

**CLYVE ROSE**

*Caroline's Christmastide*



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## *On the first day of Christmas...*



*Cantwell village on the York Road,  
Christmas Day, 1815.*

“**C**allie, are you out here at all?” Keeper Partridge’s voice betrayed a hint of impatience as he crested the snow-coated hilltop above Cantwell’s churchyard.

Caroline gazed at the top of his head, far beneath the tree in which she’d recently taken refuge. Her gown was bunched between her thighs as she gripped the branches harder beneath numbed hands. She stretched towards the blurry shapes dangling just beyond her fingertips, teasing her at the end of her bough.

Unfortunately, this dislodged a large clumping of snow, sending it heavily onto the shoulders of anyone standing below.

“Aye!”

Callie scrambled down as fast as her voluminous skirts and benumbed legs would allow, paying little heed to the damage done her gown or stockings.

"Papa, oh Papa, I beg your pardon!" She managed through chattering teeth as she brushed him down. "I truly did not mean to do it."

Her father shrugged off her assistance and proceeded to straighten his greatcoat. "You always say that, Callie, but you always do it."

Callie blinked at her father. "Do what?" She replied, blowing on her fingers and regretting her misplaced gloves.

"I'm uncertain as to how you manage it, dearest girl." Her father shook his head. "But you always manage to find your way into the most interesting scrapes." He handed her his own mittens with a sigh, before shoving his reddened fists into his coat pockets for warmth. "*When* are you going to realise that you're a young lady now? You're eighteen years old. Why, your sister Florrie's more grown up in London service, and she's barely fourteen." He reached up and tugged a woollen scarf from a torn branch and twined it round Callie's throat. "I'm aware you chafe at being home when governessing is more in your line, but your mama appreciates it and so do I. What were you doing up his lordship's tree?"

Callie leaned past her father to take up a neatly stitched linen bag. "Mama sent me to fetch the bread from Ma Hobbs after the snow storm last night. She bade me ensure the old lady is not too low for firewood, which I did, then on my way home I thought I saw late season pippins. I know we've not got much at home—"

"Who told you that then, Callie?" Her father's voice grew rougher.

She paused her walk to stomp one foot as they made their way home. "I'm not a fool, Papa. I can see we've no coal, and little wood despite your excellent haul of gamefowl. I thought

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to help, is all.”

“By scrumping his lordship’s fruit?” Her father grew stern. “I’m his Keeper, Callie. Like it or not, you can’t lark about these preserves as you wish. They belong to the Earl of Cantwell and his three blessed sons. Scrumping’s poaching, and poaching’s a crime. Cantwell is very particular about his preserves, you know.”

Callie paused in her stomping, turning to face her father. “Would you truly take your own daughter before the magistrate simply to impress the old earl, then?”

“Nothing more certain.” Her father took her arm and steered her towards the snowy path once more. “Come on, it’ll be dark soon. I’d arrest you because it’s my duty as his gamekeeper, and without the earl’s favour we’ve nought.” He paused. “As it is, I’ve no cause to arrest you, anyhow.”

“Because you’re my father?”

Papa stubbed his boots against the scraper in his doorway, before answering.

“Because you scrumped nothing. Perhaps you should acquire a quizzing glass, Callie.”

“Huh?” Her brow furrowed in puzzlement.

“The correct response is ‘I beg your pardon?’” He pointed out, lowering his voice automatically as he opened the front door. “That wasn’t an apple tree you were illegally raiding, dear girl.”

He motioned for Callie to precede him before addressing her mother, drowsing in her rocking chair with little Charlie swaddled and laying on her knee. “You’ll never guess where I found our girl, Beth.” He kissed both mother and child, then shot a mock-glare at Callie. “Up a tree in Cantwell’s orchard.”

“Did you find Ma Hobbs’s bread up there too?” Mama asked.

Callie hung her bag on its hook by the door, then kissed her

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mother and headed into the kitchen where a large pot of soup simmered on the hearth. She ladled out a bowl for each of them and set the table.

"No, Mama," she replied, watching as her mother carried Charlie carefully to his cradle. "I was attempting to gather pippins," she explained on her mother's return. "But Papa says this was foolish."

"Stealing from your father's employer is foolish, Callie," her mother agreed. "As is tearing your stockings and your gown, and losing your best gloves. I expect you to repair or replace all lost or damaged items before Sunday."

"Yes, Mama."

"And you must repay his lordship for anything you've taken, Callie."

"She took nothing," her father added, trying his best to appear stern.

"I'm almost sorry, Keeper." Her mother was equally poor at assuming a disciplinary stance. "I quite enjoy pippins, and cider for the season goes down a treat."

"Aye," Mr Partridge agreed, "but even a girl as stubborn as Callie can't coax pippins from a pear tree." He laughed at Callie's chagrined expression.

"I ought to pay more attention when assisting you on your preserves, Papa." She acknowledged. "May I assist you in traversing the woods this Christmas?"

"You can assist me best by helping your mama with Charlie here at the cottage," her father replied. "I've no need for an assistant just yet." He stifled a cough.

"Perhaps Callie may accompany you once or twice this year," her mother spoke up gently. "Delivering the twelfth night cakes will be an excellent occasion to introduce Callie as a young



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woman.”

Callie gaped at her mother. “I know all our neighbours already, Mama.”

“Not as a young lady, Callie.” Her mother grinned at Callie’s expression. “Since Florrie’s been hired to Mayfair, your presentation this Christmastide is my last opportunity to present a daughter. Besides, you’re the eldest so the pleasure of the annual ball ought to be yours.” The delight in her voice made Callie feel guilty for not wishing to attend. She wondered if first-time attendees were required to dance, like martinets must parade in the military. She suppressed a shiver of distaste. *I do not care to dance.*

Her mother seemed to be studying Callie’s shape as she opened her workbox before the fireside.

“The Cantwell Assembly will be larger than usual this year now that his lordship’s elder sons are safely returned. You’re to accompany your father.” She glanced meaningfully in the direction of Charlie’s cradle. “When you’ve eaten, we’ll pin up a design you may wear.”

Callie brightened. “Am I to have a new dress, Mama?”

Her mother smiled. “Not strictly new, no, but it’ll be wonderful, dearest. I promise.”

“Aye,” her father intoned. “No one shall find any partridge shabbily attired at the Cantwell Ball.” He slurped his soup.

## *Two turtledoves*



**T**om Doyle trudged furiously along the York road, doing his best to avoid the deep ditches on either side of the rutted surface. This wasn't easy when the ditches were concealed with snow. Lord Cantwell had ordered him to search the York road to the other side of Cantwell village – with his 'sincerest apologies'. Tom shrugged more deeply into his old caped army coat and swore under his breath.

"It's my own fault, really." He muttered to himself, more to stave off the sensation of his lips freezing together than anything else. "I shouldn't have let the boy go alone."

As he reached the far side of Cantwell, he finally found what he'd been looking for: the Right Honourable Rudolph Cantwell, third son to his lordship, and more trouble than all the earl's six other children combined. The boy was reeling off from a cart laden with Christmas greens. He slid down the boughs to land in the snow in front of Cantwell church. From his position across the way, Tom watched the carter wave away Rudy's thanks and turn his trap for York.

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Tom squinted at the retreating carter. The fellow appeared to be wearing Rudy's new coat as well. Few cart drivers went about their work attired in furs. The earl's son had undoubtedly lost all his coin.

"Damn," he muttered. His fault, again. Tom hurried to help Rudy to his feet. "All right there, Mr Cantwell?" He did his best not to recoil from the reek of stale brandy and cheap ale. "How was your club's Christmas rout in York?"

Rudy threw his arms around Tom in relief. "Thank heavens for you Doyle," he slurred. "I thought I should have to brave this slush on foot." Waving an unsteady arm across the village, he grabbed at Doyle's jacket in an effort to remain upright. He missed Tom's arm, tumbling into a snowdrift. He laughed before struggling to turn himself. He lay there a moment, spitting snow from his mouth and blinking blearily up at Tom.

"Doyle?"

"Yes, sir." Tom clenched his fist behind his back.

"When did ya get here?"

"Just arrived, sir. May I escort you home?" Doyle hauled the younger fellow to his feet. Then he undid his coat with one hand, holding Rudy as steadily as possible with the other. With admirable finesse, he managed to float his caped coat around Rudy's shivering shoulders before placing the boy's arm across his own neck. He wrapped a firm arm around the fellow's torso and hoped they met someone with transport who was headed towards the hall - and sooner rather than later.

"Whyd'ya give me ya coat, Doyle?" Rudy exhaled fumes that could light a ballroom.

"Because," Tom huffed, "you fell into the snow. You're wet through, and you're freezing."

"Not!" Shouted his charge.

"You may not feel it, Mr Cantwell, but I can assure you that it's so."

Rudy began nodding as though Tom had uttered something terribly profound. "Then I thank you, sir." He giggled rather alarmingly. "You do take such good care of me, Doyle."

Tom only managed a grunt in response as they reached the other end of the village and began plodding up Cantwell Hill. Dragging Rudy alongside, with a stumble every third or fourth step, was taking its toll. Tom glanced ahead at an ominous sky. More snow clouds on the way today. His gaze caught the impressive pear tree marking the boundary of the Cantwell orchards. Cutting across this way would be faster – if Rudy stayed on his feet.

Rudy's shuffling gait suddenly stopped dead. He turned to Tom. "Why?" He announced to three passing villagers who looked away, clearly unimpressed.

Tom sighed. "Why what, sir?"

"*Why* do you take such good care of me?" Rudy sounded surprisingly sober all of a sudden.

Tom did his best to meet the other's darting gaze. "Because it is my honour, sir. I serve not only you, Mr Cantwell, but also his lordship, who serves all of Cantwell and all of us."

Rudy grinned, slumping against him again. "He owns half of York as well," he muttered into Tom's ear. "Did you know about that, Doyle?"

"I think all of England knows it, sir," Tom replied, puffing again as he hefted the other fellow forward.

As they crested the hill, Rudy stooped to snatch something from the ground beneath the tree.

"What's that there, sir?"

Rudy's eyes gleamed. "It's a billfold." He peered at his found

treasure. "A *fat* billfold. I'd wager it holds more than twenty pound."

"You'd wager on which raindrop wins a race down your windowpane," Tom answered, his heart sinking. "His lordship expects you at the castle, sir. Your brothers are returned, and your married sisters as well."

Rudy raised one sardonic eyebrow. "You've no idea how attractive returning to York sounds in the face of such a programme." He about-faced, and only Tom's quicker movement prevented his charge from tumbling down the hill into snow again. "Papa has charged you with keeping me in line, has he not, Doyle?"

"A task at which I'm clearly failing," Tom responded. "How will I face the earl if you don't return today?" *Perhaps the Prime Minister's brother requires a valet?*

"Attend me to the gaming tables in York, then." Rudy managed to make his request sound both reasonable, and less alarming than facing the earl. "I'm sure you shall have good luck. Christmastide is a time for good luck – and I've used up all the bad luck there is," he expounded with the logic of a fool, a gambler, and an earl's well-heeled son.

Tom reached an arm towards the billfold. "May I see it?"

Rudy handed his treasure over without a murmur. *He must be more inebriated than usual.* Tom weighed the purse in his hand. Rudy might be drunk, but the fellow could estimate a monetary amount to the penny with unerring accuracy.

"This twenty pound matters to someone," Tom went on. "The bills are fresh but the purse is worn," he said, running his thumb over the outline of a bird worked into the leather purse. The stitching was worn but well applied.

"Then hold it and I won't wager it," Rudy straightened. "I'll

visit the silver-hell only and I'll only wager my own funds."

"You've none," Tom reminded him.

"Aren't you already holding my Christmas allowances?" Rudy smiled winningly. "I'm aware you received them instead of me."

"Your father preferred me to preserve them from your bad luck," Tom cocked a brow of his own this time.

"The old fellow doesn't trust me," Rudy replied in tones of mock-offense.

"Can't imagine why." Tom shrugged, sighing deeply. Rudy would attend the gaming hells of York with or without him. The lad was sixteen going on for a fool. "I'll attend you, sir, if you agree I'll hold all purses on my person and I do not have to wager either purse."

"Agreed!" Shouted Rudy, waving down a pony and trap heading towards Cantwell from the Castle. "Halloo! Are you headed to York?" He smiled again as the couple in the trap slowed down. "Oh, Partridge – well met indeed!" Rudy bowed.

Beside him, Tom did the same. "Keeper and Mrs Partridge, how pleasant to see you."

"It is," Partridge replied, nodding towards the glowering sky. "At least, it seems so in this moment. I'm taking Mrs Partridge for a short drive," he explained, though with his wife's arm linked through his own there was truly no need. "She's barely had a breath of air since Charlie blessed us." His words were followed by a violent spasm of coughing.

"Keeper, turn us for home," Mrs Partridge urged. "I am perfectly capable of driving myself another time."

"Not all the way to York, you're not," her husband responded firmly, reaching out an arm to Rudy. "Climb up, Mr Cantwell and we'll see you safely there." He seemed surprised when Tom helped Rudy into the trap and hopped up beside them. The trap

was designed for four so they fit comfortably enough. "If we hurry we can out-drive the weather."

"I didn't know you enjoyed the delights of York as well, Mr Doyle," Mrs Partridge's disapproval sharpened her tone.

Tom was grateful for Rudy's hasty explanation. "Oh no, madam. Doyle attends such meets only to oblige my father, you know. His entire role is to keep a close eye on me. He's a very well-behaved valet, is Doyle. Far better than I."

Tom grunted as he took over the reins from Keeper Partridge.

Mrs Partridge smiled at Tom with such delight, he felt bold enough to ask her a question.

"How is the eldest Miss Partridge? Have you heard from your other children at all?" He thought she tried not to turn her smile into a grin.

"Callie is very well, thank you for inquiring Mr Doyle. She is preparing the twelfth night cakes today. James is at sea, posted to *The Amazon*. The wars are ended but we imagine his return will take some time. Our daughter Florrie is in service as you know, thanks to the kind recommendation from your brother."

"We're most grateful," Keeper Partridge broke in.

Tom grinned. "I'm sure I did very little. It's your daughter's diligence that secured her the position. My brother and I merely suggested her suitability for the Ryan sisters."

"Still, it was kind of you both," Mrs Partridge insisted. "It's kind of you to take such solicitous care of Mr Cantwell as well, Mr Doyle."

"I concur." Rudy nodded.

Tom snorted. "I come only to ensure my coat's safe return."

He was gratified to hear them all laugh as the trap lurched towards York. Laughter seemed better than the unease that spread through the group whenever Keeper Partridge's cough

grew too much.

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"Where is it? Oh, where on earth is it?" Callie scrambled up the pear tree and back down, heedless of her newly-mended clothing. Heart hammering, she dug into the snow with her bare hands - since her mittens appeared to be lost forever as well. Mittens were nothing though, to the family billfold, which Papa had entrusted to Callie in order to buy Ma Hobbs's bread. She'd already ripped her bag apart, in case the billfold had somehow become secreted into the stitching. *My most foolish thought yet.* Her family were convinced that most of Callie's thoughts were foolish. She blushed for herself as she hurried home.

She daren't be absent from Charlie for long - besides, she'd left the cakes baking on the hearth - but she had to try. She *had* to. The billfold held all the extra funds her siblings sent home for Christmastide. With mama unable to bake her usual quota of goods to sell or barter, Callie knew their whole family was counting on these funds to see them through the season.

By the time she gave up and hurried home, tears beaded the corners of her eyes. She arrived home just as Charlie woke, sobbing, from his sleep. Callie dipped a small cloth into the bucket of milk and encouraged her little brother to suck on the fabric. It soothed him enough to be carried across to the rocking chair where she sat, and rocked, and sang to Charlie, doing her best to ignore the sinking feeling in the pit of her belly as she worried over the missing billfold. Lost, she reminded herself. It wasn't missing. *I lost it.*



## Three French Hens



**Y**ou bloody cheat!" The ham-fisted Crocky's Dunner shoved his chair back with a bang. As he advanced slowly towards Rudy, Tom noted the fellow seemed built for wrestling bears. Leaving his drink at the bar, Tom hurried across to assist.

"Bloody hell." He ducked beneath a flying fist, twisting away from the bulk of Rudy's attacker, dragging the boy from his seat in one swift movement. Shoving Cantwell beneath the card table, both men flinched as a club broke over the wood above them. More epithets blistered the air as other men came running, angry with loss, or drink, or boredom – perhaps all three. Rudy leaned towards Tom.

"I would never cheat at cards, Doyle." He murmured.

*No, just at dice.* "I thought you were playing Hazard," he replied as the skirmish moved closer to the bar. When he heard the smash of glass bottles, Tom seized Rudy's collar and pulled him along beneath the table, almost falling on top of his charge in the process. Once on the other side of the room, the pair made

a run for the door. Outside the room, they flattened themselves against the panelling behind the door, keeping well out of the way as a dozen of the den's employees rushed the room.

"That was a close run thing," Rudy panted, leaning beneath a portrait of Lord Nelson.

"I'll say." Tom ran a damp palm through his hair. His skull felt as though tiny splinters were pricking at his skull, and there was a glint in Rudy's eye he didn't like at all. "May we return home now, sir? *Please*."

It wasn't easy to sound commanding to a Cantwell. Tom wondered, not for the first time, at the wisdom of his lordship's appointments. Surely the earl's other two sons could not be so much trouble. *Perhaps I ought to inquire?*

"Of course old man." The glint in Rudy's eye evolved into a full-blown gleam. "As soon as I've looked into the other room."

"There's another room?" Tom hid his surprise because it made him appear foolish. *Of course there's another room.* He uttered a sigh so loud, the nearby curtains fluttered as he watched Rudy straighten his dress before waving rudely to another fellow across the corridor. He scowled as the boy smiled and joined his peers, glancing over his shoulder to address Tom.

"I'm all right, Doyle and I won't be long. I promise. Why don't you await me in the downstairs bar? You've never finished your drink. Have them bill me." He patted his pocket with a grin, flicking a glance towards the sign by the door, which read: 'Members Only'. "You can't come in here in any case." Rudy made a useless attempt to appear apologetic.

Tom stared at the sign. "I didn't know you were a member, Mr Cantwell."

Rudy shrugged. "Of course. See you later." He drew the door closed, leaving Tom in the hallway listening to the shouts

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and smashing glass sounds emanating from the larger, public gaming room. Tom made his way to the stairs and found the downstairs bar. It was only when he took up his whiskey that he reached for his billfold out of habit – and found it absent. The image of Rudy’s grinning face came back to him. *That insolent cub*. Tom also recalled the leather worked bird shape, and how the purse looked like someone had been saving their pound notes for a long time. He hoped like hell Rudy had the sense not to wager it all.

“Another, sir?” The waiter motioned towards the empty glass. Tom nodded and settled in for a long night.

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Rudy returned more quickly than Tom expected. He made his uneven way across the the bar and dropped into the seat opposite. By the downcast look in the boy’s face he’d not met with any good luck today. Tom stood.

“Tell me you haven’t lost it all.” He said tightly.

“I could do that,” Rudy nodded. “Then I’d be a liar as well as a fool.” He dropped his head into his palms and groaned. “*Why* did you let me wager it all?”

“I did no such thing,” Tom pointed out. “You picked my pocket! I don’t even want to know where you learned to do that.”

Rudy grinned unpleasantly. “There was this whore I once knew—”

“Enough.” Tom raised his hand. “Have you anything left at all?” He put out his palm.

Wordlessly, Rudy handed over both empty billfolds. The leather worked bird appeared considerably slimmer.

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"Then we'd best start walking." Tom drained his drink. "We'll be hard-pressed to make it back to Cantwell by dark on foot.

"On foot?" Rudy stared as though Tom had asked him to swim the channel.

"We've no coin for a trap," Tom reminded him. "Besides, perhaps the walk may sober you up."

Rudy shrugged, motioning for two drinks. "Arriving home cucumberish is bad enough. I've no intention of doing so sober."

Tom took up his glass, for once in agreement. The walk back to Cantwell might take hours. Fortification was necessary.

The clock on the wall read two and they could postpone no longer. By the time they stumbled out of Crocky's, Tom regretted his weakness. Rudy could barely stand and the thought of dragging him all the way across country was chilling enough. It took the best part of an hour merely to make it to the road. The streets weren't busy but Rudy's shambling gait impeded progress. He also stopped to greet the gentlemen they passed as though he knew them all. Tom swore bitterly under his breath, wondering if this Christmastide could get much worse. The chimes from York Minster indicated it was nearing tea time and for the first time in his life, Tom Doyle wished for a wife.

Someone to welcome him home after the long, muddy, freezing walk back to Cantwell, dragging the feckless Rudy along every step. A wife would begin with a warm drink and some quiet conversation. Perhaps a seat by the fire. If he closed his eyes, he could almost see it, but he couldn't do that. Not with the earl's son hanging on to his coat buttons like a millstone. *Only with less sense.*

Tom sighed, trying to ignore the image in his mind's eye of Miss Partridge warming his slippers before a cosy fire, a decent

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sized hound dozing before them. Sometimes, he conjured up children – an infant, in a cradle. As the babe slept, Callie would seat herself near to him, and smile, and unwind her honey-brown hair...he suppressed a groaned – then blinked sharply as a familiar voice sounded.

“Well met, gentlemen. May I offer you a seat?” Could Miss Partridge read his expression? Tom hoped not. He straightened, holding Rudy upright with a fistful of jacket clutched across his back. They bowed in unison.

“Good afternoon, Miss Partridge.” Tom smiled up at her, admiring the way wisps of hair shipped round her face. “We’d be very grateful, if you’ve the room.” He eyed the gig doubtfully.

Miss Partridge laughed, glancing into the rear. “It’s not Mr Cantwell’s sort of carriage, and you’ll have to share but we’ll make do.” She reached out a hand, which Rudy accepted.

“I thank you.” He pressed his lips to her gloves.

A dull heat roared through Tom’s gut. “Sir!” He managed, but Rudy only laughed.

“Miss Partridge doesn’t mind at all, do you?” He barely glanced at her before seating himself too closely on her right.

The pink tinge to the lady’s face spoke otherwise.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Partridge.” Tom bowed again before climbing up and sliding in behind them. He barely fit before noticing three feathered bundles shoved into a corner. As he arranged himself in the tight space, the bundle shifted away with a gasping sound.

“Mind the hens!” Miss Partridge warned. “They’re for Cantwell Castle – I believe Ma Hobbs has preparations for your ball well underway, Mr Cantwell.” She turned to Rudy with a stare. “I take it you’ll be recovered by then, sir?”

Rudy shifted uncomfortably beneath her glare. “Yes, ma’am.”

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Tom's mouth fell open. *How the hell did she manage that?*

He was forced to abandon further thought as the gig lurched forward at a pace clearly designed to outpace the impending weather.

## *Four Calling Birds*



**U**nder cover of adjusting her reins, Callie slid her gaze to the side. She'd never sat so close to nobility before. In truth, she'd not been so near the Cantwells' in her life. Mr Cantwell might be handsome if he smartened up a bit. He had the fine Cantwell features and a pleasant enough face.

She had a dim memory that this son was the wildest. Today's behaviour seemed to bear this out. Watching the young man's chin drop slowly against his chest, Callie stifled a laugh when he emitted a loud snore. Behind her, his valet emitted a loud sigh.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Partridge." He sighed again.

Callie did laugh then. "I'm accustomed to such behaviour Mr Doyle. Perhaps you're unaware that I served as governess to a baronet's five daughters before I returned to Cantwell to assist Mama."

"I did not, but such training explains your excellent management of Mr Cantwell. He rarely listens to anyone, least of all me." Yet another sigh.

"Well," reflected Callie, "if he'd behaved any worse, I'd have left you both to the weather." She turned her head and fixed Mr Doyle with a definitive stare – and hardly held it. She'd not been so close to Mr Cantwell's valet before either. Mr Thomas Doyle was rather shockingly attractive at such close quarters.

She cleared her throat, studying her huddling hens. Mr Doyle had arranged himself so as not to disturb them, though the birds seemed to consider him a suitable source of warmth. Mr Doyle reached out a hand to pet one's feathers. The bird uttered a sort of happy coo and shifted nearer.

Callie experienced a rush of gratitude, and sudden understanding. Mr Doyle took good care of those in need of it. Even birds.

"I'll have to stop in at home first to settle your friends," Callie explained, indicating the hens. "Though I don't mind taking the Cantwell road, as it's the shorter route."

"It is," Tom agreed cautiously. "It's not nearly as well used as the York road, Miss Partridge, nor so well kept. Should your gig upset, I don't like our chances of assistance."

Well, that put paid to any tender sensations! Callie sucked in her breath at the hurt, shoulders stiffening as she angled her gaze sharply forwards. "I am a perfectly capable driver, Mr Doyle, I assure you." Her chilly voice met with silence, but she'd not turn again to observe Doyle's expression. *Not by any means.*

She negotiated the tight left turn into Cantwell road in equal silence, aware her back straightened as much as any soldier's, heat prickling through her cheeks. Did her face appear mottled now? Does it matter? *Yes.*

She'd thought Mr Doyle handsome and kind, and she did like him. *Did*, past tense, because it's disappointing to find he underestimated her as much as anyone else. Callie wasn't



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able to go to sea like her brothers or make her way in London like Florrie, but she'd made herself useful in her previous employment and she missed it.

Blinking away a momentary flash of tears, she slapped the reins across Enid's flanks. She ducked her head automatically as the road passed beneath the eaves of Cantwell Wood, though there was no need. While the wood was immense and well-treed, there were few leaves to speak of, though a fir retained its greenery here and there, and there was mistletoe of course.

Callie didn't want to notice the mistletoe. Mistletoe made her think of kissing, and that must be a sin at Christmastide, with an earl's son asleep beside her, and a handsome man murmuring apologies at her back... *Apologies?*

"I beg your pardon, indeed." Mr Doyle's quiet voice seemed to whisper. "I meant no offense, but your gig is not designed for two ribald gentlemen, three French hens, and one offended Miss Partridge. This is all I intended to infer. I have no wish to impugn your excellent management of your vehicle."

"Thank you, Mr Doyle." Callie replied as an entirely different prickling sensation rippled through her body. She cleared her throat and turned her head to offer him a smile.

Mr Doyle smiled tightly back.

"We'd still be stumbling along the high street if it wasn't for you and your hens," he added.

"And Enid," Callie replied automatically.

"Enid?" She could almost hear Mr Doyle's eyebrows rising.

"The pony," Callie explained.

"Ah, of course." His response warmed her cheeks further and Callie wished for something to shift her focus away from mistletoe and Mr Doyle's quiet understanding.

Apparently Christmastide wishes are granted, for she heard

the most mournful sound she'd come across in her life and drew the gig to a halt.

"Whoa." She turned in her seat. "Mr Doyle, can you hear it?"

He started at Callie in puzzlement, then blinked as the sound came again – a high-pitched keening growing fainter the more they listened.

"I hear it, Miss Partridge," he murmured.

"Can you tell where it's coming from?" Callie asked as she shifted to the end of the gig seat. This time she could see Mr Doyle's leaping eyebrows for herself. To assist his direction, Callie imitated the sound as best she could, whistling aloud and cocking her head to catch it again.

She caught Mr Doyle staring at her with the strangest expression. Then the keening sound returned and his gaze shifted to one side.

"Somewhere near that oak tree, I think." He nodded towards an impressive tree, with only the canopy visible from the road. "Looks like it's been there since the Norman conquest." Mr Doyle turned back to Callie. "More to the point, what is the sound, Miss Partridge?"

"That's the advantage of being a Keeper's daughter, Mr Doyle. I learned the sounds of small creatures in distress from the cradle. I'm not surprised such noise is unknown to a valet. Do take my seat and hold the reins steady while I investigate." Callie climbed carefully down from the gig, mindful of her newly-mended skirts.

Mr Doyle appeared to open his mouth in protest, then shut it and obeyed. Callie supposed sitting in the front of the gig could hardly be unwelcome after Mr Doyle had been squeezed behind it for the best part of an hour.

He was a fairly tall man, now that he unfolded himself.

### *Four Calling Birds*

However, Mr Cantwell wouldn't humble himself to fit in such a tight space, nor take such care with the hens. As Callie made her way further into the trees, she wondered if it was treason to prefer the character of a valet to an earl's son. She whistled again, listening intently.

The keening noise was fading and Callie's sense of urgency returned. It was foolish to race headlong through snow-covered woodland, especially when she didn't know the path, but she ran anyway. Her head twisted left to right and back again as she sought the trunk of the great tree. She fancied she heard the crunch of snow behind her, but she dared not turn. Somewhere nearby was a creature in pain, and Callie was trained to go to its aid.

She'd no idea how long she spent searching, but the snow clouds lowered above the wood when she tripped in the snow, falling forward with a cry as pain shot through her ankle. Tears fell as Callie looked up to find the base of the great tree – and there by the roots, lay a straggly nest. Four baby birds were crying for nothing.

Such creatures born in December rarely survived, but the turn of the year sometimes yielded strange occurrences in the natural world. After all, Charlie had just been born and he was a December baby, wasn't he?

The mother bird was nowhere to be found, likely frozen beneath the snow and so Callie cried – for her pained ankle and the dying birds, and truly because she knew what it was to be afraid of losing one's family. This was, after all, why she'd given up her previous position. It was why she came home at all.

Christmastide in Cantwell wasn't about her; it was about her family. Once her sobs subsided, Callie wiped her eyes clumsily

*Caroline's Christmastide*

with her gloves, studying the infant birds. The little creatures fell silent then, and Callie sat sniffing on her knees in the silent, snowy wood.

## *Five Gold Rings*



**G**ood lord, this girl could run! Tom found her at last, on her knees beside the grand old oak. She appeared distressed. He bit his lip to stop himself moving closer.

“Miss Partridge, are you well?”

“I’m all right, Mr Doyle,” she sniffed, her voice thick with tears. “It’s just — the birds. I thought to save them but they’re—” She gave herself a shake and turned to face him, her bonnet askew and traces of tears marking her fair cheeks.

Tom hurried forward with his kerchief. She accepted with a little nod and blew her nose. He looked over her head and beheld the crumpled nest.

“They’re frozen, aren’t they?” She said quietly.

Tom knelt beside her and leaned towards the birds. Tiny sounds emanated from the nest.

“Not yet, they aren’t. May I have your bonnet, Miss Partridge?”

She turned to stare at him. “My bonnet?”

"We may be able to preserve at least some of these chicks, if we can warm them quickly." Tom offered her a small smile. "Is it impertinent to ask?"

Miss Partridge's smile may have warmed the whole wood. "No more impertinent than running off and leaving you to mind the gig." She unpinned her bonnet and flipped it upside down, before handing it to Tom. "What else do you need?"

"Well, a fireplace would be best, but there's little chance of such out here," he replied. "Any wood will be too wet. See if you can find any dry leaves, or moss. Something to warm them and keep them dry until we can get them out of the wind and snow."

"Of course," Miss Partridge beamed at him. "I saw Papa create a dry nest once. He saved an entire nest of chicks." She tugged off her gloves. "Start with these. They're not the finest wool, but they're warm."

Tom blinked at her. "Miss Partridge, your hands will freeze."

"Nonsense, Mr Doyle. Besides, I insist." She arranged the gloves in her upended bonnet to forestall further argument and began transferring the four birds efficiently into their new home. She took care to blow on each tiny, feathered breast as she did so, rubbing gently with her thumb. Tom merely stood, holding the bonnet as though he were a valet to birds like his favourite saint.

Her hands mesmerised him – so delicate, and efficient, so careful with each tiny life. His body hardened as he watched her lips purse, blowing across the final feathered chest. When Miss Partridge's gaze lifted to his, Tom gasped. Her dark eyes shimmered with unshed tears, seeming larger and brighter and far too enticing.

"You were right," she murmured in tones of awe. "We may

## *Five Gold Rings*

revive them yet. I thank you.” Leaning closer, she rested one freezing palm on Tom’s arm as she reached up to graze his cheek with her lips. He tightened his grip on the bonnet, lest the baby birds suffer. His whole body heated as though he’d a fever, but he was well. He was wonderfully well. He held his breath.

“Miss Partridge, I—”

“What are you two about then, leaving me to freeze on the path back there?” Rudy’s voice was both petulant and pathetic as he made his way from beneath the fir trees. “What in the blazes is going on, Doyle?”

In this moment, there was no one on earth whom Tom wanted to knock down more.

Miss Partridge drew back in a hurry before scrabbling around the bottom of the oak tree, pulling out browned moss and squeezing it to see if it was too icy. Any that was dry enough became padding for their makeshift nest.

“I beg your pardon,” Tom offered, with a cold glance at Rudy. “You ought not to use such language, sir,” he said more loudly. “And is the gig secured?”

Rudy offered them both his most brilliant grin. “I beg your pardon, Miss Partridge,” he bowed. “And yes, I tied it to a stump.”

Miss Partridge hardly raised her eyes. “Thank you, Mr Cantwell – have you much need of your scarf?”

Rudy’s hands flew protectively to his neckwear. “It’s terribly cold, Miss Partridge.”

“And these birds may die,” she replied, turning to face him. She stomped across the clearing and seized his scarf, drawing it off with a grin. Returning to Tom, she padded their nest-bonnet further, smiling as the birds began chirping softly again.

Gratified to see a faint reddening of Rudy’s cheeks as he stared

back at Miss Partridge, Tom smiled and explained their mission — then scowled at the lad's next words.

"How far do you think we are from any cover, Miss Partridge? Isn't there a looker's hut nearby?"

Miss Partridge looked at him in surprise, then seemed to evaluate their surroundings.

"Why, I believe you're right, Mr Cantwell. I'd forgotten this one."

Tom watched Rudy's wolfish stare flicker over Miss Partridge as though she were dinner. He couldn't see her expression but from the way Rudy gazed down at her, he guessed she was smiling at him in much the same way she'd smiled at Tom. A new kind of heat spiked through his body and his fist curled. *If she kisses his cheek, I will knock him down.*

"The hut's not far at all," she announced to them both, with another devastating smile. She hurried towards a tiny trail to the right of the oak, nearly hidden by snow. "Take care on the path. It's not been used since the spring."

"Thank you, Miss Partridge." Rudy caught her up and offered his arm. She paused, staring up at him before slipping her sleeve against his, while Tom trudged behind them, doing his best to keep the bonnet-nest as level as possible. The others soon outstripped his slower progress.

Who did the lad think he was, staring at Miss Partridge like he might fill her dance card at the Cantwell Ball? *He's the earl's son.* Tom sighed inwardly. It wasn't as though he needed reminding. He wondered what might happen if he struck the earl's son. Nothing good, sure enough, but would it be worse than watching Rudy flirt his way to the Keeper's daughter?

Tom had pulled Rudy out of too many scrapes with young ladies to credit his intentions, but he'd barely time to consider



## *Five Gold Rings*

any further before they reached the hut. Miss Partridge clearly knew her business. She had no trouble unbarring the old wooden half-door. They entered the rustic little place and located the ready pile of dry firewood easily enough.

Placing the nested birds carefully on the hearth, Tom found the tinder box and lit the pot-bellied stove.

"I wish there was a way to warm them more effectively," he murmured. "And we ought to find some water."

"I'll fetch it," Rudy announced, shocking Tom out of his focus on the birds. "Is there a pump?"

"Nothing of the kind, I'm afraid, Mr Cantwell. There ought to be a gallon jar or two. Shall I help you look?" Miss Partridge smiled at Rudy again. *Damn!*

"I'm certain Mr Cantwell can look for himself." Tom spoke up. "I've had an idea about warming the birds."

She turned back to him. "Oh?"

"Are there any crumble rings?" He hastened to explain in the face of Miss Partridge's puzzled expression. "The Keepers use them to make crumble cakes, usually in sets of six. Your father surely knows of this?"

Miss Partridge nodded. "Oh! Oh, yes." An old cabinet stood in one corner of the rough kitchen area. A quick rummage through the various drawers and cavities yielded the yellowing rings, though one appeared too worn for further use.

"We merely require four," Tom assured her when she held up the useless item. "Now, have we an earthenware dish?"

This, too, was found within the cabinet, as were the mason jars of water and a few tin spoons. Miss partridge wasted no time in tipping a little water from a jar into a pannikin and offering a shallow teaspoon to each tiny beak. Three of the little birds accepted their drink. The fourth seemed too far

gone to care. His tiny head hung limply on his neck, as though life were too heavy for him. Tom's kinship with this forlorn fellow felt immediate.

"There, there," Miss Partridge whispered, blowing on his little chest ever so gently. "Don't give up yet, Rudy."

"Is it a boy then?" Tom asked.

Miss Partridge offered a cheeky grin. "I've no idea but he sleeps a lot."

The subtle laughter from Rudy indicated he was charmed, rather than offended, by the lady's teasing. Tom ought to be relieved at this — but he wasn't.

Clearing his throat, he arranged the rings in the earthenware dish. Next, he transferred one bird to each ring, tucking them in as neatly as possible. He was pleased to see the little fellows sitting up and blinking a little now that they were out of the cold. Even the Rudy-chick looked perkier. The smile on Miss Partridge's face was more than pleasing. She was tantalising and it was hard to turn his attention back to the birds – and to make his next pronouncement.

"We must place the dish on the stove—"

"Mr Doyle!"

"Yes, dammit Doyle!"

Tom raised his hand at the others. "The iron won't be warm yet. It'll heat slowly enough in this weather and the birds will revive. What we must not do, is leave the dish atop the plate too long," he warned.

Miss Partridge nodded, placed the dish on the stove and sat down beside it to wait.

## Six Geese a-Laying



**I** 've named the others after my siblings," Callie told the gentlemen. "There's William for my midshipman brother, Florrie for my sister, and little Charlie." She stared at the birds as though focus alone might save them, though Mr Doyle's point about overdoing the heat was well made. She thought he smiled at her. *I hope he did.*

"The birds are your family, Miss Partridge?"

"Papa says all creatures are our family," Callie replied softly. "He enjoys his work as Keeper more than any other work in the world."

"I'm certain he's more satisfied than many a wealthier man." Mr Doyle's response sent a warmth through Callie that had nothing to do with the stove.

"If only we had some cards," Rudy suggested loudly, looking to Mr Doyle.

"No!" Doyle answered with as much vehemence as volume. "And there's no drink in this place except water."

Callie thought he muttered something under his breath. It

couldn't be an epithet. Mr Doyle's manners were better than Mr Cantwell's, which reminded her of something. She turned to Mr Cantwell.

"Did you cover the birds, Mr Cantwell?"

Cantwell gaped at her. "I beg your pardon?" He shifted his glance to the chicks.

"She means the hens, sir." Tom's voice sounded weary and verging on the wrong side of impatient.

Callie wondered if he was holding in another sigh. By the stunned expression on Mr Cantwell's face, she gathered that he'd not given the French hens any thought at all. She undid her cloak and draped it over a chair, keeping one eye on the chicks. The little birds fluttered and cooed as they settled into their rings.

"Please do so, Mr Cantwell." She smiled as beguilingly as possible in the face of his stony stare.

"You wish me to march back to the trap, and cover your hens?"

"They're your hens in truth, Mr Cantwell." Callie kept her voice mild. "The property of Cantwell Castle. There'll be a deal of fuss if they're ruined, and I'd have to explain why I was delayed."

"Back through all this snow, without my scarf..." Mr Cantwell seemed to be struggling with himself. "Send Doyle," he said finally, looking at Callie in a way she wasn't certain she liked.

"Mr Doyle is required here to watch the chicks. The stove was his idea." She stood and retrieved his scarf from the table. "Please, Mr Cantwell?" He didn't refuse when she reached up to wind the scarf round his neck. In fact, he caught the opposite end of it, as though playing a game. Pulling Callie closer than was decent, he lifted her hand to his lips.

Callie's limbs froze as his lips grazed her gloved wrist. There

## *Six Geese a-Laying*

was no sudden warmth flowing through her at his touch, but there was plenty of heated confusion.

Tom moved then, fussing about the little birds as though he were their mother and clearing his throat too loudly.

"Shall you have my coat, then, sir?" He removed his caped greatcoat.

"All right, Doyle." Mr Cantwell gazed hard at Callie, before releasing her hand. He took up the coat and bowed to them both, as though conferring a great favour. "I'll go."

"I thank you." Callie curtsied. Once he'd left, she resumed her seat beside the stove. Mr Doyle took up his station on the other side, peering down at each fragile 'cheep' from the little creatures. Apart from the birds, and an occasional 'pop' from the stove, an unsettled silence reined. Tom spoke first.

"Do you know what species they are?"

Callie's face broke into smiles. "You mean you do not?"

Mr Doyle shrugged. "I'm a valet, not a gamekeeper, Miss Partridge."

A spurt of anger shot through her. "My father may not serve his lordship at the castle, but no one on the estate would eat so well without my papa."

Mr Doyle shook his head. "I beg your pardon, Miss Partridge. I have the highest respect for Keeper Partridge. I do not have his expertise, is all. Must you always respond so impulsively?"

Callie bristled again – and exhaled. "Yes," she replied. "I'm known for it, but if it vexes you I will attempt to improve on it." She blinked away her blush before catching his gaze with her own. "My turn to ask questions now, Mr Doyle. Why, pray tell, were you pair stumbling home through the snow at all?"

He said something about found money and York, and how the money had been lost. Callie blinked at his account, which

seemed tempered to favour his employer.

"Mr Cantwell is of age, is he not?"

"He is, and I suppose I'm too used to protecting him." Tom replied as though this was the very last question he wanted to answer. "I took the purses for safe keeping. Mr Cantwell took the funds back from me at Crocky's. You do know—"

"I am aware of all the gaming hells in York, Mr Doyle, though I've no experience." Callie couldn't help her sharpened tone. "My sea-faring brother talks a great deal when he's ashore, you know, and Florrie writes about more from London that our mama would like."

Mr Doyle nodded, but he didn't smile. Callie didn't smile either and she didn't like the mention of 'found money'. Her recent experience stung her conscience like thorns in her fingertips.

"You ought to have turned any found monies in to the magistrate," she said primly.

"You're correct, Miss Partridge. I ought to have stood up to my employer, though he swore he'd not abuse the purse." He flushed. "It isn't easy to refuse Mr Cantwell his desires."

"He's not a child," Callie pointed out, though it was clear Mr Cantwell adhered to a certain type of man. She thought of her brother and his fellow navvys. Despite Callie's inexperience, rowdy young men seemed more common than not. A man who looked her straight in the eye and told the unflattering truth about himself, was not.

"Is the money safe now?"

She wasn't surprised when Mr Doyle sighed and shook his head. He pulled an empty leather billfold from his vest. "This is all that's left."

Callie stood, heart thudding faster as anger burned in her

## *Six Geese a-Laying*

gut. "That belongs to my Papa." She snatched it up, tracing the leather-worked design. The slimness of the pouch made it clear her family's Christmastide funds were gone. "With Mama still weak from her lying in she can't take on as much work as last year, so the funds sent by my siblings are all the spare we have, you see, and—." She stopped and threw it on the table.

"*Had*, not have — and now there's nothing at all." She stared back at Mr Doyle. *If only he didn't have such kind eyes.* They were of the palest blue, like a winter sky, brimming with inner intensity and promise of warmth after frost. Callie mentally shook herself. *Never mind his eyes!* How could a man who saved baby birds from death, keep her father's found purse as his own? She didn't want him to be so very bad. And what of Mr Cantwell's behaviour?

The door opened. *Speak of the devil.*

"Did you miss me?" Mr Cantwell laughed, winking at Callie. Mr Doyle stepped forwards to brush the snow off his shoulders. Callie straightened, resisting the urge to slap them both at least once. Instead, she offered her shortest possible curtsy.

"I thank you both for assisting with the birds," she announced in a clipped, furious tone that froze both men and left them open-mouthed. She donned her cloak and stared scornfully about the hut. "There are six geese laying up for me in the castle pens, so do excuse me. I'm sure such resourceful *gentlemen* will find their own way home." Her emphasis appeared to hit home: Doyle flushed, while Cantwell's eyebrows met his hairline at speed.

Snatching the family's (empty) billfold from the table, Callie swept from the hut into a world of white, regretting her gloves, but not her decision to leave the others behind. Neither were fit company in her estimation! One was near enough a thief

(despite living in a castle), and the other did nothing to deter his friend. It was only as she reached the gig that she remembered the baby birds.

“Perhaps keeping such fragile creatures alive might teach them something, Enid,” she muttered, petting the horse before peeking beneath Mr Doyle’s coat to check on the hens. The three birds blinked at her in evident understanding. Hens were female, after all. Presumably these three had encountered their share of arrogant cocks.

Callie ran her hands over the worsted wool. An army caped coat? She’d not known Mr Doyle served in the wars, like her brother. Her ire towards him may yet cool.

“But not yet,” she murmured as she set course for Cantwell castle. Mr Doyle may have a charming smile and a pleasant face, but Callie had six geese to manage, along with her hens, and all the eggs she could harvest. She closed her eyes a moment, but the image of Mr Doyle’s warm blue eyes resided stubbornly behind her eyelids. Snapping her eyes open, Callie slapped the reins over Enid’s flanks with a sense of finality.

Twelfth night was barely a week away. There was punch to blend and greenery to be got (no mean feat in winter). She simply had no time for earl’s third sons who lost all their money, or their handsome valets.



## *Seven Swanns a-Swimming*



**I**t was close to sundown by the time Callie finally arrived at Keeper's Lodge. She drove directly into the makeshift shelter leaning up against the oldest outbuilding, then hopped down to unharness Enid.

"You've done well, old girl." She stroked the pony's rough nose and led her into further beneath the roofed-in space, walled on three sides by hay bales. To stop Enid eating her own stable, Callie filled a trough with fresher hay and stirred up the mash. It wasn't safe to light a brazier beneath a shelter constructed from hay, so Enid ate her mash cold. Still, she harrumphed her thanks as Callie removed her tack, cleaned it, and hung it the one solid wall. Only after she'd completed this, and oiled the axels, did she lift the officer's coat and take stock of her hens.

"What shall we name them, Enid?" She asked.

The horse's ears flickered at her name, though she didn't bother looking up from her feed.

"I'd not bother naming any of them, dear girl." Papa's voice came from the other side of the shelter. "Seeing as they're

destined for table at the big house.” He placed a palm on each of her shoulders and looked into her eyes. “Are you all right, Callie? I was on the verge of sending out the dogs. I don’t like you absent at the turn of the year.” He seemed to sniff the air suspiciously. “There’s thieves about, you know, and your mama needs you home.”

“I’m quite well, Papa.” She turned back to the birds. “Even if they’re only to live for five more days, I like to name them. Perhaps Faith, Hope, and Charity. I may not have my young people to teach, but I must not forget my work.”

Papa shrugged and hefted an old roosting box from the ground. “As you wish, my dear. I won’t pretend that your earnings as a governess weren’t a help, though we’ve managed more with less before now. What’s happened to your bonnet? We’ve none spare as you know-ow-ow.” A coughing fit took him and Callie grabbed the coop, pulling the weight of it on to herself.

“I have it, Papa,” she said quietly.

“So do I,” he replied stiffly, but he let go and she stumbled backwards into Enid. Fortunately, the old horse barely shifted her weight. She raised her head, stared at them both from soft brown eyes, and went back to her trough. A jolt of envy speared Callie. *Oh to be a horse...*

Setting the coop down, before blowing on her hands reminded Callie she’d need to stitch yet another set of gloves before next Sunday. In truth, before the Cantwell Assembly, only six days away. *Help!* Taking a deep breath, she prepared her explanation about the billfold.

“Keeper! You’re wanted immediately.” Mama’s voice called loudly from the house. Already, Callie heard Charlie’s hoarse cry and her gut contracted. *Not croup, not now. Not this year.*

*Seven Swanns a-Swimming*

Papa hugged her with one arm and nodded towards the house. "There's soup on the hearth when you're done out here."

"Thank you, Papa." Callie hugged him back, then turned her attention to the hens, lifting the coat out of the way. Her father stopped, suddenly stern.

"Whose coat is that Callie?"

"Why, it's Mr Doyle's, sir. I was delayed because of the gentlemen Doyle and Cantwell –"

Mama's cry came again, and Callie shrugged. "It's quite the tale, Papa. Perhaps once Charlie's quiet and Mama sleeps? Be assured I'm well."

Her father nodded and left Callie to house the hens and explain to each of them the meaning of their names. She measured out the corn and fed them all, hoping for eggs on the morrow. If the hens were warm enough, and comfortable, they might lay. This thought sent her across the newer outbuilding and out the other side.

A small courtyard housed the geese being fattened for twelfth night and Callie greeted them each by name. Tipping their grain out on to the ground was the only safe way to check their roosting boxes. Cantwell geese guarded their nests fiercely otherwise. Callie was delighted to find a half-dozen large new eggs.

"Well done, girls," she murmured. "Especially you, Rosie." She had a soft spot for little Rosie, who seemed the smallest of the flock, though she always gave them the most eggs. There were two from her this evening, adding to the three she'd delivered up at dawn: A true blessing, was Rosie.

"You've done far better than Miss Partridge at any rate," she whispered to the Keeper's Christmastide fowl. Overhead, a crow called to another. The mournful sound nearly sent tears

## *Caroline's Christmastide*

down Callie's face, but she wasn't the sort to cry out her troubles. Drawing the billfold from her bosom, Callie traced the avian design with one shivering thumb.

She wondered if the leather was worth anything, then shook her head. The billfold had belonged to her grandfather. Keeper Partridge would miss it easily.

She stood a moment in the gloaming, wondering how to break the news of the lost money. Her anger at Doyle and Cantwell wasn't absent, but she was as culpable as they. Moreso in truth, for Papa had entrusted the billfold to Callie, not the gentlemen from the castle. They'd not have had Papa's money if she'd not been careless in the first place. This was the honest truth. *I lost it.*

Callie sniffled miserably, wiping her eyes on Mr Doyle's much-soiled kerchief. Guilt twinged in her belly. She ought not to have left the men alone in the snow. Callie hoped Doyle and Cantwell arrived home safely.

It wasn't far to the castle, and she'd not be able to rest until she knew for certain they'd returned. She'd see to it after making her excuses for dinner. Her stomach was in such knots, she couldn't stomach a meal anyway. Nodding to herself, Callie entered the Keeper's cottage by the courtyard door, doing her best to think up a way to replace the family's Christmastide purse. *How?* Callie untied her cloak and entered the dining room, where she stopped dead.

Papa sat in the rocking chair, gasping for breath with a palm over his chest, Mama beside him on her knees, whispering so as not to wake Charlie.

"Mama? Papa?" Callie's voice shook and this time she let her tears fall. "What is it? What does he need?"

Papa attempted to speak, but Callie raised one hand. "Don't

## *Seven Swanns a-Swimming*

speak, Papa," she ordered. "Mama, is it the pain in his chest again?"

Mama nodded. "There's a physician staying at the castle for Christmas, Callie. Doctor Swann." Her mother said. "It's nearer than Cantwell."

Callie nodded and re-tied her cloak. "I'll fetch him here in a moment, Mama." She ran to the stable and drew Enid away from her trough. "Sorry, old girl, but it's you, me, and some sort of Swann fellow." She buckled on the bridle and led her forward between the gig shafts, warming her hands in the steaming, horsey breath.

Callie bit her lip to control her shaking hands, cut her knuckles on a nail head, and swore. Enid's steady, quiet presence was a balm. By the time they set off, she was more grateful than ever for the well-trained creature and Papa's affinity with animals. It was less than a mile, and the sun set less than an hour ago, so it couldn't be five o'clock yet. She wondered if the family might still be at tea. Food seemed irrelevant now. Even the lost funds were less important in the face of this greater, looming loss.

"We can't lose him. We just can't," Callie prayed aloud as she shot past the castle chapel house, taking the sharp left turn toward the back courtyard. A moment later, she was banging on the back door, and being upbraided by Cook.

"Young lady, what do you mean by—"

"It's Keeper," Callie said clearly. "His heart, I think. Mama says there's a Doctor Swann staying?"

"All seven Swanns are here at the castle," Cook replied. "She jerked her head at one of her maids. "Fetch Butler Harris. We'll need his lordship's leave." She led Callie to a chair. "You sit right down there, my girl. We'll be as quick as we can." Stumping

## *Caroline's Christmastide*

across to the ancient stove, she lifted an enormous brown teapot and filled a large mug with a hot, steady stream of dark brown tea. "Get that into you."

Callie wrapped her hands around her mug, taking a slow sip of the strongest brew she'd ever tasted. It was bitter, but oddly comforting. She tried to smile.

"Thank you."

"Never fear, Cantwell will do right by Keeper," Cook assured her, settling in with comforting gossip. "Those Swann children are a good brood, lass. Five well-grown girls and not a one as lovely as you. Their mama's determined to get her daughters wed to his lordship's sons, I bet. The castle's swimming with plots this Christmastide. How're your Twelfth Night Cakes coming along?"

Before Callie could respond, Butler Harris bustled in, poured out his own cup of tea, and added a dash of fortification from a silver flask he seemed to keep behind the sugar jar.

"Miss Partridge?"

Callie nodded.

"I've spoken with his lordship. The earl stands ready to assist in any way, as does his physician. Did you arrive on foot?"

"My gig is outside, with Enid," she explained.

Mr Harris blinked. "Is Enid your sister?"

"Enid is a horse," Mr Doyle's voice filled the room from his position atop the servant's stairs. "And she's in demand this night. Good evening, Miss Partridge." He bowed stiffly in Callie's direction. "Doctor Swann is at your disposal. His lordship requests I drive the trap around to the front."

## *Eight Maids a-Milking*



Tom tried not to look at Miss Partridge as she settled herself alongside him in the gig. *It's rude to stare.* Still, he blinked several times in shock at this capable, clever woman suddenly needing someone by her side. He blinked again at knowing this 'someone' seemed to be him. As Enid lurched sharply through the courtyard exit, Miss Partridge clutched his arm. Tom nearly drove the gig into a stone column.

"I-I'm glad you gentlemen found your way safely, Mr Doyle," she murmured. "I ought to beg your pardon."

"We both ought to beg yours, and indeed I do. Cantwell will too, when he's finished pouting before his brothers. We made our own trouble and I'm sorry you got caught up in it." Tom smiled at her as they pulled up before the grand main entrance. "The long walk home was just what Rudy – I mean Mr Cantwell – needed to sober up before he met with his lordship." He managed not to sigh. There were more important concerns than his conscience. "All of Cantwell castle are praying for Keeper, Miss Partridge."

"Thank you."

He patted her arm, wishing he could say something more uplifting but he was a valet, not a poet. Her proximity made it difficult to think. Well, that wasn't true. It was easy enough to think about her arm against his, and the shape of her lips when she smiled. Lips he wanted against his, and soon... Tom forced his thoughts into cooler channels. That kind of thinking *was* harder now but he held his tongue, held his breath and behaved as properly as possible, because frightened though she was, worried as she must be, Miss Partridge was still damnably attractive.

The door opened and a footman preceded Dr Swann, handing up a large black bag to Tom, before the doctor attempted to squeeze himself beside Miss Partridge.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Doctor." Miss Partridge unwound her arm from Tom's and slipped behind the men to take up the small seat space. She fit easily and Tom sobered as he listened to Dr Swann's detailed inquiries regarding Keeper's coughing, his breathing, and how long his condition had been in this state.

When they arrived back at Keeper's Lodge the good doctor jumped down, nodding as Tom handed him the bag. He wasted no time, hurrying straight in without pausing to knock.

Tom turned to Miss Partridge, who was clambering into the driving seat. She took her place beside him again, though she forbore to hold his arm. *Damn.*

"Would you mind driving round to Enid's stable? I must tuck her in," she explained. "Mama leaves a lantern."

He smiled. "Of course not, Miss Partridge." He positioned the gig according to her directions, then jumped down to lead Enid from between the hafts, surprised at the hay-bale stable and the ancient dark lantern. The guilt in his gut trebled as he



## *Eight Maids a-Milking*

remembered his billfold.

"Th-thank you, Mr Doyle." Miss Partridge smiled at him.

"It's the least I can do," he replied, hoping the darkness hid his flushed face. He glanced around, noting the old roosting box and the fluttering sounds from the birds within. The feed bins were old too, and in need of repair. There was no spare tack and a half-planed plank of wood indicated Keeper was repairing his own hafts instead of having this work seen to in the village. Work that'd likely been interrupted by his current bout of ill health.

"What became of the baby birds?" Miss Partridge's voice sounded frayed as she guided the pony into her stall.

"They're accommodated in the stables for now," he assured her. "It's warm and dry in there. Does Enid need a mash, or rubdown, or anything else?" He asked.

Miss Partridge shook her head. "I thank you, no, Mr Doyle. Her trough has water and there is hay." She smiled again, and his heart rate picked up.

"Is there no other assistance I may offer?" Tom's voice lowered to a hush.

She turned swiftly to face him and took his arm again, her eyes boring into his. "Tell me he will not die," she begged. "I need to hear someone say it."

Tom turned to face her properly and gripped her elbows. "Keeper Partridge is one of the strongest men I know, Miss Partridge. He has his family to live for, and the entire village is willing him to health. He will fight through this, and he will not die. Do you believe it?"

"I believe you," she murmured, nodding, stepping closer as though she needed his warmth.

Tom drew his full billfold from his jacket at the same moment.

"Will you accept this, Miss Partridge?" He held it out to her.

"I couldn't." She drew back.

He stepped closer, he had to. "You must take it." He needed her to take it, to allow this. *To let me in.* "I must make it right."

"As must I." She reached for something hanging neatly on a hook mounted into the single solid wall.

This brought her almost directly beneath his chin. Tom took her palm, pressing his billfold into it. "Please," he said again, releasing her hand, which he regretted.

The next moment his chest contracted as Miss Partridge squeezed his hands with both of hers, exhaling loudly. He tried not to notice the rise and fall of her breasts beneath her cloak. Tried, and failed.

"I haven't yet told Papa about the missing money. Oh, I will repay you all of it, I swear it. As soon as I've replaced my lost gloves, and –"

"Miss Partridge –"

"Callie, please, Mr Doyle."

"Tom, please, Callie," he replied, taking a breath. "I'll not accept any repayment so don't mention it again. It was your purse to begin with."

"But I lost it to begin with," she argued and he wondered how many other women objected to such assistance. "And you didn't wager it."

"It's Mr Cantwell who'll repay me, by order of his father. Your home truths did both of us a lot of good." He moved closer. "I'm a better man because of you." He swallowed, because the world seemed suddenly tiny, the only sounds the sweep of snow, Enid's quiet munching and an occasional rustling of hen feathers.

Falling snow shimmered in lantern light as silence settled around them. Tom gazed down into dark, brimming eyes.

## *Eight Maids a-Milking*

"Callie," he whispered.

She slipped his billfold beneath her cloak, then slid one palm out, reaching slowly upwards, tracing the shape of his lapel. Her breathing shifted as she tugged at that lapel, drawing his face to her, settling his lips over her soft breath.

Tom teased her mouth with his tongue until she opened to him and sighed, nestling closer, pulling him nearer until her bodice pressed so intimately against his jacket that he could hardly stand it.

The heat of her mouth, her tongue, tangling against his, teasing him, tempting him... Tom lifted her closer, held her tighter, never breaking their kiss, never pausing, only revelling in the heat and closeness that was Callie in his arms, here, now, for one soaring, single moment.

An owl hooted overhead and Enid gave an astonished snort. He felt her smile when she pushed gently at his chest and Tom stepped back, releasing her with another sigh that made her laugh. He couldn't tear his gaze away from her lips roughened and wildly pink from his kiss, her eyes wide with longing and hope. He kept his gaze on her face: didn't trust his control to withstand her tempting curves and delectable body. Tom clenched one shaking fist behind his back and nearly fell to his knees. *I want to marry you, Callie Partridge.*

"Callie!" Mrs Partridge's call was plainly distressed and it was Callie's turn to sigh. She finished removing something from the hook behind him.

"Your coat, Mr Doyle," she offered, holding it out for him. "I thank you on behalf of Faith, Hope, and Charity."

"Beg pardon?" He stared a moment, then smiled as understanding dawned. "Ah, you've named your hens."

Her returning smile seemed suddenly shy. She nodded as

they both went in to find Swann concluding his examination of Keeper.

"I'll need to make up a syrup," he was saying. "In the meantime, do you have any milkmaid flowers? It's just past the season."

"I'm sure I don't—" Mrs Partridge sobbed into her kerchief, while her daughter took charge.

"He means the cuckoo plant, Mama." She almost ran into the kitchen and returned with an earthenware jar. "We know them as mayflowers too." She proffered the jar to Dr Swann. "Is this the one, doctor?"

Swann sniffed the jar and nodded. "That's it." He addressed further remarks to Callie. "The syrup will take me a few days. There's an infusion process. In the meanwhile, a good strong milkmaid tea will ease his breathing. Eight spoonfuls steeped in two pints of boiled water. Steep it for at least a quarter of the hour. Do you understand?"

Callie nodded. "How often, sir?"

"Two spoonfuls every two hours or so and he should pass the night safely." He patted her shoulder. "Keep it up until you hear from me." He turned to Keeper. "The taste grows bitter after steeping, sir, but bear with it."

He opened his bag and drew out a large brandy bottle. "You have his lordship's permission to fortify your medicines if you wish." He smiled as Keeper tried a rasping laugh.

"That's enough, Papa," Callie replied firmly. She approached her mother. "Mama, do you see? Papa will be well. Please try to believe it as well as you can," her voice shook a moment and tears started in her eyes. She turned away to stare at a painting on the wall. Tom took up station behind her.

"It's all right," he murmured. "I'm here, Callie." He studied the painting, and saw it depicted a ball. Couples waltzing to a

## *Eight Maids a-Milking*

quartet of musicians. "That'll be you, soon," he whispered. "In a few days Keeper shall be well, and you'll attend your father at the Cantwell Assembly."

She nodded, ducking her head to hide the blushing smile chasing her tears. His arms ached with the need to hold her tight and close, to kiss her again. To stand beside her the rest of his life.

*I will marry you, Callie Partridge, if you'll have me.*

## *Nine Ladies Dancing*



**I**’d best set Papa’s tea to steep.” Callie headed to the kitchen just as a plaintive wail made Doctor Swann jump in the act of pouring his measure of brandy.

“Blast it!” He pulled a cloth from his bag and mopped up the spill. Callie hurried to assist.

“Shall I see to Charlie, Mama?”

Her mother wiped her streaming eyes and stood. “See to the tea, dear, and fetch some supper for our guests.” She curtsied to the gentlemen. “Do excuse me, sirs. He’s hungry, so help us all.”

“Of course.” Tom bowed.

Dr Swann did likewise.

*Supper?* Callie wondered when Mama had last looked into her larder. There was precious little left of Ma Hobbs’s bread, and most everything else was reserved for the twelfth night table up at the castle. Mama had already received payment for her cakes and wassail. Those provisions were spoken for.

Placing the kettle over the hob, Callie stared at the painting above the hearth (another ballroom scene), wondering if Tom’s

## *Nine Ladies Dancing*

prediction might come true. This painting showed nine ladies dancing, and a tenth sitting mournfully by the bowl of ratafia, in an outdated gown. Or was she drinking wassail? The carollers in one corner inclined Callie to think so, and the work was titled *An Assembly for Christmastide*.

It must be wicked to worry that Papa might not be well enough to attend Callie to her first proper assembly at Cantwell castle, or to escort her to the wassailing celebrations she longed to attend. At least she'd no need to worry about attending in a handed down gown now.

Callie glanced again at the lonely maiden in the picture. Would Tom dance with her if she wore such a travesty? (Should she even be thinking of dancing with Tom Doyle?) If she were honest, she wasn't thinking of dancing with him so much as wanting to feel his arms surrounding her again, his lips teasing her skin...

A spike of hot desire shot through her so fast, Callie gasped, her cheeks heating faster than the iron kettle, and far more dangerously. Straightening her shoulders, she shook her head to dispel such wild thoughts and focused on measuring out eight careful spoonfuls of tea.

Her sharp ear caught Tom's laughter from the parlour and the clink of glasses. Papa's wheezing cheer as he complimented his lordship's brandy made her smile. She peeped into the larder at her twelfth night cakes, cloth-wrapped and ready for Cook. Beside these sat her first little effort, baked too hard and slightly burnt.

Mama called it 'Partridge tack', after something Callie's brother wrote about navy rations. Callie made her tack from leftover batter and a little ginger. She used it as a test to know the oven was heated for the festive cakes. In better times, the

tack would be fed to the geese, but not this year. This year her family needed every resource.

Tom's billfold sat heavily beneath her stays and gratitude flowed through Callie in a powerful rush of hope. The year was turning and bring what it may, she believed in staunch friends and generosity of heart.

Such goodness would always matter more than a billfold in Cantwell, and was certainly more important than a new dress. Callie smiled suddenly at the tenth lady in the painting. Leaning in, she whispered, "it's not the gown. It's how you wear it."

She nodded to herself. *I'll not be that girl, and Papa will be well.* Taking down her little loaf, Callie found a knife sharp enough to slice it in pieces. On impulse, she drizzled honey and warmed butter over each piece. With a dusting of cinnamon powder, her supper looked nearly decent. Slicing the last of the unpreserved pears as thinly as possible, she arranged her platter and carried it in.

"Cantwell crumpet," she said quietly, placing it before Papa's guests with a curtsy. Papa smiled and nodding as he sipped his drink. His coughing seemed less after the brandy.

"Without the crumble rings," Tom smiled at her, his eyes on her mouth as he placed a piece of her creation on his tongue.

Callie worked hard not to blush when his smile became a grin.

"Did you bake this, Miss Partridge?" Doctor Swann demanded.

She nodded, ready to excuse the quality, when he licked his lips and took up another piece. "Why this isn't on every twelfth night feast table, I can't imagine." He seated himself beside Keeper and continued. "Wouldn't you agree, Doyle?"

Tom nodded, his mouth full of cake and brandy. When he'd



## *Nine Ladies Dancing*

swallowed, he smiled warmly at Callie. "It's tasty indeed, Miss Partridge. Will you not sit with us?" His gaze lingered on hers. Callie blinked to banish the thought of kissing him in her parent's parlour.

"Yes, do sit down, Callie," Papa added.

Callie obeyed, taking the seat opposite them all.

"It's such a comfort to know my girls have staunch allies," Keeper said serenely, looking between Swann and Doyle. "My health is such a burden."

"It's not," Callie blurted out immediately, before collecting herself. "I mean," she looked up at Papa. "You've taken care of all of us for so much of your life, Papa. It's no burden to turn it about."

"Indeed not," Doctor Swann nodded approvingly. "I have five bairns, Keeper, the same as you and I'd hoped to reap a handsome return on such investment, though all are daughters so far." He seemed to scowl.

Callie resisted the urge to scowl back. She was grateful to Papa for his tactful silence. This in no way satisfied Doctor Swann, who addressed the rest of his remarks to Tom.

"Do not you wish more for sons, once you're wed, Mr Doyle?"

"I wish only for joy in any children," Tom replied quietly. "Every day, I witness women perform feats of which we often believe them incapable. In many ways, they are braver than men."

"I can't imagine what you mean," Swann replied. "My daughters are lovely, accomplished girls but they've not an ounce of sense between any of them."

"Then perhaps they cannot wed a Cantwell valet." Callie burst out again, blushing profusely. She thought Tom smiled into his brandy glass when the doctor coughed in protest. She flinched

at Papa's wheezing laugh, trying to avoid Tom's steady, heated stare. Papa seemed to be watching Callie too, with a sharpness he usually reserved for his work. Ill or not, Keeper Partridge's powers of observation were what made Cantwell's preserves the best in the country. It's as well she and Tom weren't a couple of nesting birds. *Is it?*

Mama returned with Charlie before Callie could embarrass herself (or Tom) any further. The men all rose, though Callie was pleased to see Tom persuaded Papa to forego his bow.

"Yes, you must rest," Dr Swann told him, with a stern look at Callie. "It's most important." He turned to Mama. "Does the bairn disturb Keeper's sleep at all?"

"He's fussing again." Mama presented Charlie to the doctor. "I'm terribly afraid of the croup, Doctor Swann. Would you mind very much?"

Swann set his brandy aside. "His lordship bade me assist you, madam. Let's have the little fellow." He took Charlie from her, rocking him gently. He peered into Charlie's ears and had Callie hold him while he produced a device from his bag that looked something like an ear trumpet. Tapping Charlie's chest, he listened for a long time, one hand raised for silence. By the time he was done, Charlie was gurgling happily at the new faces around him.

"A fine, healthy bairn, Mrs Partridge." Dr Swann returned Charlie to Mama's arms and bowed, before resuming his seat and his brandy. "It's just Keeper's health to improve upon now."

"I'm sure Mama does so indeed," Callie worked to gentle her tone.

"Callie," Mama remonstrated, but her tone held mild. The look on Mama's face spoke agreement, though it also served to remind her that the doctor was here at the earl's behest. They'd

## *Nine Ladies Dancing*

not afford his service otherwise.

Still, did he have to demean every female in the room? Callie pitied his daughters and remembered such beliefs were too common for reasoned argument.

“Perhaps the tea is ready now?” Tom ‘s diplomacy drew Callie’s gaze at last.

His warm, steady stare met hers, before turning towards the painting on the wall, studying it as though he might learn the waltz this way. *I’m sure the man can waltz.*

A moment’s imagination saw her gowned in muslin and in Tom’s arms again, waltzing the requisite six inches apart to avoid the slightest scandal. He hadn’t been so circumspect in Enid’s stable. Callie’s tongue darted across her lips and Tom’s eyes widened, lingering... Heat flared all the way from her toes and up her legs, warming her breasts, her shoulders, neck, and flooding her cheeks. Callie turned away abruptly, hurrying into the kitchen to see to Keeper’s tea. *Six inches isn’t nearly enough.*

## *Ten Lords a-leaping*



Once the gentlemen had left, Callie volunteered to settle Charlie. Yawning as she rocked him in the chair, Callie hoped for a restful night at last. Between the lost billfold, trips to York and Cantwell, not to mention the castle, and rescuing birds and gentlemen from scrapes dire and not, she deserved a good night's sleep.

When Charlie was asleep, she went to her own little room. Brushing out her hair, Callie wished for fairer curls, lamenting both her absent gloves as well as her soiled bonnet. She secured her hair in a tight, dusky braid, before kissing the miniatures on her dresser.

"Goodnight, dears."

Callie's room was the only one in the lodge without paintings of assemblies or balls. She'd created the miniatures herself. One was of William and the other depicted Florrie. Callie vowed to draw up a sketch of Charlie as soon as he grew beyond an infant. Once abed, she turned to her side, but sleep stubbornly refused to indulge her. All she saw behind her eyes was Tom's

## *Ten Lords a-leaping*

charming smile, and warm, intense gaze.

All she thought of was his mouth on hers, and how much she wanted to kiss him again. She sat up, bunched her pillow in a ball and lay back down. It made no difference. Callie shook her head inwardly, wishing William had taught her more curse words.

The morning dawned cold and bright, with no promise of snow. Callie woke before dawn to mend her bonnet. When she'd re-trimmed it with holly leaves and leftover ribbon from Charlie's swaddle, it looked passable for delivering twelfth night cakes. She met Mama in the kitchen and prepared breakfast for them all.

"Lay table in the parlour this morning, Callie," Mama decided. "And see if we can make up the fire."

Shrugging, Callie did as she was bid before readying her cakes for transport. She still hadn't managed new gloves, and blushed when she recalled how easily she'd lost both her temper and her belongings. Perhaps this year she'd learn to hold on to both. Shaking off old regrets, she joined her parents at table. She'd barely finished her toast when a sharp rap came at the back door.

"That'll be Mr Doyle." Her father coughed as he sipped his mayflower tea. "He's escorting you today."

Mama beamed, and Callie tried not to look as though her heart was leaping about in a mockery of a waltz.

"But *why*?"

Papa shrugged. "Someone must attend you, dear girl and I'll not be much use. Besides, if I rest well enough, I'll be better able to escort you tonight. Don't you think so, dear?" He looked to Mama.

"I do," Mama replied as she left them to open the door.

Callie rose, eyeing her reflection in the small mirror beside the ballroom painting. Mama returned with Tom, who appeared as calm as could be. Callie couldn't be certain if he looked at her. She was too busy staring at the way his shoulders fit into his best jacket, and the slope of his powerful shoulders. Callie no longer feared the cold this morning. There were other sensations to consider instead.

"Good morning, Mr Partridge, Miss Partridge." Tom bowed deeply and with such formality that Callie fancied the small fire in the grate shrank in sympathy.

She curtsied just as deeply but didn't dare meet his gaze.

"I beg your pardon, sir." Tom addressed Papa. "You're still at breakfast."

"We are," Mama replied. "But Callie is ready with the cakes, aren't you, dear?"

Callie nodded, cast a fleeting glance around the room and hurried to the larder. She found Tom sent to accompany her and blushed again.

"There are fifty-three in all," she said.

"So your Mama tells me," Tom replied, gathering up a dozen baskets at once.

Callie pressed her lips together and opened the back door. She helped him load the cart, trying not to flinch when her fingers touched Tom's gloves. When all the cakes were stacked on the cart, she turned to face him.

"Mr Doyle—"

"Tom," he corrected with another bow.

Callie gazed up at him, her tone wavering. "Tom, I-I do not wish you to misunderstand me. L-last night, I—"

"You may depend on my not mentioning it." Tom said clearly, turning to climb up to the cart.

*Oh.* He sounded so cool, so terribly distant. Had there been something wrong with her kiss?

"I-I wasn't myself last night," Callie forged on regardless, a stab of horror pitching her voice an octave higher. "I didn't intend to give a false impression, or to tease you."

"I don't think you could tease a man if you tried, Callie Partridge," he replied as he took his seat, patting mildly at his coat pocket.

*Oh, really?* Callie narrowed her eyes and glared. He was pretending as though their kiss had never happened. Well, she wouldn't stand for it! She suddenly understood why so many ladies spend their days sobbing over gentlemen. *I'll not be that girl.*

"Oh, and I have something for you." Tom drew out the gloves she'd thought lost in the looker's hut, handing them down to her with a nod before offering her a hand up.

Callie drew on her gloves and accepted his help, allowing him to guide her down beside him.

"Thank you, Tom." Straightening in her seat, she sat closer, pressing her leg tightly against his.

She felt him shift in surprise. A surge of triumph took her as she gathered the reins, but she wasn't finished. Leaning in, she pressed her lips against his cheek.

"It's too kind of you to think of me." With a falsely wide smile, she sat closer still, until his loud sigh warmed the air between them.

"We're for Ma Hobbs," she told him, directing the cart accordingly. "Then through the entire village, working our way back towards the castle."

He nodded, sighing again.

Callie looked away to hide her grin.

By the time they arrived at castle Cantwell, Tom must have sighed at least fifty times. He drew the dray cart up in the kitchen courtyard and jumped down to assist Callie.

"The last dozen are all for the castle, then?"

"Eleven are for Cook. The last one is for someone special," Callie offered Tom the same smile she'd held in place all morning. She also sat too close and used any excuse to touch him. Not that Tom didn't want her touch, but something didn't feel right. He was doing his best to behave respectfully, but she wasn't making it easy.

He shook his head, turning to knock at the kitchen entrance, where Cook stood ready to receive their bounty.

"Callie, you're here!" She sent her maids to collect the cakes and drew them both inside for a mug of tea and her favourite past time – the latest Cantwell gossip. Her first inquiry was for Keeper's health.

"Papa is greatly improved," Callie assured her. "He'll escort me at the assembly this evening."

"This is excellent news," came a familiar voice from inside the enormous larder. Rudy swung himself round the doorway and assisted the maids in placing the cakes on an empty shelf. One maid in particular worked closely by his side. *Too closely*. Tom frowned.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Partridge." Rudy left the pouting maid, stretching out his arm to bow before Callie. His conciliatory tone had all Tom's instincts on point.

Instinct turned to anger as Callie slipped her hand into Rudy's, allowing him to kiss her wrist as she curtsied before him. Her eyes met his, and that irritating smile glowed as she fetched the last twelfth night cake.



"This is for you alone, Mr Cantwell," she announced, with another curtsy, and not a shadow of a glance at Tom.

Rudy handed the cake to his discarded maid with a careless shrug. "May I take this chance to reserve your first dance, Miss Partridge?"

"I'd be delighted, Mr Cantwell."

Tom stood there, open-mouthed. What the hell was Callie playing at? She'd no idea how dangerous Rudy's behaviour could be for a girl. Before he could summon the words to intervene, Rudy addressed him.

"If you've finished gadding about the countryside, Doyle, I've an errand for you at the humidors." Rudy's gaze never left Callie's. "It'll take you the rest of today, I should think." His next words came lazily. "Perhaps Miss Partridge might care to visit the birds we rescued together?" He extended his arm.

Callie seemed flustered as she shook her head. "I thank you, Mr Cantwell, but I'm needed at the lodge." Her blush revived him a little as she hastened from the larder. He heard her call a farewell to Cook, then the back door closed fast.

Tom turned away from Rudy, keeping his fists tightly clenched behind his back.

Rudy studied his arrangement of cakes with interest. "She's not an accomplished flirt," he replied mildly. "I shall teach her better."

"She's not used to your games, Cantwell." Tom said loudly. "I mean, *sir*."

Rudy smirked. "I never let the bird win the game, Doyle. You know that." He sounded bored. "I'll find her at the assembly anyhow. My Indian tobacco awaits. You're to fetch it immediately and bring a fresh load of greens back with you." Rudy's laugh followed Tom all the way to the cart.

As soon as she left the castle, Callie lifted her skirts and ran the whole way home, her hammering heart demanding she put plenty of distance between Mr Cantwell and her virtue. Flirting with him had seemed a tame idea, until he'd responded with such wolfish glee. Papa was right – Callie ought to consider her behaviour more. Thank goodness for the pouting maid and Tom Doyle. *To whom I owe yet another apology.* Callie sighed more deeply than she'd done in her life to date. Perhaps sighs were as contagious as kisses.

She let herself into the lodge and found Mama in her room, staring at a large package.

"It arrived just after you left," Mama reported. "It's from London."

"From Florrie!" Callie guessed. Thoughts of feckless earl's sons and their uptight valets fell away.

"Yes, and I think I know what it is." Mama's eyes gleamed.

Callie grinned, and tore at the wrappings, revealing the box lid beneath. She tossed the lid to the floor and burst out laughing.

"*Such* a gown, Mama." She lifted it out and held it against her. It was of the softest brushed silk, embroidered with tiny, pale gold beads bordering the square-cut bodice. The skirts shimmered with golden threads and more beading and there, lying beneath the dress itself, was the loveliest pair of ivory evening gloves Callie had ever seen.

The stitching was exquisite, and the avian design might have been Florrie's own. It was the same emblem sewn into Papa's billfold, and Callie's day gloves. It was her family's favourite design.

Florrie had thoughtfully included new silk stockings, as though she knew her sister's frequently tore. There were

*Ten Lords a-leaping*

slippers too, in Callie's size, though they bore signs of previous use.

"Oh, oh," she cried. "My dear, dear sister. Mama, did you know?"

Mama smiled. "I may have written to Florrie. Did she send a note? Why, yes." Mama caught up a little sealed paper that had fallen to the floor.

She handed it to Callie, who broke the seal with her fingers and read it aloud:

St Germaine Parfumerie,  
Mayfair,  
London.

*Dearest Callie,*

*It's so generous of you to give up your position to assist us all. I could not remain ladies' maid to the Misses Ryan if you'd stayed as governess where you were. As you know, one of my ladies is an actress and she hands me the gowns she uses on the stage. I made this one over for you and it's mostly new.*

*It's been worn before on stage only dearest, and to play a duchess too. I hope you won't mind it at all. It's my mistress's most celebrated role. May your assembly be as delightful as you hope. May ten lords at least spin you dizzy in the dance. Do write and tell me all about it as soon as you can.*

*Happy Christmas dearest. William and I can't thank you enough for returning to Cantwell.*

*Your favourite (and only) sister,  
Florrie*

Callie embraced Mama with tears in her eyes. "I never minded

### *Caroline's Christmastide*

coming home, Mama,” she said. “Truly, I prefer Cantwell to York, you know, and being with you and Papa is a blessing.”

“You’re the blessing, Callie,” Mama hugged her back. “I don’t know how Keeper and I might have managed Christmastide without your help.” She shook out the gown. “Place the iron on the hob and we’ll press it smooth in time for the ball.”

## Eleven Pipers Piping



**T**he earl of Cantwell and his countess stood by the castle entrance to welcome the village.

“Here you are, Miss Partridge.” The countess pressed a dance card into Callie’s palm with a smile. “You look lovely,” she added, glancing over her shoulder at a group of young ladies stationed nearby, as though guarding the dance floor. Their elegance of dress exceeded Callie’s. Between them they sported every decoration known to womanhood. She gazed at their vibrant silks and costly brocades. The tallest wore bejewelled peacock feathers in her hair, though these did nothing to lift the scowl from her face. She shot a scornful glare at Callie’s gown before addressing her dumpy companion who sported a false garland of green and puce roses.

“*Hoi polloi* do try, sister,” observed Peacock-feathers in a stage whisper. “Though fashion is not the *forte*.”

“It’s a village assembly, dear,” said Green Roses. “What else can you expect?”

Leaning forward, Lady Cantwell whispered in Callie’s ear.

“Try to stand away from the Misses Swann, dear. They’re not from Yorkshire, you know, and you *do* show them up.” She leaned back with a wink. “Glad to see you, Keeper,” she said as Papa kissed her hand. “Do save me a dance, won’t you?”

Callie entered the assembly room on Papa’s arm, feeling like a queen. She’d never been inside the castle ballroom before. She admired the candelabras placed on either side of each ancient stone pillar. Red wax candles complemented golden brocade hangings, held in place by fir boughs bent with holly. The candlelight softened such vibrant reds and greens to something warmer, more in keeping with the flickering light and warming energy.

Carollers gathered to sign the songs best known to please the Cantwell family and Callie listened to them for a while, a smile playing at her lips as she thought of her sister. Florrie sang better than anyone there and Callie made a mental note to tell her so when she wrote her promised record of this evening.

One of the better singers – a young lord by the look of him – caught her eye and shifted to his left, inviting her to join the carolling. Callie smiled and shook her head, stepping closer to Papa. She preferred dancing to carolling, though she thought it best to remain close to Papa until he shooed her away.

“Go and be with the other young people,” Papa insisted, spotting Dr Swann waving him over with a spare pipe tobacco pouch. “I’ll not fall down just yet, Callie.”

Taking a breath, Callie moved closer to the dance floor and found herself surrounded by a large group of gentlemen practically leaping over each other to scribble their names in her dance card. She looked around for Tom, but he seemed not to be there, though Mr Cantwell soon caught her eye. Before Callie could look away, he threaded his way through at least ten

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leaping lords enjoying their first Yorkshire reel of the evening. A footman trailed in Cantwell's wake, bearing what appeared to be his personal tray of wassail.

"Make way there, make way." Mr Cantwell winked at Callie, as he side-stepped a jumping couple to arrive at her side with a flourish and a bow.

Callie allowed him to kiss her hand again. "Mr Cantwell, how are you this evening?"

"I'm well, Miss Partridge, though not as well as you," he smiled winningly. "You're quite the revelation this evening. May I?" He held out his palm for her dance card.

Callie smiled as he scribbled his name and offered his arm. Perhaps she'd misjudged him. He led her to the floor amid several mutinous glances from the Misses Swann, and a positive glower from their mama. Shaking off such concerns, Callie took her place at the head of the reel, curtsied to Cantwell and moved as the dance dictated.

"You move well," Mr Cantwell said during their spin.

"I thank you." She smiled. "As do you, Mr Cantwell."

"Most of Cantwell call me Rudy." He lowered his voice suggestively.

Callie tried to study his face, but the reel moved too fast. "I'm not most of Cantwell." She shrugged one shoulder and glimpsed Papa sitting between Dr Swann and the earl, with about eleven other gentlemen puffing away on their pipes.

No doubt his lordship held court on the value of well-run preserves and the expense of his imported tobacco, and no doubt Papa was enjoying this evening immensely. The grin on his face widened Callie's smile too. This may have been a mistake, because Mr Cantwell smiled back and this wasn't at all reassuring.

The reel ended, the music slowed, and Callie's blush felt like a warning.

Mr Cantwell moved closer. "Do you know the Yorkshire waltz, my dear?" He attempted to draw her against him.

Callie stepped back. "I do, sir but I've a full dance card, you know."

"Of course."

She hoped such a tiny lie would be forgiven in heaven. Her dance card had been seized by at least ten eager gentlemen, but Tom Doyle hadn't been one of them. She'd kept a space aside in case, and she'd not give him up yet.

Mr Cantwell guided her to the refreshment table, where he summoned his footman and offered his wassail. Once she'd drunk enough to cool her cheeks and lighten her head, he offered her another. The cider tasted too strong and Callie sipped it warily.

"Do you see your next dance partner, Miss Partridge?"

Callie shook her head, her brow furrowing.

Cantwell sighed, which only reminded her of Tom. "That's a poor show for any fellow. Perhaps you've time now to visit your birds?"

"Shan't we be missed, Mr Cantwell?"

"Among all these crowds?" He raised his brows as if she'd said something silly and childish.

Caught off guard and dizzier than she'd expected from his cider, Callie found herself nodding. Before she knew it, Mr Cantwell took her arm in his and guided her towards the back stairs. He led Callie out one of the side doors so stealthily that she wondered how often he came this way. Despite the cold, Callie had the sense to refuse his jacket. She shivered as they crossed the courtyard and had a mind to turn back,



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but Mr Cantwell ushered her rapidly into the stables where a low-burning brazier kept the animals from freezing.

Several whinnying greetings sounded as he pulled the door closed and it was only then, among the dark scents of hay, horses, and manure, that Callie realised what she'd done.

Would she never learn to think before doing? Stepping out of a crowded ball room on the arm of the earl's rakehell son, without her escort was foolish — and she truly didn't want to be there at all. Callie caught her breath in horror.

"I've not seen Mr Doyle this evening." She kept her voice studiously neutral.

"Neither have I," Mr Cantwell replied, and she knew it was a lie. "Your proper name is Caroline, isn't it?" His voice jarred her ears for some reason, and she didn't like the way he looked at her, or the way he moved towards her, but Callie knew this place, and her head felt clearer. She found the candle holder on the back wall and managed to light the stub of wax at the brazier. As the wick caught, she heard the cheeping birds from one of the back stalls. At least he didn't lie about the birds.

"I'd like to return to my papa, Mr Cantwell."

"So soon? I'm disappointed, Caroline." He stood between her and her exit.

"No one calls me Caroline." Callie stood with her feet slightly apart, balancing in her slippers. The wall behind her held an assortment of whips and riding crops. She reached backwards to finger the nearest one. Thin, and knotted. *Lunge whip*. Good. She knew how to use it. She wasn't afraid. Not of Cantwell, anyway. Village gossip and her family's good name was another matter.

"You weren't quite so prim this morning."

Callie clenched one fist around the whip handle behind her

back, wincing inwardly at her own foolishness. "Th-that was a game. A foolish one I ought not to have played."

"I'm rather fond of games." He smirked at her, leering. "Shall we play one together now?" Drawing a silver flask from his vest, Mr Cantwell removed the cap and took a long swallow. He tipped it towards her. "Caroline?"

"I think I've had enough."

Callie breathed a silent prayer of gratitude that he'd stopped moving towards her. She kept her hold on the whip though. He shook the flask at her again.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes!" She stepped past him, the whip gripped tightly in one fist. "Move, please, sir."

"Bloody hell!" Mr Cantwell's eyes widened when he saw the whip. He leaped back, crashing into the door as it swung inward, knocking him to the ground.

"Callie?"

"*Tom!*" Relief flooded through her, followed by a dull sort of horror as she realised her position.