone." She lifted her head and peered at him. "Even more if he knew I was up here alone with a man."

In spite of the cold night, Fell felt heat rising up his neck. He couldn't see details clearly in the dark, but he suspected Meg's face had gone pink too.

Neither spoke of it again. They settled into silent stargazing. Aside from the occasional exclamation of another star identified, they sat in perfect accord.

Eventually a sound dragged Fell's common sense to the fore. *When had Meg moved so much closer?* He went up on one elbow to peer at her. "Your teeth are chattering! We're both going to freeze to this roof if we stay much longer."

She sighed. "Aye. And Mama is determined we'll all be tromping the woods tomorrow. We best go in."

He rose and held out a hand to help her rise. He kept it

longer than necessary, gazing upward again. "Thank you for sharing this with me, Meg," he said. When they reached the door, he realized he still had her hand. "Good night," he said. "You should go down first. I'll follow in several minutes so we aren't found together."

For a moment it seemed as if she might object, but she nodded and started down the stairs, leaving him bereft with a pounding heart.



The door opened and Perseus sniffed the air. *About time my lady returned. It is much too late.* He sniffed again and rose to his feet, shaking himself. Something smelled different.

"Goodness Percy, are you still awake, you naughty boy?" his lady scratched his ears, but Perseus twisted his head and sniffed her fingers finding nothing.

He pressed his nose into that soft wooly robe of hers. *Here is something.* He found the out-of-doors, the dusty roof tile smell and—there! It was the smell of his new friend. Perseus was certain of it. His lady had been close to his new friend. He snuffled around. The signs were mostly down one side. He let out a bark and gazed up at her sternly.

His lady merely laughed. "What are you thinking, you curious dog?"

Curious? Someone has to protect you. Just because this stranger turned out to be kind, don't expect me to be less than vigilant.

She removed her robe and draped it over the chair. Perseus barked, a single gruff sound. She ignored him and got in bed. He did not wish to be ignored. He paced up and down before barking again, this time thoroughly.

“What is wrong with you, Perseus P. Gibbs? Go back to sleep before you wake up the house and get me in trouble.”

Trouble? What has she been up to? Perseus wasn't sure, but he stomped to his bed and snuggled in, disgruntled. He'd have a word with their new friend, first chance he got.



Fell found shaving himself to be a reasonable skill. The guardians had insisted he employ a valet when he reached sixteen. Alfred, the valet, and he reached an accommodation not long after. As long as Alfred was willing to teach him how to do for himself *some* of the time, he allowed Alfred to fuss and take over *most* of the time. Fell needed to know he could take care of himself. A similar arrangement with the grooms had resulted in thoroughly competent if not necessarily gentlemanly boxing skills when the guardians weren't around. The steward looked the other way, and Fell rewarded him by keeping him on when he reached his majority.

He finished quickly and wiped his face with the hot water so efficiently provided by the Auchenben staff. He had a warm towel over his face when he realized he wasn't alone. An odd little sound drew his attention to the tiny dog, sniffing his way around Fell's room like a bloodhound tracking his prey.

“Searching for something, Perseus?” He asked.

The little white dog sniffed the evening slippers he'd worn the night before, gave his head a shake and moved on only to stop at the trousers Fell had tossed over a chair when he came in. Perseus sniffed the hems, reared back, and grabbed the edge pulling the garment to the floor where he continued to study them with his little nose in earnest.

Fell watched the creature, bemused, while he put on a clean shirt, warm trousers, an old waistcoat and heavy jacket, preparing for their foray in search of holiday greens. At last, Perseus lifted his head and turned to glare at Fell. At least, he seemed to glare, rather like a protective brother who had just discovered... The little beastie must have found some sign of Meg on his clothing, and that from a regretfully innocent evening.

Fell placed a hand over his heart dramatically. "Fear not, great hero, my intentions to your lady are entirely honorable."

"What lady? And who are you talking—" Drew's question was cut off when Perseus attacked his boots. Drew tried to shake him off while uttering a string of curses. He reached down to grab him and got his hand nipped for his trouble. Perseus darted through his legs and out the door. Drew tripped and fell with a thud.

Fell bit his lip to keep from laughing. "He really doesn't like you, does he."

"Little monster hates me," Drew grumbled, rising.

"You might try making friends with him. Most canines respond to kindness."

Drew shot him a skeptical glare. "I came to show you the way to early breakfast before mother drives us all into the woods. I can see for myself you are already dressed for it. Let Meg confine her own dog."

Pity. I was hoping for an excuse to deliver him to her door.

"Lead on. I am hungry as a bear."

Fell followed his friend memorizing the maze of corridors to the stairs as he did.

"Percy you naughty dog!" Meg's voice came from the family floor. A yelp told Fell the little fellow had been

captured and wouldn't be invited on their trek to fetch greens, which was probably a good thing, given the large crowd. A sudden image of Perseus trotting along with Meg at his side brought a smile to Fell. He made up his mind to invite Meg and her fluffy white protector for a stroll.

Chapter Four

Fell, bundled in great coat and scarf, descended the main stairs in happy anticipation of time with Meg only to face a milling sea of Gibbs cousins joking and teasing in ways Fell rarely understood. Some had loops of rope over their shoulders, and others carried burlap bags. Meg did not appear to be among them.

When they surged out the door, Flora Ellington attached herself to his arm in an iron grip. "Onward, Mr. Hastings, the woods await."

They had gone a few feet when the door opened again, and Meg surged out, skipping down the stairs to a raucous greeting.

"Late as always, Meggy!" her brother Edward shouted to much laughter.

"Did your mangy mop cause trouble again?" one of the cousins called.

"Invaded a gentleman's sanctuary and bit me again," Drew announced.

Why they should all find that amusing confused Fell.

Meg, however, took it in stride, tossing teasing comments right back. She glanced only briefly at Flora and Fell, but her smile warmed him.

Cold wind, mitigated by bright sunlight, accompanied them along well-worn paths up into the hills behind the castle. The group began to sing Scottish ballads, holiday songs, and once a ribald ditty they would never have sung in front of their elders. Flora, who never let loose of Fell's arm, giggled at that. Meg, however, sternly suggested that they clean up their ways in front of the younger girls. To Fell's surprise, they did.

Drew led them to a clearing and what appeared to be a preselected log, more of a tree trunk really. As Fell tried to imagine how they would haul it down the mountain, even with the four stout footman who accompanied them, two of the cousins upended their burlap bags to disclose claw-like metal clamps and a hammer. Clamps were swiftly hammered into the log, and they began to attach ropes.

"Well done," Drew said. "Give it a try." The footman and a few of the cousins pulled on the ropes and the log moved in a satisfactory manner, aided by the frost covering the ground.

"Now greens," Drew announced. "I suggest we spread out. Ed, take Jamie and Kit and show them the best holly. Take the bags to carry it. The rest of us can cut evergreen branches, and an extra tot of rum to the first person who finds mistletoe."

"What for the ladies?" Meg demanded. Her adorable nose peeking over a red scarf had taken on a delightful pink from the cold. The cousins laughed, and some shouted outrageous suggestions.

"Extra sugar for their tea."

"Aunt Adelaide's dandelion wine."

"Ten-year-old ratafia."

When little Alice, all of seventeen, retorted, "*Two* tots of rum," the group convulsed in laughter and then dispersed in amiable conviviality.

"I'll bet I know where to find mistletoe," Flora whispered. "The great oaks are this way." She yanked him to the right and slightly uphill through a thicket. A frustrating half hour ensued in which Fell and Flora got separated from the others and she kept murmuring, "I'm sure it is this way. Somewhere."

At last, they heard a shout nearby, and Fell took control, herding the little minx toward the sound. He removed her arm from his when they came into the oak grove. Drew grinned at him.

"I knew it was here somewhere," Flora muttered.

Fell rolled his eyes behind her back. No one noticed. The members of the party wandered around the ancient oaks gazing upward. Alice drew their attention by shouting, "There it is! A big clump."

The lowest branch of that tree was too high to reach. Samuel Gibbs, who had the build of a bull, put another on his shoulders, but they still couldn't reach the branch. "We need someone taller."

"You need an acrobat," Fell said shaking his head.

All eyes turned to him. He could see them measuring his great height and slender build

"No acrobat, but you'll do!" Fell blinked, but had no time to object. He was hefted up on cousin Samuel's shoulders and told to stand. He could just reach the lowest branch.

"Pull yourself up," Drew shouted.

Panic took him. Could he tell this crowd he had never climbed a tree? They would laugh him to scorn. Across the clearing he saw Meg staring at him wide-eyed. *I'm about to make an utter fool of myself in front of her.*

It was the certain humiliation of refusing or the probable humiliation of falling. He chose the latter, reached up and grabbed the branch, pulling himself up with some help from two men pushing on his feet. He threw one leg over the branch and peered up at the big clump of mistletoe. *How hard can it be. I survived the hardest part.*

The logical part of Fell's brain took over, and he found foothold after foothold, climbing steadily up. When he reached his goal, he clung to a branch with one hand and arm and pulled a knife from his boot with the other. The mass measured three feet in diameter in his estimation. Wooden branches or rootlets attached it to the tree. He hacked one loose and then another to many shouts of encouragement and advice. Finally, he cut the main branch and the entire mass pulled free and tumbled to the ground.

A great cheer rose up from the onlookers, and wee Alice demanded her rum. A sense of triumph warmed Fell. For a moment or so. Then he glanced down. He froze in place watching the tableau below him, holding on for dear life.

Drew pulled a blanket from the pack on his back and rolled the mistletoe onto it. He wrapped it carefully, tied a knot, and slipped a stout branch through it so two people could carry it. A flask passed to Alice and was quickly pulled away as she choked on the spirits. The flask passed from hand to hand, while Flora put an arm around Alice to lead her away. Some of the crowd started back. Fell had not moved from his perch.

Far below, impossibly far, Meg stared up at him.

"What do I do now?" he asked, feeling like a fool.

"You climb down the way you went up."

"On the way up, I didn't look down."

She grinned. "I have faith in you."

Drew leaned in and spoke to her. She shook her head and never took her eyes from Fell.

Fell forced logic past his panic. He turned toward the trunk and felt for the last foothold. It seemed to him the trip down took a full day, though he knew it was minutes before he reached the lowest branch and sat on it. It was, he recalled the height of two men above the ground.

"Now you have to jump," Meg said.

Fell swallowed. Hard.

A voice from several feet back spoke up. "We'll break your fall. You can do it." Drew's voice. He and a few others had stayed behind.

Moments later, Fell stood on wobbly feet accepting congratulations and back slaps from the men and a radiant smile from Meg. They started down the path after the others.

"I have a confession," he murmured for Meg's ears only. "I've never climbed a tree before."

Her eyes widened like dinner plates. "That was foolish. Brave, but foolish." She took his arm and gave it a pat.

Fell grinned at her. "Will you walk with me later?"

"Perhaps tomorrow; we've walked enough today," she replied, tugging him forward to catch up with the others.



Perseus, tired of trotting about the periphery of his rooms, lay on his cushion disgruntled and hungry. *Where is my lady? She has been gone for hours. The sun is sinking lower.*

When she returned, she peeled off layers of clothing: her cloak, shawls, scarves and a warm hat. When she didn't respond to his barks, an obvious request to be fed, he knew she was distracted. That maid person, Agnes invaded to help her change.

Perseus used the opportunity to inspect her cloak. He found pine, earth, and mold smells. No animals. He thought there was a hint of his new friend, but not much. *Of course, I gave him a good warning this morning*, he remembered. He trotted to the door and sat. Waiting. It was time for food and a good walk—or as good as he could get on a lead.

Dressed at last, his lady noticed him. “Oh dear. Honestly, Percy, I don't have a walk in me. It will have to be a footman.” She attached his lead and headed out.

He gave a soft bark. *Food first, please.*



After a round of warm drinks, most of the party dispersed for naps. Meg went up to change but felt too restless to sleep. She took Perseus to the kitchen for his nooning, asked one of the footman to walk him, and requested tea in the library.

The warmth of the room wrapped itself around Meg; the hearth had been well kept. The novel she had been reading rested under her favorite chair. The downstairs maids knew her hiding place and obliged her by ignoring it. She sat back with a sigh of satisfaction for a peaceful interlude.

Flora disturbed it immediately. She poked her head from behind a bookshelf and waved. “I'm glad you came. I found some books that may help.”

"Help with what," Meg asked, irritation furrowing her brow.

"Track down the Hastings family, of course. You agreed we could probably find something." She carried three huge books to a table.

Flora is tracking down Fell's pedigree? Intrigued in spite of herself, Meg rose to peer over her cousin's shoulder.

Flora paged through the largest book. "I know what county he is from."

"How did you figure that out?" Meg asked

Flora glanced back, her expression smug. More so than usual. "Easy. I asked him how the weather in Durham where he was from compared to here. He said, 'Yorkshire, not Durham.' Quick as that I had the information."

"That book is organized by county, but you overlooked something."

"What do you mean?" Flora kept paging.

"The title, silly. *Great Families of the Southern England*. You won't find Yorkshire there."

Flora slammed the book shut and pulled the next one. It described families in the borderlands, but from the Scottish side. Meg pulled over the third, "Try this, *A History of the Northern Counties and the Major Families Therein*. Published in 1795 so it should be reasonably current."

Almost half the book concerned Yorkshire, but half of that was ancient history. When it came to more current times it divided into the "ridings," the three governing entities within Yorkshire. An hour passed before they finished the first section, the North Riding, but found no Hastings. Flora let out a puff of air in frustration.

"There must be a better source." Meg went back to the county history section, running her fingers along titles. "Here's one!" she called. "*County Families of England, First*

Edition on Alphabetical Principles. It is a list by family name."

Flora re-shelved the other books, and the girls sat on little stools between the shelves with the book open in front of them on the floor.

It was a matter of minutes to find an entry for Hastings. "There is no duke marquess, earl or viscount Hastings," Flora said, disappointed. "I see a Baron Haster. He lives in Suffolk. Do you think they are related?"

"No, but look again. 'Mr. Bartholomew Hastings esq, magistrate in East Riding.' The book says he is the great-grandson of the third Duke of Stanbourn," Meg said.

"Do you suppose that is the current duke?" Flora mused.

"Unlikely if he has great-grandchildren! I wonder if F—Mr. Hastings is a relative," Meg replied.

"Or another great-grandson or nephew of a later duke or something?" Flora wondered.

"We should search under Stanbourn," Meg replied.

The door opened with loud bang. "Meg, are you in here?"

"Horsefeathers! It's Drew." Meg closed the book and shoved it under the shelf. The girls rose and straightened their gowns.

"What are you two doing on the floor? Is that hell hound on the loose again?" Drew demanded.

"He is not a hell hound!" Meg retorted.

"You two are up to trouble, I can tell!" Drew examined them closely for signs of mischief. He shook his head. "Mama sent me to find you. She wants to make sure you look your best for dinner. She has a surprise." He turned on his heels.

Flora peered at Meg for an answer, but Meg merely

shrugged. She glanced back toward Drew just in time to see Fell at the door. He peered in and smiled, but Drew pulled him away.

Meg sighed. "Good thing they didn't catch us gawking at 'Hastings' entries. I'm off to make myself presentable," she murmured.

Chapter Five

Yet more guests. Fell's heart dropped when he entered the drawing room. Just as he had begun to feel at ease with the rowdy Gibbs clan, the countess's rather more uppity sister and nephew had arrived from Edinburgh.

"And who is this young man?" the woman purred, making the hair on Fell's neck rise.

The countess smiled benignly. "This is Andrew's friend, Mr. Felton Hastings. Felton, may I present my sister, the Marchioness of Greenbury."

At "mister" the marchioness's eyes faded. Her acknowledgement was a mere nod. She clearly bore little resemblance to the warm and welcoming countess. He'd been dismissed as unimportant. Of the marquess, there was no sign.

Drew's mother went on. "Howard, this is Felton Hastings. Felton, may I present Howard Manchester, the Earl of Blenock, my nephew." *Earl. He must be the marquess's heir.* If the marchioness struck Fell as the type of unpleasant aristocrat that had blighted his brief foray into society, Blenock

embodied the superior sort of snob Fell despised. Luckily, in his current guise as plain mister, Fell could hope they would simply ignore him. He vowed to avoid the pair.

During the pre-dinner wait and dinner itself, however, it became clear that Blenock was not only a blustering braggart, but—if wee Alice's tearful face was any indication—a bully as well. He wrapped his father's superior title, one he planned to inherit, around himself as armor that gave him leave to lord it over everyone else.

Over port, Blenock treated the earl with respect, Drew with patronizing superiority, and the others with inattention while he droned on about Edinburgh's lack of quality society and his intention to flee to London as soon as possible. Even the Earl of Auchen viewed him with pained patience as if a relative must be accepted if not appreciated. Felton didn't understand it. The oaf ought to be booted out.

On their way to join the ladies, Blenock made a disparaging remark about Samuel Gibbs's boots. Gibbs, to his credit, turned it into a self-disparaging joke.

In the drawing room they found the marchioness holding court. Meg sat next to her mother who appeared to be at pains to point out Meg's many virtues to the marchioness.

Why is the countess pushing Meg forward? Does she hope for the marchioness's sponsorship? Fell glanced at Blenock posing by the mantle. *Or worse, hope for a match?* His stomach curdled.

"My dear Catherine," the marchioness pronounced for all to hear, "Tell me you do not plan to subject us to musical performances. I'm sure George's nieces try their best, but amateur musicians can be so tedious."

The company knew the countess, who colored deeply, had indeed planned an informal musical evening this time.

The girls had practiced. "We don't have to, of course," she murmured. "We could—"

"If games are on the docket, I, for one, shall seek entertainment elsewhere," Blenock broke in.

"I would suggest cards," the countess replied. "Drew, dear, can you organize the tables. Margaret Ann, kindly partner your cousin. Be a good hostess and see to his comfort."

Meg, less than enthusiastic, whispered to a footman, who served the earl a brandy as soon as he was seated across from her. Fell planned to stay far away from Blenock, but when the countess pushed Meg forward, he hovered protectively. He heard Blenock sigh and mutter, "Better you than that Aunt Isadora of yours, Nutmeg. I hope you can give me a decent game."

"I asked you not to use that childish nickname!" Meg said.

Blenock sneered. Decision made, Fell took one of the other two seats at Meg's table. It may have been his hopeful imagination, but he thought he saw a flicker of concern in her expression. Flora Ellington took the other.

"What is the bet?" Blenock demanded.

"Family games are friendly. We play for points," Meg said.

Blenock snorted. "Child's play."

"The Gibbs family takes triumph seriously," Flora told him. "Winners have bragging rights."

Blenock narrowed his eyes at Fell. "Winning a table of cards won't make a silk purse out of sow's ear," he said derisively.

Fell bit back a retort. No point in giving a bully satisfaction.

"I just hope Nutmeg plays cards better than she dresses.

You best plan a new wardrobe if you intend to attempt another season, cousin. That frock is a sad display. Even Flora here has more fashion sense.” Meg stiffened. Fell suspected she had dressed her best, probably at her mother’s urging.

“The gown is particularly becoming, Lady Margaret. It flatters your eyes,” Fell said, deliberately using her title.

“In a provincial sort of way perhaps. No offense intended. One doesn’t expect someone from these wilds to know better,” Blenheim said.

The dealing began, and blessed silence took over. Though Fell grit his teeth and tried to focus on his cards, Meg and Blenock won the round.

Blenock rose quickly. “Where is the brandy?” he demanded.

Meg rose with him to direct him as her mother expected. She turned back to peer at Fell. “Thank you,” she mouthed.



With Blenock well into his third brandy, Meg happily turned him over to another partner. She hadn’t seen him in three years, and he’d clearly become even more obnoxious in that time. What was her mother thinking suggesting Meg try to fix his attention, as if Lord High-and-mighty would so much as glance her way?

She finished a round as Aunt Isadora’s partner. They won, of course. Then she turned to choose a table as far from his Arrogance of Blenock as possible.

Her mother joined the next table, tossing Meg an apologetic smile. At least Meg thought so, with some relief. Mama couldn’t possibly be unaware of his behavior. That

round turned out to be the end. His Arrogance rose, grabbed the newly filled brandy decanter, and loudly announced that he had had enough child's play. He invited the "real men" to join him in the billiard room. Drew, with a gentle shove from Mama, joined him, as did one or two Gibbs cousins.

Flora floated over to Meg for a sympathetic hug. "How long will they be here? It is eight more days to twelfth night!"

The marchioness announced the onset of a headache and the need to turn in. Meg could almost feel the entire room breathe a sigh of relief at the departure of the Greenbury contingent.

Poor Mama appeared weary and disheartened by her relatives. Meg brought her a fortifying cup of tea and a sympathetic pat.

"You don't need to show that man any undue attention, Margaret, but do try to please my sister. The marchioness could do you no end of good in London in the spring." Meg wondered if Mama meant to convince Meg or herself.

A moment later Fell bowed to the pair of them. "With your permission, your ladyship, may I take a turn of the room with Lady Margaret?" His blue eyes focused on Meg, his kindness warming her heart. She took his arm gladly.

"Does your mother approve of me?" Fell asked as they walked, nodding to this person and that.

"Of course. You're Drew's friend." *Would Mama consider him as a suitor? Perhaps not.* She knew they hoped for a title. *But perhaps...* Meg let her dreams and her feelings for Fell free rein.

"How is Perseus? I haven't seen him all day," he asked. His interest in Perseus drew Meg to him as much as his kind blue eyes did.

"No one let him loose today!"

"You promised to walk with me tomorrow, I recall."

Meg nodded. Of course, she had.

"Will you bring your fluffy white friend along?" Fell asked.

"He will love it—and so will I." His answering expression sent electricity through her, her heart melted, and her knees felt weak.

"Will you go up to see the sky tonight?" he murmured, holding her eyes. His voice mysteriously dropped a few registers, and the deep sound heated her belly, sending tingles through her.

For a moment she couldn't speak. "Tonight?" She swallowed and then moved on. "I fear not. With my horrid cousin likely to be out and about at all hours, and I'd best keep to my room." She knew it to be true, but disappointing.

"I think it is cloudy anyway," Fell said sounding deflated.

And yet he had asked her. The stars weren't his only interest. Her heart soared.

Chapter Six

Perseus preened. His lady had wrapped him in his woolen jacket which meant she intended to take him outside. There would be fresh air, good smells and perhaps treats. Besides, he could keep an eye on all the strangers and invaders. He might see his new friend.

The lady dressed warmly herself and put on her sturdy boots. She picked him up in her arm and he peered eagerly over her muff.

At the stairs they met cousin Flora hurrying up.

"I found it!" Flora said. Perseus hoped they didn't delay long. He had grounds to survey.

"What?" Perseus's lady asked.

"Hastings is the family name of the Dukes of Stanbourn. Felton is a relative. He must be." *Hastings? The new friend?*

"But what?" his lady asked.

"Why don't you ask him? You seem to have all his attention," Flora said. In Perseus's opinion, the girl had a sly gleam in her eye. His lady pulled him closer so that her

answer was muffled. He made out the words “couldn’t” and “rude.” When he whined, she loosened her grip and they went on down.

His new friend Hastings waited by the door. Even better, he gave Perseus a piece of kidney pie. Definitely a friend.



Fell happily took Perseus’s lead, and they set off around the castle grounds. Propriety demanded that they stay in view of the windows—and therefore her assembled relatives. He knew what was proper and so, unfortunately, did Meg.

It was late morning before they got out, a crisp sunny day. Fell paused and pulled her scarf more carefully around her neck up to her adorable little chin, peering deep into her eyes as he did. The heat in them encouraged him. Something had happened to them since he climbed the oak tree. Something that made him anticipate the hanging of the mistletoe this afternoon with joy.

Fell dismissed the weather, and his opinion of her mother’s relatives as he groped for a conversational topic. Before he could settle on one, she asked, “Was that truly the first time you climbed a tree?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” he replied. “I was raised by my overly protective grandfather and two elderly uncles. Tree climbing was not on the list of subjects they deemed necessary in my training.”

“What were?” she asked.

He breathed in. *How much to reveal?* “Greek, Latin, manners, honorable behavior, accurate bookkeeping.” *Pedigrees, estate management, proper address of servants, land values, corn prices...* “Agriculture.”

"You have land?"

"Yes, a tidy plot." *Four plots—11,000 acres total. Maybe I should tell her.*

She pivoted. "And what else did they not think to teach you? Sheep shearing?"

He'd learned that on his own from the tenants. "Social niceties. Dancing." *Avoiding backstabbing and responding to the cut direct. Political maneuvering.*

At "dancing" she laughed, a rich rippling sound that warmed his heart. "Dancing can be taught. I'll work on it with you before Mama's Twelfth Night Ball."

"I would like that."

"Who taught you stargazing?" She asked.

"My grandfather. It was the best time I spent with him. What of you? Who taught you?"

"No one. Books. Mama would weep if she knew how much time I spent up there searching for planets and stars. It wasn't on the list of subjects they deem necessary for a lady," she said echoing his words back to him.

He grinned. "What was?"

"Dancing. Languages, too, and water color, and how to entertain on the piano forte. A more useful subject is household management. Mama holds out hope I'll manage a great house sometime."

"I suspect you could manage anything you took on, Meg. You are a formidable woman."

"Is that a complement?"

"Of course!"

"One cannot always tell where the expectations of ladies are concerned. I'm not sure 'formidable' is on my mother's list of desirable qualities."

"It should be," he retorted. "What do they not deem important to teach you?"

"Let me see. Greek. Latin. Science and mathematics. How to fire a long gun and bring down a stag—the usual unladylike activities."

"I would encourage a young lady to learn whatever she chose."

"Would you truly? Such a young lady would be fortunate."

They had made a circuit of the entire house. She flung a mischievous glance his way. "You were mighty shy when you arrived. What else did those old men fail to teach you?"

He met her glance with his own. "Flirting. I'm sadly deficient in flirting."

"Then you are a fast learner. I would say you're doing rather well."

He stood fixated on her words, the heat in her eyes, and her lush lips rising above the tartan scarf.

What else they might have had to say was interrupted by a group of cousins coming from the other direction. "Aren't you two frozen? We best get in and warm our hands so we can carry out Aunty Catherine's orders for the decorating."

Perseus pulled on his lead and barked at them frantically, drawing naught but laughter.



Perseus remained agitated when they entered the atrium. Fell kept the dog's lead while a footman took Meg's wraps. She took it so he could hand his hat and greatcoat over. Meg knelt and struggled to undo the lead on the wriggling dog. Just as she did, Perseus bolted away, chasing one of the younger cousins who teased him by darting this way and that.

"Percy—come!" Meg shouted. The dog ignored her, happily engaged in what had become a big game, with young people flitting around, egging him on. "Stop teasing him. Perseus come!"

"Who let that damed rodent loose," a deep voice growled. Blenock stood at the foot of the stairs having just arisen, rumpled and much the worse for the previous night's drink. "Get that vermin out of here."

"He isn't vermin!" Meg shot back over her shoulder, still chasing her dog.

Fell had better ideas and treats in his pocket. He bent down off to the side and tried to coax Perseus gently.

"I might have known that waste of fur belonged to you, Nutmeg. You always were a stupid hoyden," the horrid cousin yelled.

Insults to Meg made Fell's gorge rise. He stood up slowly, glaring at Blenock.

Perseus noticed the newcomer and approached him slowly, growling.

Blenock descended the last step. "Think you're ferocious, you worthless cur?" He kicked out and sent Perseus flying a few feet.

Perseus leapt back up and charged, locking his sharp little teeth on Blenock's ankle. The arrogant earl shook his leg, dragging the angry dog off its feet trying to dislodge it, while letting out a string of curses.

Meg ran forward to grab Perseus just as Blenock reached down to pull him off, and Perseus bit his palm. Hard. Blenock yelped and yanked his hand away backhanding Meg in the process. When she landed on her backside, most of the company gasped in horror. Before anyone could move, Fell stormed toward the miserable

excuse for humanity. Perseus attacked again, latching on to the earl's leg.

"I'll have you drowned. I'll have you burned. I'll strangle you myself," the earl screamed. He grabbed Perseus by the throat with one hand, causing him to unlock his jaws and shoved him away.

Fell's fist met Blenock's nose with a satisfying crunch, shocking the miserable earl, and followed it with a jab to the abdomen. Blenock went down hard, blood running down his face and shirt. Fell stood fists at the ready hoping he would rise. "You, sir, will never treat any lady thus, nor creatures weaker than yourself."

Blenock rose slowly, dabbing his nose with a handkerchief. "I'll have you transported for that, Hastings. How dare you attack a peer of the realm." He stepped back at Fell's fierce expression.

"You are no peer, Blenock, and your courtesy title doesn't make you one," Fell said lowering his fists. The worthless bully obviously wouldn't attack someone who could fight back.

"Who do you think you are to speak to me like that? I'll have satisfaction. My father—"

"I know exactly who I am. I am Felton Charles George Reginald Hastings, Sixth Duke of Stanbourn, Earl of Sedbergh, twelfth Baron Beaudoin. I *am* a peer of the realm, and I don't intend to soil my honor by meeting the likes of you, sir, for your so-called satisfaction."

"I agree. I suggest you explain yourself to the lady's father, Blenock." The Earl of Auchen roared from the archway, fury in every line of his body.

The room had gone silent. Samuel Gibbs's jaw hang open, and Flora Ellington's eyes were wide. The Countess of Auchen gripped her husband's arm.

Fell reached Meg and leaned in to offer an arm to help her rise. "Are you hurt? If he harmed you..."

"You'll defend me, I know."

Perseus had trotted over to comfort Meg. When Fell leaned in, the little dog licked his face and hands. Behind them they heard Blenock whining and sputtering, excuses tumbling over one another. It was the dog's fault, Meg's fault, the unruly cousins' fault, he complained.

Meg let Fell help her up and hand her Perseus. "But Fell—duke?"

He blushed to the roots of his hair. "True, I fear. I'm sorry."

Before she could respond, her parents surrounded them.

"Well done, son," the earl said. There was a twinkle in his eyes. "I wondered what it would take for you to come clean."

"You don't seem surprised, my lord," Fell murmured.

"Her ladyship may have missed it, but did you think I didn't remember who you are? We'll talk, but first, I need word with her ladyship's nephew." His tone turned grim. "He'll be leaving shortly."

"Oh George, he's a horror. Do what you need to, but be kind to my sister." The countess put out a shaking hand to Meg's cheek, now red with the imprint of Blenock's hand.

"He deserves to be thrashed. I'll have to settle for banishment and a blunt letter to his father. Greenbury will handle him."

Meg ignored them. She pushed the villainous cousin from her mind. She had eyes only for Fell—Stanbourn—and the expression in his deep blue eyes as he gazed at her while one hand absently stroked her beloved Perseus.



Perseus closed his eyes and enjoyed the attention. He had conquered the monster with help from his friend Hastings. All was well in his world.

Chapter Seven

Perseus decided most of the strangers were not as bad as he had suspected. Lying on a large cushion in the formal drawing room, he reigned as hero of the day. Or at least one of them. His lady sat next to him wrapped in a quilt, holding ice wrapped in a towel to her cheek under her mother's firm orders.

The cousins and friends meanwhile, laughed while hanging tree branches all over the house. It seemed to him an odd thing to do, but it brought good smells in from outside, and it made them all jolly, although the large punch bowl on the side table may have been contributing to the cheer.

The lady cousins stopped to slip Perseus treats with satisfactory frequency, and his own lady repeatedly told him she was proud of his bravery. The countess didn't order him taken back to his rooms even once.

When Master Andrew approached him cautiously, his hand offered for a sniff as is proper, and called him a hero, Perseus stopped growling, and graciously accepted a treat.

Even Master Andrew saw him for the ferocious defender he was. Yes, all was as it should be.

Almost all. One thing was missing. His friend Hastings had disappeared.



The housekeeper came to relieve Meg of the ice pack. It was the second one in the few hours since the incident. "I'll bring you another in a half hour or so, Lady Margaret. It doesn't do to leave it on too long. What can we send to make you comfortable?"

An ice pack for my arse... She had fallen hard, but she daredn't say it. "A cup of that punch if you please."

The house keeper obliged, but she handed it with a frown. "Those male cousins may have been at it with spirits, my lady. You sip carefully."

Flora bounced over, to sit next to Meg. "Is it very bad?" She peered at Meg's cheek and winced. "That will bruise."

"I'll heal. Mama is overreacting. She is that upset with Blenock. Have you seen F—, erm, the duke?"

"He went upstairs to change after your father dragged Blenock to his study. Did you know? About the duke's identity, I mean?" Flora asked.

Meg shook her head, and cringed at a pain in her neck. "No. Not even after you discovered that he must be related to the dukedom. It never occurred to me."

"No one else knew either. Except Drew. That brother of yours thinks it is a great lark."

"He would. Papa knew, but never said anything. He said it was 'the boy's own business to tell.'"

"I wonder if he's embarrassed to come down now." Flora barked a laugh. "Do dukes even get embarrassed?"

"Heroes don't. Papa said he wanted to speak with him. They may be taking their time about it."

Flora studied Meg slyly. "What do you think they are discussing?"

"I certainly don't know. Crop rotation? Sheep raising?"

Flora gave her a poke. "Blenock will cause trouble. Perhaps they're plotting to undermine him."

"Papa is writing to the marquess. I shudder to think what he's threatening. Don't worry about Blenock."

"But sheep raising? You aren't that big a nodcock!"

Samuel and the others called Flora over to decide where to place the mistletoe, or the *ducal* mistletoe as they were calling it. *The Gibbs cousins will give Fell no quarter, title or not!*

A disturbance in the atrium caught everyone's attention. Flora ran to the window. "The marchioness's carriage has been brought round!" she reported.

A loud burst of male voices in the atrium subsided as soon as it arose. Moments later, Flora reported. "He's sulking, of course. And oh! The marchioness is leaving as well. Her face is pinched like she's fit to be tied. Angry with that son of hers, I hope."

Aunt Greenbury will not want scandal. Hopefully she can keep Blenock in line. I won't be enduring her sponsorship during the Season, though. Thank goodness.

Meg's father entered the drawing room as soon as they heard the great door shut. Fell walked at his side, and all thoughts of the Greenburys fled.

Perseus hopped up and trotted to Fell, who picked him up with a smile. Meg suspected a treat surreptitiously passed between them.

Papa came to Meg's side immediately, peering at her

face in sorrow. "He's gone, Meg. I'm sorry I let him in the house. Always was an unpleasant lout."

"I don't blame you, Papa. You taught us family is family and family first. Unfortunately, that branch hasn't your heart," Meg said, her eyes straying to Fell who stood silently at Papa's side.

"You're a good 'un, Meg. You rest and let these rapscale lions have their way with the castle." Papa turned to the crowd of cousins who weren't even trying to hide their curiosity about the exchange. "You lot—Y've turned my drawing room into the New Forest. Get thee to work on the atrium and dining room."

"We need His Secretive Grace to show us where to hang the ducal mistletoe he so generously supplied us," one of them retorted.

Fell breathed a dramatic sigh. "I suppose I must. Can't trust the lot of you with so vital a task." He turned back to Meg and handed Perseus to her. "The sky should still be mostly dark and, if my calendar is correct, the Geminid meteor shower will be on display," he murmured. He didn't wait for an answer. He joined the young folk to much teasing, giving as good as he got.

Was that an invitation? She suspected it was. He could hardly request a midnight tryst in front of her father.



Fell paced the battlement, uncertain whether Meg would come. He couldn't be sure she'd caught his meaning. He had been unable to find a private moment with her. He spent the afternoon fending off both admiration for his handling of Blenock and ferocious teasing from one and all. He had been at Castle Auchenben long enough to under-

stand the teasing for affection. He'd been accepted by the Gibbs family. As fine as that was, it kept him from time with Meg.

Meteors streaked across the canopy of the sky. He longed to share it with her.

The door creaked open, and Fell spun around to look, his heart in his throat. She wore the wooly robe again, fastened around her and closed at the neck. He shuddered to imagine what she wore under it. His throat went dry.

"I wasn't sure you meant it," she said, glancing up.

"I knew you'd catch my meaning," he said, though he'd had doubts but a moment ago. He approached and reached for her hands. Unfortunately both hands were encased in thick mittens.

Meg took a step back. "You ignored me all afternoon."

"There was no privacy and so much to say. The cousins intervened whenever I came close."

"The mistletoe." She swallowed.

That baffled him; his brow wrinkled. "What about it?"

"All that chasing and giggling and you never..."

"Never what?" he murmured stepping closer.

"You didn't—"

He closed the distance, gripped her shoulders, and took her mouth in a searing kiss. An alarm in his head reminded him he meant to be gentle, but when she didn't object, he kissed her again. Her hands slid around his neck and up into his hair. *Where did the blasted mittens go?*

Fell pulled Meg flush against him, feeling her curves beneath the wooly robe, and slid his tongue along the seam of her lips until he found entrance. She gasped against his mouth, responding, untutored, but enthusiastic.

Her obvious innocence brought him to his senses. Fell took his hands from her back and pulled away. He had to

unwind her hands from his neck, kissing each one as he did. "I could hardly kiss you like that under mistletoe in front of all your relatives. It was better not to start."

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him again. He kept it gentle this time. "Am I forgiven?"

Meg leaned her head against his shoulder, took a deep breath, and nodded.

Fell took her hand, entwining their fingers. "Come and sit by me. I asked your father permission to speak with you privately. He gave it, but I'm certain this isn't what he had in mind. We need to talk.

When he sat them on the slanted bit of roof, Meg lay back. He joined her. What else could he do?

"That is how you make me feel," she said, gesturing to the sky alive with falling stars, and words stuck in his throat.

"I need to explain," he said.

"About your title? No, you don't. I don't care about it. I'm glad we became friends before I knew."

"But I do." And so, he did. About his grandfather's death the year he turned fifteen. About the title falling on him like an avalanche. About elderly guardians. At some point, his heart took over and he poured the grief, the loneliness, the isolation, the gaps in his experiences.

"You told me about the things you were taught. And the ones you weren't. There was more, wasn't there?" She ran her thumb over the back of his hand.

He gazed upward at the sky, not meeting her eyes. "Estate management came easy; social matters less so. The uncles decided I needed to learn about women. Their approach was to introduce me to a willing widow who could 'teach you how to go on' as they put it. They checked it off their list. I learned nothing about flirting, courtship, gallantry, small talk, or coy conversation or any social

niceties beyond basic manners. When I went to London, I floundered. Drew rescued me.”

Fell rolled onto his elbow, worried he may have offended. She reached up and pushed back the hair that fell across his brow. “Your brother thought some time at a family party might help,” he said hoarsely, searching her face.

“Did it?” she whispered

“Oh yes. So much. It showed me what family ought to be, for one thing.” He gazed down at her without going on.

“And?”

“This.” He lowered his mouth to hers. After several satisfying minutes, it was Fell who pulled away again.

Meg groaned. “Honor, Fell?”

“That much, the guardians did teach me” he murmured through the thickness in his throat. He sat up.

She followed. “What did you and my father talk about?”

“Politics. I knew the mechanics but not the parties and the machinations. He is going to mentor me in the spring.”

Her shoulders drooped, her chin tilted downward as if despondent. He knew it wasn’t the answer she hoped for. He put a knuckle under her chin and pulled her face up.

“And you,” he said softly. “I asked his permission to court you.”

She swallowed eyes wide, and threw her arms around his neck. He removed them. “I have his permission to court, not to ravish. And no betrothal.”

She sank back. “No?”

“Not now. He wants you to have another Season. He thinks I need another Season, one with family support. Until May. If I offer for you then, and you accept, we may announce our betrothal.

“I accept!” She gave him a quick smacking kiss.

"I haven't offered," he replied, kissing her back. When the kiss deepened, she smiled under his mouth. "What?" he asked.

"If this is your idea of courtship, I'd say you're a quick learner."

He kissed her again, whispered, "I love you, Meg," against her lips, and continued. Stars exploded around her. She could not be certain they were only in the sky.



Perseus yipped when Meg yanked him out of his sleep, grabbing him into her arms. She danced around the room as if it was some sort of ballroom.

"We're going to London, we're going to London," she sang. "He loves me, Percy; Fell loves me," she warbled dancing on.

Humans, he thought, could be silly sometimes. He relaxed patiently in her arms. At least his lady was happy.

The End

Author's Note

For this story, I had to investigate the sky in December. I didn't find details for 1819, but in 2025 Perseus should indeed be overhead, with the Geminid meteor shower inspiring awe over the dark skies of Scotland mid-month.

The books Flora found in the Auchenben library were fictional. However, *County Families of the United Kingdom*, does exist. It is, indeed, an alphabetical list by surname and title name, but it wasn't published until 1860. Burke's *Peerage* began publication in 1826. Debrett's existed, and at least from 1830 it had an index by surname, but I couldn't find a pre-1820 example. The one I made up, modeled on *County Families*, worked!

I hope you enjoy this little story!

About the Author

Award winning author of family centered romance set in the Regency and Victorian eras, Caroline Warfield has traveled far and wide and been many things. Now in at least her third act, she works in an office surrounded by windows where she lets her characters lead her to adventures in England and the far-flung corners of the British Empire while she nudges them to explore the riskiest territory of all, the human heart. Because~

Love is worth the risk.

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