

Late September 1831, Castle Yates, Yorkshire

Dead meat, lemme, lemme, oh no, heel! Yummy bite, wiggle, flower lady now, please. . .

Flower lady? William Ives-Madden cut off his connection with the mastiff's kaleidoscopic thoughts before he stumbled inadvertently into the path of one of the duke's daughters. The duke had felt safe hiring him because he knew Will wasn't a womanizer.

Will wouldn't let the man down—he needed his grace's support to buy the kennel he had his eye on.

Besides, the duke's daughters were too young, too dainty, and too toplofty for a big, uncouth bastard like himself.

When a man's voice carried through the arch in the hedge he'd been about to enter, Will fed Ajax another treat in approval for preventing his blundering in where he wasn't wanted. *Dead meat?* Will thought in amusement, recalling Ajax's scent. Ajax was female, but the duke had chosen the name for reasons of his own. Maybe he was on to something. Ajax didn't like this gentleman and strained like any hero to get at him.

Deciding the tableau shouldn't be interrupted, if only for the entertainment value, Will waited where he could keep an eye on the scene. He'd lived in the shadow of Castle Yates the better part of his life. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen this play before, but one never knew how the farce would end.

On the other side of the arch, beneath the rose arbor, an elegantly attired gentleman rested on bended knee before a lady. "You are the dawn's golden light, the moon's silver glow, the light of my life, Lady Aurelia. Will you please do me the great honor of accepting my hand in marriage?"

Will admired the gentleman's way with words. In the eyes of every man over the age of six, Lady Aurelia was all he said and more. Her hair shimmered in the palest shades of corn silk. Her thick-lashed blue eyes matched the summer skies, and her dainty, feminine form made a man swell with protectiveness and desire.

Unfortunately, as the wealthy daughter of a duke, she had more suitors than dogs had fleas. She'd had so many proposals, she would probably disdain a prince if one offered. Proposing to her had become a sport wagered on in taverns in the same way hunters wagered on the number of quail they'd bring down.

Will pitied the foolish chap soaking his best trousers. As usual, the lady didn't even deign to look at him but tilted her head to admire a bird flitting from the trees.

The only real question was what the deuce she was doing out here without one of her family or servants with her. For good reason, the duke wisely shielded her from just this sort of inopportunity.

Familiar with the lady's eccentricities, and in lieu of a better guardian, Will lingered. His livelihood derived from training dogs to rescue lost animals and people, so watching over ladies was not his usual sort of task. But the duke wouldn't be pleased if Will let the lady come to harm.

"Lydia is playing the most beautiful waltz," she responded inexplicably to her passionate suitor. "Let us see if they have opened the ballroom."

She was always polite. She never made sense.

Without waiting for assistance, the duke's daughter rose in a graceful swish of sprigged muslin, revealing a waist so petite that Will knew his big clumsy hands could encompass it.

He went on alert as the scowling suitor groped his way upright by leaning on the bench she'd just departed.

"My lady, I have poured my heart at your feet. I think I have a right to expect an answer."

The mastiff stiffened at his tone. Will did the same, narrowing his eyes as the gentleman reached his feet and caught the lady's arm to detain her.

Dead meat.

Fearing the lady would not appreciate his intrusion, Will restrained himself and the dog.

Lady Aurelia donned her frostiest expression, her impossibly long lashes sweeping up and down in disdain as she regarded the hand on her person.

"Just say yes, my lady," the gentleman suggested. "We are well suited. I will see that you are never bothered by undesirable admirers."

"The waltz calls," she said, removing the hand crushing her sleeve by the simple expedient of bending a finger back until he had to jerk away.

Will breathed a sigh of relief as she swayed briskly in the direction of the duke's sprawling mansion. He really didn't wish to cause a commotion by pounding a rich lordling

into the ground like a garden post.

Regrettably, the lordling didn't take the lady's form of dismissal as an answer. He caught up with her in a single stride, grabbed her arm, and swung her around rather forcefully.

The frightened look on Lady Aurelia's fair face was all it took to set off Will's protective instincts. Trying his best to remember he wasn't at home and couldn't do as he pleased, he snapped his fingers and set Ajax loose. The giant mastiff ran straight toward the couple.

Deciding the lordling didn't look as frightened of the dog as the lady did of his grip, Will silently ordered Ajax to jump. The dog enthusiastically obeyed as if the gentleman really were the smelly animal carcass she'd sniffed earlier.

Enormous paws landed square on the back of a tailored coat. The gentleman had to release the object of his desire if only to remain upright. Will noticed the nodcock did *not* attempt to block Lady Aurelia from the dog's paws, as a gentleman ought.

"Get off me, you beast!" the fool yelled, darting to one side while Ajax waved her tail and waited for a reward.

Will sauntered from his hiding place in the hedge. "Well met, my lady," he called, without explanation. He seldom gave explanations, and the lady knew who he was.

"Is this your bloody brute?" the angry suitor demanded. "Get him off me!"

"*Her*. Even females can be heroes. Ajax, down." Will snapped his fingers, then produced a treat from his pocket. The mastiff happily trotted over to where Will had placed himself—between the lady and the gentleman.

"Good afternoon, sir." The lady patted Ajax's massive head and accepted a drooling slurp. "Good doggie."

With legs down, the mastiff stood well over waist high. Her massive head and teeth turned toward the angry suitor, blocking his way. Without another word, Lady Aurelia swept down the gravel path, her petticoats swaying, head held high.

The lordling glared at Will and fisted his fingers. "Who the devil are you?"

"The one keeping the duke's dog from biting off your balls." That was one explanation he didn't mind giving. Feeding Ajax her treat, humming the waltz coming from the open window, Will aimed for his original goal, the kennel.

There. He had behaved like the gentleman he wasn't for a change. Did the soul good to

occasionally refrain from pounding lordlings into fence posts.

Of course, he'd need a cold bath in the brook after encountering the lady's *flower* scent and seeing those huge blue eyes up close, wide with fear and anger and maybe a hint of admiration.

Even females can be heroes, Mr. Madden had said.

Aurelia wished she had the courage to be one. Given all the blessings she'd been given, her family expected her to accomplish marvelous things, not lurk in sequestered chambers.

Entering the cacophony of a house filled with over a hundred servants and guests, she rubbed her temple and tried to concentrate on the lovely notes emanating from the new piano.

Although she loved the music, she couldn't bear the penetrating, abrasive chatter of their guests in the music room. After the encounter with Lord Clayton, her head pounded from the assault of all the castle's noises, and she retreated to a quieter wing, shivering. She'd had enough company for a while—which was why she'd stupidly sought the privacy of the garden in the first place.

Recalling the ugly scene in the garden, she hurried to the parlor overlooking the path to the kennel.

A long line of yews sheltered the outbuildings from view, but Mr. Madden hadn't reached the hedge yet. At the sight of him, she took a deep breath of relief. The large. . . gentleman. . . strode along, unharmed, as if he hadn't just routed her suitor without lifting a hand. She didn't know what had come over the usually indolent Lord Clayton, but she despised altercations and was glad the dog trainer had behaved with more civility than the earl's son.

She had heard tales of Mr. Madden. His animals had pulled drowning people from ponds, found lost children in snowstorms, and more. She had thought them mostly local-boy-does-good stories, but his action in keeping Clayton away added corroboration.

Sheltered here as she was, she seldom had the opportunity to meet anyone outside the duke's elevated social circle. She'd seen Mr. Madden, of course, but only from a distance.

Mr. Madden had the build of an ox. Any attempt to hit his hard, very square jaw would

have broken Lord Clayton's knuckles. Since Mr. Madden spent most of his time in physical exercise and had the taut bulging muscles to prove it, Clayton wouldn't have fared any better had he pummeled him elsewhere. She appreciated the trainer's long-legged stride and straight posture as he directed Ajax into happy circles to prevent the dog from chasing after a rabbit crossing their path.

She sighed in admiration over the overlong wealth of thick bronze hair brushing his loosely-tied neckcloth. Why couldn't the gentlemen who courted her look like that? She might even try to listen to them if they did.

Hearing an argument rising above the music, she decided maybe not. Even a dog handler would need to be a mute hermit for her to be comfortable. And her father and brother would shoot anyone less than an earl who came near her—which was why their current guests shouldn't be here at all. Her sisters had been mad to invite them.

Still, they were all gentlemen, as far as she was aware. Lord Clayton was heir to an earl. What on earth had caused him to overreact in such a manner? It did not seem in character, although she would be the first to admit that she was not a keen judge of behavior. Unfortunately, out of self-preservation, she preferred shirking society to observing it.

She peered around the corner to verify no one lurked in the corridor, then darted toward the library. If she was fortunate, she might find a book with pictures and sneak up the back stairs to her room before anyone found her.

She grimaced as she slipped into the library and Lord Baldwin rose from a wing chair with a rose in hand. As he spoke, she lost her concentration on the music, and the clamor of a large household invaded her head.

Don't you ever go in my pantry again or I'll take this knife. . .

Drip, drip, ping. Drip, drip, drip, ping.

A waltz please! We need to practice. . .

E, F#, G#, A, B, C#, D#, E, G

*You **bastard**, I thought you said there was no one out there. . .*

Is she really gone?

She nearly whimpered as the more emotional arguing dominated, intensifying the pain. Was that Lord Clayton shouting? At whom? Who was gone? Should she rescue the person threatened with a knife? How could she think with all these questions demanding an

answer?

Vaguely, realizing Lord Baldwin had stopped speaking, not having registered half the words said, she dipped a curtsy. "How very lovely to see you again, my lord." Intent on no more than escape, Aurelia abandoned another bewildered suitor.

With her over-sensitive ears assaulted from all directions, she hurried up to her private wing, only to find her sisters waiting. Well, she had expected no less. She shut and bolted the extra-thick door, blessedly shutting out the worst of the aural storm. Stubbornly, she sat on a chaise longue near the window overlooking a quiet park filled only with birdsong, and waited for the lecture to begin.

"Did you accept Lord Clayton's suit?" Lydia asked, trying on Aurelia's diamond earrings and admiring them in the vanity mirror. Her round face and blond curls weren't classically pretty but pleasant enough. At nineteen, she'd already been presented and snared a suitor— because Aurelia had refused to go to London last season. The previous ones had been too horrifyingly painful and embarrassing.

She didn't know if she could put off her father's demands that she marry much longer.

"Or Lord Baldwin's?" Phoebe asked excitedly. "A spring wedding, just in time for my come-out would be wonderful!"

Phoebe was only seventeen. A shorter, plumper version of her older sisters, she was sweeter-natured but more impetuous.

"It won't happen," Lydia said in boredom. "You'd do better to anticipate my nuptials."

"Your betrothed will surely be home by spring," Aurelia said reassuringly, trying to follow her sisters' chatter with the din of a hundred voices buzzing and shouting from beyond her thick walls. In addition to extra thickness, she'd added heavy paneling and tapestries so she had some chance of sleeping at night. "Do you have your music prepared for the musicale this evening? Lady Bennet has such a lovely voice!"

"You won't even be there to listen!" Both her sisters glared at her. Accustomed to her behavior, though, they did not waste time bothering her again with questions she didn't hear or wouldn't answer.

"We waited until father and Rain were both in London to arrange this entertainment," Lydia continued, her anger superseding the buzz in the distance. "We brought in all the eligible young men you *haven't* rejected, the ones whom they would not invite. And you still

cannot decide?"

"I don't *hear* them," Aurelia cried plaintively, hugging an embroidered pillow. "How can I marry someone I cannot hear?"

"As far as I'm concerned, that's a benefit, not a detriment. We made sure they were all handsome. All you need do is *look* at them," Phoebe said with a hint of desperation. "How will I ever compete with you next Season if you're not taken?"

"You won't," Lydia said. "None of us can. We'll have to put a sack over her head."

"Or beans in my ears," Aurelia said with a sigh. "Cook is threatening to knife someone again. Will one of you please calm troubled waters this time? I really don't want to push Lord Rush down the stairs. He's hovering on the landing."

Again, they didn't question her irrelevant response as everyone outside the family did. She hoped someday when she was a maiden aunt that they would come to accept her inability to deal with the world at large. Had she been a medieval lady, they could have bought her a place in a nunnery and gone on with their lives. As it was, her excruciatingly acute hearing rendered her perfectly useless and an obstacle to everyone's happiness.

"I'll go, if I can borrow your earrings for this evening." Lydia turned her head back and forth to admire the flash and sparkle.

"By all means." Remembering Lord Clayton's unusual behavior, Aurelia added, "Phoebe, go with her. Some of the guests have been a little unruly in Rain's absence. We'd best go everywhere in pairs."

That, of course, excited her sisters' lust for excitement. They left, chattering, completely confident that they were safe in their father's sheltered household surrounded by servants.

Aurelia wished she could be as blissfully ignorant. But she'd heard and suffered the result of neglect and violence and no longer pretended the world was a safe place.

As if her gloomy thoughts had taken on a life of their own, an anguished cry, almost a childish wail, pierced the normal cacophony in her head. Emotional cries always penetrated better than normal speech, but there were no children in the house. Even her younger brother Teddy was away at school. It wouldn't surprise her if the painful throbbing in her head started producing imaginary shrieks. Maybe it was her skull protesting.

Aurelia hummed, hoping to drown out the various noises so she might dress for dinner.

But by the time the musicale was ready to start, all she could hear was the child's terrified weeping. She could not think, could barely breathe with the anguish overwhelming all the more pleasant noises buzzing through the halls.

Aiiieeeee, sob! Ahhhhhhh, sniff, sob, aiiieeeee!

They say. . . But really. . .

Tonight, we'll leave tonight.

*Whimper, sob, **waaaaaaaaa!***

She had done her best to learn to disregard adult arguments, but she could not ignore a terrified child. Neither could she go out into the world on her own. The daughters of a duke had the need for accompaniment drummed into their very souls from birth—especially in this tragic household.

Helplessly, she listened to the wordless wail. Everyone was anticipating a pleasant evening of music. Dragging footmen and her maid into the cold damp night on a fool's errand with no surety that she could find the child—or that she did not imagine it entirely—would only ruin her reputation even more than it was. Her father and Rain would be furious.

And then she remembered Mr. Madden coming to her rescue this afternoon.

Humming one of the tunes emanating from the duke's palace, Will scratched the heads of a few hounds, checked the kennel's water supply, and secured the gate. Moonlight peered from behind the clouds, enough to find his way back to the stable. He enjoyed the late hours when no one was about. He'd have to take Ajax on a nighttime patrol soon.

He favored Castle Yates over the grandiose home where his half-brothers resided. He'd been born and partially raised in Yatesdale. He was comfortable here, where people didn't expect him to be more than Maeve's bastard son. He had no inclination for science or politics as his brothers did. He didn't need the city. The land he meant to buy was in a peaceful valley of the Cotswolds, where he'd never have to wear a tailored coat or attempt to read a book again. He was built like a farmer, and a farmer's life suited him. No one accustomed to animals questioned his talking to them.

He could appreciate the beauty of the sprawling ducal castle from a distance, but he

never wanted to live in one.

Lights flickered in the windows on the hill above him. Music poured from an upstairs gallery. He listened to the notes blending with the sleepy calls of birds and crickets. Perhaps, when he had his own place, he'd learn to make music. Or find a wife who could play.

Thoughts of a wife made him restless. Now that his brothers were almost all married, it was time he made an honest woman of Miranda. She was conveniently located not far from the farm he wished to buy. She wasn't a lady like his brothers' wives, but she was a good woman who didn't complain when his work took him far afield for long periods of time.

He was about to reconsider working off his excess energy by taking Ajax on a patrol of the grounds when he noticed a cloaked form racing toward him.

What the devil? There was no mistaking the lady's slight figure. Even should there be a maid of the same size, she wouldn't have been wearing a fur-trimmed cloak. For good reason, his grace's daughters never went out without escort, and this was twice in one day that the addlebrained female had risked her person.

Will hastened to put himself between her and any danger. He'd lived here half his life and never spoken a word to the duke's reclusive daughter. Twice in one day signified a change in the universe as he knew it, and he tried to maintain his usual composure. Difficult, he admitted, knowing the most-sought-after heiress in the kingdom roamed loose in his territory.

"Mr. Madden," Lady Aurelia cried when he stepped into her path. "Thank goodness. There is a child lost in the woods. I hear her cries, but I cannot understand what she is saying." She continued toward the stable, expecting him to follow.

Had she been anyone else, he would no doubt have balked without further enlightenment. But Lady Aurelia's daunting beauty concealed the fact that she wasn't entirely right in the head. She required all the security the duke could surround her with—and maybe some extra brains.

Following her, he listened to the night sounds, but if there was a child crying, he couldn't hear it. "Children cry," he said, searching for a thin thread of reason.

"Not like this." Impatiently, she tugged at the stable door that had been closed up for the night.

Ever aware of his size, Will knew he could fling the witless lady over his shoulder and haul her back to the house and to the people who ought to be guarding her. He feared she might break if he tried. Alternatively, he could let her tug at the bolted door for the rest of the night. Unfortunately, his mother had taught him better than that.

“Go back to the house. I’ll fetch the dogs,” he said, hoping she might have a rare episode of reason and agree.

“Excellent idea. I’ll fetch Ajax, if you’ll saddle the horses.”

So, she heard only what she wanted to hear. Women were like that, especially women of this particular family.

Will saw no sense in arguing. In her eyes, he was a mere servant, and his duty was to obey her commands. He’d been thinking of walking out anyway. Might as well go for a ride with a madwoman. He grabbed the heavy bar, hauled it back, and heaved open one of the long doors.

Unwilling to disturb the grooms who had settled in for the evening, he threw saddles on a couple of the calmer mounts in the duke’s extensive stable and led them out. The lady was waiting with Ajax already leashed.

“Shouldn’t you have one of your sisters with you?” he asked, attempting a degree of sanity.

“They only make noise,” she said, not exactly addressing the question. “It’s quieter this way, and I can hear better.”

Malcolm madness. He’d seen his brothers deal with their insane women. This one wasn’t his and never would be, so he didn’t have to listen. But if he wanted that kennel, he needed the duke’s approval, and he’d lose it if his grace learned Will had let the witless Lady Aurelia go out alone.

“You’ll explain this to your father if he objects?” he demanded, cupping his hands and lifting her into the sidesaddle. She was so light, he feared flipping her over the horse’s back.

He liked his women heavy and substantial, he reminded himself. He was a big man and needed a big woman, like Miranda. Just because this fairy-like female fascinated him didn’t mean he should see her as more than his employer’s daughter—an employer who was likely to murder him should he discover he was out here alone with her.

She seemed momentarily startled at his assistance. Freezing, as if suddenly realizing

the foolishness of this escapade, she glanced back at the lighted house spilling music.

And then she glanced down at him with what appeared to be a frown. "I can't hear the child if I'm surrounded by noise. You're so quiet, I can almost hear your heart beating."

Will snorted. Still not the answer he wanted, or even one that made sense. "*Annoyingly silent* is the usual epithet I hear." Deciding arguing with a madwoman was a waste of energy, he checked the girth and unleashed the dog. "Ajax has learned to heel. Let's see how she does."

"The child sounds so terrified," the lady murmured in despair, again not responding to his words. "How will we ever find her? I have no idea how close she might be."

Was the lady deaf to him while she listened to otherworldly voices? He was mad as she for not hauling her back to the house and letting them lock her up, where she belonged. Unfortunately, he had a little more experience than most at being outside the ordinary, and he couldn't deny her plea. Or that was his excuse anyway.

"Ajax has better hearing than I do. Let's see if he can pick up the sound." Linking his mind to the dog's, Will tried to hear what Ajax did.

Rustle, rabbits, badger! Hurry, tug, run. . . what's that scent? Human. Follow! Treats.

Will couldn't discern a child's cry in the dog's mind, but Ajax had been trained to track human scents. With no better guide, Will sent the bitch off to follow her instinct.

Tongue lolling, the mastiff took off in the direction of the untamed wilderness beyond the duke's manicured landscaping. The lady trotted in their wake as if riding out at night, alone, was the most natural event in the world. Having seen her ride these hills since childhood—in company with family and grooms—Will had no doubt she could handle the steed. His concern was returning her safely to her home before anyone came looking for them.

The lady rode silently, allowing him to stay connected loosely with the dog. He didn't need to know about every badger trail or dead vermin in the gorse, but he tried to hear with the dog's sharp hearing.

The sure-footed horses found paths around rocks and scree, carrying them downhill and into the gloom of the cliffs below. Will cursed himself for being so distracted by the lady's presence that he had not thought to carry a lantern. Even the moonlight vanished in the shadows beneath towering boulders. Ajax whimpered and dashed off down an animal

trail. Will lost visual sight of her but kept the mental connection. Keeping his ears open, he tried to hear a child's cry but didn't.

The craggy moor appeared untouched since the beginnings of time. Tumbling rock, rough grasslands, and bogs were unsuited for human habitation. Miles from the village, cut off from other farms by the duke's vast estate, the steep hillsides were no easy hike from anywhere. He would dismiss Aurelia's fears as hallucination—except Ajax was definitely following a scent she identified as human.

"I *hear* her," Aurelia whispered anxiously, as if sensing his doubt. "How would a child ever find their way down here?"

"The same way you hear her perhaps," he said dryly.

"Inexplicably," she retorted, proving she could listen when she wished.

A rabbit darted from behind a rock. His horse shied, and Will heard Ajax's yip of excitement. If the damned dog was following a rabbit. . . He couldn't complain. He was rather enjoying this break in his dull routine.

He winced at that wayward thought. He'd chosen his simple path for good reasons—one of them being that he wanted freedom from society's unreasonable restrictions and lack of understanding.

He focused on the dog's mind—

Wet grass slapping her nose with the rich scent of earth. Push her nose into wet dog stench, tall plants tickling, yip, warning. . .

Will shook himself out of the bitch's unfocused senses. Ajax had evidently found a patch of thick ferns and the stench of wet fur.

Will still heard no child, but he gathered that Ajax had found an animal, possibly a dog, one that was alive but not moving. He held up his hand to halt the lady and swung down.

"She's not here," Lady Aurelia argued. "We're closer though."

"Let me see what Ajax has found." He couldn't abide to leave hurt animals suffering, and that was the sense he was receiving. He crept up to where the mastiff lay down, tail wagging, nose sniffing.

Among the frost-bitten ferns lay a bedraggled spot of dirty brown and white, wriggling pathetically. Will crouched down, removed his glove, and held out his hand for the creature to sniff. It did so eagerly, proving it was accustomed to human handling.

“What have you found?” Lady Aurelia asked, keeping her voice low.

Will scooped up the shivering terrier pup, stroking its bristly coat and searching for injury. He thought he found blood, and the rear leg appeared hurt. That was a discovery he would not relate to the worried lady, but it raised his hackles. This was a pampered puppy, not an animal accustomed to roaming wild. Damage like this usually happened from human brutality.

“A puppy. He may be injured.” He held up the creature in the palm of his ungloved hand to show her.

“The child may be crying for her dog!” she exclaimed.

Will thought he might almost follow the path of that thought.

She reached for the bedraggled creature. “He’s small enough to fit in my pocket. Will that keep him warm enough for now?”

He would rather take the dog back to the house to tend it than chase after unseen, unheard children at the insane demand of a woman who heard what others did not. But the presence of a pampered puppy asked questions he couldn’t answer.

He fed the puppy from the treats in his pocket and let the terrier sniff the lady’s much sweeter smelling hands. It scrambled eagerly to reach her. She cuddled him in her lap, stroking him into calmness. “A child’s pet?”

“Possibly,” he said gruffly, climbing back into the saddle. Quelling his resistance to tamper with a strange dog’s mind, he probed until he saw the puppy’s scrambled, page-flipping thoughts.

He might not read textbooks with fluency, but he could grab scenes from a dog’s mind with enough accuracy to react in horror. *Blood, unbelievable amounts of blood. And screams. And pain.*

Unable, and unwilling, to explain those impressions, Will merely urged the horse into a trot, ordering Ajax to follow the puppy’s scent. He appreciated that the lady didn’t question his path.

His Malcolm sisters-in-law were nonstop chatterers, so he’d never thought of Lady Aurelia in the same manner as her cousins. Except he knew that her father was descended from one of the more mad of the Malcolm witches—one who heard spirit voices and saw ghosts. He didn’t think the puppy was a ghost or that the scene of carnage in its mind was

from beyond the veil, but it was possible that the lady might be hearing more than was evident in the real world.

Double damn and twice the trouble.

With an inexorable sense of foreboding, he led the way in silence, through darkness, until they reached the bottom of the steep hill. Ajax yipped and raced toward the south. The cold night air nipped at Will's nose, but this flat path was safer than the downhill one.

"I hear her!" the lady cried in a low voice. "We're close."

Will heard nothing human. He connected his mind to Ajax, sifting through the sounds and scents—until he heard a child's quiet weeping through the dog's ears. His stomach lurched, and he sent the lady a narrowed look. "Do you hear her in your head or with your ears?" he asked, cursing himself as he did. Ives curiosity often won over common sense.

"Both," she said curtly, straining to hear the impossible.

She seemed agitated but didn't do anything reckless like sending her horse galloping through the rocks to reach the invisible. He'd always known the lady as a cautious creature who seemed better suited to a fairy garden than the real world. Her reply proved him right.

"There, by those boulders," she whispered, distracting his wandering thoughts.

The terrain she indicated was too rough for their mounts. Keeping an eye on Ajax, Will found a grassy patch by the creek not far from the boulders. He dismounted and would have followed the dog alone, but the lady's impatient reaction forced him to reconsider.

"You'll terrify her. Help me down."

The night couldn't be any weirder. *Hold the duke's fragile daughter?* A few hours ago, he would have thought it more likely he'd encompass the moon.

Clamping down on his rioting senses, Will clasped the lady's tiny waist. He'd been right, his hands circled her. She smelled of cakes and biscuits, weighed almost nothing, and he had a need to cradle her against him. At the notion, he practically dropped her and backed away.

She didn't seem to notice. Removing the puppy from her pocket, she cuddled it in her arms, letting it sniff the air and whimper expectantly. Without hesitation, she lifted her skirt and cloak and picked her way across the stones toward Ajax, who had begun to yip quietly.

Feeling like an unnecessary appurtenance, Will tagged along. If the child had been

crying, it wasn't now. That did not bode well.