JESSICA GILMORE

Reawakened by His Christmas Kiss

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True Love

Jessica Gilmore

Reawakened By His Christmas Kiss

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A Christmas reunion… …with his Sleeping Beauty! Alex Davenport's shocked when her latest assignment finds her in her old home, Blakeley Castle, and face-to-face with first love Finn Hawkin! The tycoon needs her PR skills but can he also reawaken Alex's frozen heart this Christmas?

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A Christmas reunion...

...with his Sleeping Beauty!

In this Fairytale Brides story, Alex Davenport's shocked when her latest assignment finds her in her old home, Blakeley Castle, and face-to-face with first love Finn Hawkin! The tycoon needs her PR skills but she refuses to revisit their romance or what happened back then. Until she's snowbound with Finn and his little nieces. He let her down once, but can he and the girls reawaken Alex's frozen heart this Christmas?

A former au pair, bookseller, marketing manager and seafront trader, **JESSICA GILMORE** now works for an environmental charity in York, England. Married with one daughter, one fluffy dog and two dog-loathing cats, she spends her time avoiding housework and can usually be found with her nose in a book. Jessica writes emotional romance with a hint of humour, a splash of sunshine and a great deal of delicious food—and equally delicious heroes!

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Reawakened by His Christmas Kiss

Jessica Gilmore

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For Rose, Rich, Ol and Jake.
Thank you for everything.
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PROLOGUE

FINN HAWKIN ACCEPTED a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and surveyed the scene before him, his lips curving into an appreciative smile. Fairy lights and gossamer white drapes, elaborate costumes and a vast ballroom might be wasted on him, but his small nieces would want to hear about every single detail of the night. The Armarian Midsummer Ball was like every one of their favourite fairy-tales brought to life.

A masked and cloaked figure paused beside him. 'Having fun?'

'Laurent!' Finn turned to greet his old friend with genuine delight. His presence here might be more business than personal, but it was good to see his host. 'Thanks for the invite.'

'You are more than welcome. I'm glad you could come.'

A hint of sympathy tinged the other man's voice; Finn didn't confide in many people, but Laurent knew how difficult the last year had been, the hard choices Finn had been faced with.

'How are your nieces?'

'Tired out after a week of enjoying your glorious beaches. Not that they'll admit it. Tonight they are most put out at not coming with me to a real-life royal ball. I've promised to smuggle cake back to the villa. Hopefully that will mollify them.'

'Bring them to the palace,' Laurent offered. 'It'll still be chaotic tomorrow, but maybe the day after? We have puppies in the stables they can meet, and I'll take them to the highest turret and tell them grisly stories about how my ancestors repelled would-be invaders.'

'They'll like that. Thanks, Laurent.'

'And we can catch up properly. It'll be easier when I'm not hosting several hundred people.'

'Perils of being a prince.'

But Finn couldn't help noticing that Laurent seemed more at ease than usual. He was usually so reserved, so rigid when in public, but this evening he was like a different man, his smile genuine and easy, his whole being infused with a lightness and joy that Finn couldn't imagine feeling.

'Who's the girl?'

'What girl?' Laurent's grin only widened, his eyes softening as they rested on a slim figure in yellow and silver, standing to the side of the ballroom, directing a group of waitresses.

'The girl you haven't been able to take your eyes off all night. When you haven't been disappearing outside with her, that is.'

It was unlike Laurent to be openly seen with a woman—and, although his costume gave him a degree of anonymity, it wasn't enough of a disguise to ensure complete privacy. No, if Laurent was dancing, flirting and holding intense, smouldering conversations so publicly, then his intentions must be pretty serious, and that was unexpected from a man who had seemed reconciled to a sensible marriage of convenience.

'That's Emilia. She's the party planner. She put this whole ball together in less than a month.' Laurent might have been aiming for offhand, but the pride in his voice was a dead giveaway; he was in deep.

'She's done a great job. The whole evening is magical.'

'Says the man standing on the side alone. I didn't expect you to use your plus one, Finn, but there are plenty of beautiful women here who I'm sure would love to dance with you. Would you like me to introduce you to anyone? How about the Contessa, over there?' Laurent indicated a haughty blonde waving a fan as she ignored an eager crowd of young men.

Finn laughed. 'She looks a little above my pay grade.'

'Modesty doesn't become you, Finn. You're young, active, and you still have all your own hair and teeth. That puts you above half the men in this room, and that's before we take into account

your very successful company and the small fact that you've just bought your own castle. Even the Contessa would think that makes you very suitable for one dance at least.'

'Blakeley hardly compares with a royal palace,' Finn protested, but pride swelled through him at the thought of the ancient old building, currently being restored to make a home for his nieces and a base for his rapidly expanding business.

He hadn't inherited the castle, he'd bought it with money he'd earned the hard way. Although he'd grown up on the Blakeley estate, nothing had been handed to him. His success was down to pure hard work and some lucky—and canny—decisions.

'I'm happy for you,' Laurent said softly. 'You've achieved your goal. How many men can say that?'

Finn sipped his drink. Laurent was right. He was barely thirty and he'd hit every one of the goals he'd set when they were students in Paris: to found his own business, make a fortune, and live on an estate like the one he'd grown up on. Only this time he'd be the one in the big house, not the gardener's boy, doffing his cap to his so-called betters.

'We never stop setting goals, Laurent, we just change the goalposts. Now my nieces come first. Giving them the kind of happiness and security they need...that's my priority.'

'If anyone can, you can.'

They stood there in silence for a moment, watching the opulently adorned dancers waltz around the dance floor until Laurent's gaze strayed once again to the girl in the yellow dress. Finn followed his gaze. She had moved away from the waitresses and was talking animatedly to a tall, elegant woman dressed in a demure black dress, her light brown hair elegantly coiled into a chignon.

Recognition punched him. It couldn't be...

Or could it? Was this the girl he'd searched for in vain through the years, right here in a ballroom hundreds of miles away from the place where they'd grown up?

Last time he had seen her, her hair had been bleached platinum blonde and cut into a choppy bob which had instantly spawned a thousand imitations. She'd been a decade younger, coltish and angular, with cheekbones sharp enough to cut through butter and a knowing, slanting gaze that had pouted down from billboards and magazine covers across the globe—before she had disappeared from public view and from his life, as if she had never been.

'Lola?' he half whispered. And, as if she'd heard him, the woman looked up, alert, scenting danger.

He must be imagining things. Lola Beaumont was gone, disappeared into the ether. He knew that. He'd looked for her for long enough. He blinked and refocussed. He must be mistaken. The woman was clearly working at the event, and Lola was always the guest of honour, not the help. It was a passing resemblance, that was all.

He'd thought he'd cured himself of seeing Lola at every corner years ago. But Finn couldn't stop himself from turning to Laurent. 'Who is that? Talking to Emilia?'

'Who? Oh, that's Alex—Alexandra Davenport. She co-owns a party planning agency with Emilia and two other women. She arrived yesterday, I think, to oversee things tonight so Emilia could attend the ball. Why?' Laurent's smile turned sly. 'Would you like an introduction to her?'

'No, thanks. Just curious.'

But Finn's mind was working furiously. Alexandra was Lola's middle name, wasn't it? Surely it was a coincidence—a similarity of features, a shared name, that was all. But as he gazed across at the woman he couldn't help feeling that there were no such things as coincidences and now, just as his life was exactly where he wanted it to be, Lola Beaumont had returned to disrupt it all over again.

The question was, what was he going to do about it?

CHAPTER ONE

WITH A HERCULEAN effort, Alexandra Davenport managed to wait until she had passed through Passport Control before she turned on her phone. Pulling her small case behind her, she headed towards Customs and the exit, impatient as her phone whirred through its settings and began to process all communications from the last eight hours.

All around her people staggered past, eyes red, clothes wrinkled from the overnight flight. Alex, on the other hand, felt surprisingly well-rested. Thank goodness she'd packed a washcloth and a clean top in her overnight bag, and had freshened up just before the fasten seat belts sign came on. She was refreshed, she had slept, and she was ready for anything.

She glanced at her phone, not surprised to see every notification symbol jostling for space at the top. There was always a crisis somewhere. Which for her was a good thing; promotional PR paid the bills, but it was managing the unexpected and spinning disaster into gold where she excelled.

She dialled up voicemail and waited for the first message to come through.

'Alex? It's me.'

Alex smiled as she heard the voice of Amber, her colleague and, more importantly, her friend. With just three words she was home. Home. A place she had stopped believing existed. After all, hadn't she trained herself not to rely on people or places?

'Hope you get this in time. What am I saying? Of course you will. There's no way you don't have a fully charged phone ready to switch on the second you land! So, we've had a last-minute booking. It's a residential stay and the client is very much demanding that you get there asap. So you need to head straight there. I've arranged for a car to pick you up and take you. Give me a call when you're on the way and I can go through everything with you. Don't worry, I packed up some clothes for you and they've been collected. Well done again on New York. You rocked it. Can't believe we're properly international! Talk soon!'

The voicemail ended and Alex frowned as she saved it. She hadn't been expecting to head straight out again—after a week away she was more than ready to return to the Chelsea townhouse she had inherited the year before and turned into both a home and the business premises for her three closest—and only—friends. Together they had set up the Happy Ever After Agency, offering regular, one-off and consultancy support in everything from admin to events, PR to bespoke jobs.

Only eight months after opening they already had a strong reputation, backed up by glowing testimonials from previous clients. Glowing testimonials thanks to their ability to react quickly. Exactly as she needed to do right now, she reminded herself. Her feelings didn't matter. The client always came first.

Of course it didn't hurt their reputation that one of their previous clients, Prince Laurent, Archduke of Armaria, was currently courting Emilia, their events specialist, whilst tech billionaire Deangelo Santos was engaged to Harriet, his former PA and their head of admin.

Alex suppressed a sigh. They'd been open less than a year and already it was all change. Next year Harriet would marry Deangelo and officially move out of the townhouse, and they all knew Laurent would propose to Emilia any day now.

Harriet intended to carry on working once she was married but, although Emilia would remain a business partner, there was no way she would be able to take on any jobs once she became Archduchess. Alex was absolutely delighted for her friends, but she couldn't help wishing they'd had more time together first. Time to really build the agency.

She swallowed, not wanting to admit even to herself that the ache she felt deep inside wasn't just down to the changes in the business. She'd been so happy these last few months, living and working with her friends. She'd trained herself to enjoy her own company, but the house felt alive with the four of them in it. It was welcoming. Would it seem empty when there were just two?

Pushing the dark thoughts away, Alex walked swiftly through Customs, checking her emails as she did so and flicking through her clients' social media feeds to make sure there was nothing requiring immediate attention.

She was just aware enough of her surroundings to make sure she didn't crash into anyone, otherwise she zoned out the noise and hubbub as she exited into the Arrivals Hall. She stopped for a moment, scanning the waiting crowds for a sign with her name on it, but before she could spot it her attention was snagged by a teenage girl running past her to launch herself into the arms of a middle-aged couple, whose wide smiles and bright eyes showed how very glad they were to see her.

No one had ever waited for Alex unless they'd been paid to be there, like the driver today. She watched as the couple enfolded the girl in their arms, unable to help noticing other reunions, some loud, some tearful, and one so passionate she felt like a voyeur.

She straightened. Enough of this nonsense. She had just had a very successful few days, turning the agency into an international proposition, and she was heading straight into another job. Success, security, everything she was working towards was within reach. That was where she needed to focus.

With a jolt of relief, she spotted the sign with her name on it and headed towards it. The sooner she was out of the airport the better.

Ten minutes later Alex found herself ensconced in the back of a comfortable saloon car, her laptop purring to life beside her, a notebook on the folded-out tray table, a chilled bottle of water and a pot of fruit beside it. She read through her emails again quickly, but there was nothing from Amber to indicate where she was going and what she would be doing once she was there.

The driver had volunteered the information that the journey would take around an hour and a half, depending on traffic, but hadn't mentioned the destination. No matter. Amber would fill her in.

Despite the earliness of the hour the roads were busy and the car crawled along. Looking out of the darkened windows into the pre-dawn winter gloom, Alex noted how low and heavy the skies were. The temperature had dropped as well, now closer to the New York chill she'd just left than the autumnal mildness she'd flown away from just a week ago.

It was easy to believe that Christmas was less than three weeks away and winter was well and truly settling in.

A sign caught her eye and she winced at the realisation that they were heading out to the M40. Hopefully they'd turn off soon. She normally avoided the area around the Chilterns. It was far too full of memories.

She checked her phone and decided that it was late enough to call Amber. Barely had she pressed the call button when her friend answered, sounding, as always, far too chipper for first thing in the morning.

'Hi, Alex! You got my message?'

'I did. Which is why I am in the back of a car heading *out* of London and not into it. Who's the client and what's so urgent that I'm needed on site straight away? A threatened exposé? PR disaster?' Her mind whirled. The thornier the problem the more she loved it.

'Nothing so exciting. I'm sorry. But hopefully you'll still enjoy the brief. Have you heard of Hawk?'

Alex thought for a moment, the name niggling at her. 'It sounds familiar.'

'It's an outdoor lifestyle brand, all rugged clothing, popular with those people who like to leave their city pad in their four-by-four to go for a ten-minute walk on the beach, but the clothes are the real deal as well, you know? They're worn by loads of serious climbers and explorer types. They have that cute hawk symbol on all their clothes. Like my winter coat?'

'Yes. I know who you mean.' She didn't own any of their clothing personally, but she was aware of the company's stellar reputation. 'What's happened? Why do they need me?'

'A broken leg.'

Alex blinked. Maybe she wasn't as refreshed as she thought. 'A broken leg?'

‘Their PR manager has managed to break her leg in several places. She’s confined to bed with her leg in a cage.’

That made more sense. ‘I see.’

‘They’ve just moved their headquarters to some kind of stately home out towards Swindon, I think. That’s where you’re headed.’

Alex let out a breath she hadn’t quite realised she was holding. Swindon was past the danger area. ‘Okay...’

‘The owner is opening up the whole estate as an outdoor activity and nature destination. You know the kind of thing: adventure playgrounds and forest trails, all in line with the whole Hawk brand. They’re running the business out of converted barns, or stables, or something suitably rustic. They’re officially opening at the end of the week, with a ton of Christmas-themed events. Apparently the house and grounds were all neglected and it’s the kind of area where jobs are sparse, house prices sky-high and lots of incomers are buying second homes, so there’s a whole rejuvenating-the-village and local-jobs-for-local-people thing going on as well.’

‘Very worthy,’ Alex said drily. ‘But any Communications and PR plan for all that will have been agreed months ago. What do they need me for?’

‘To look after things while the PR manager is on bed-rest.’

Alex shifted, staring out of the window at the pinkening sky. ‘Amber, that’s not a difficult job. Any of our temps could take a plan and implement it. They don’t need me for anything so simple. It’s not like I’m cheap.’

‘They were adamant they wanted you. It’s a big deal, Alex. Opening up the house after all this time is a huge undertaking, and it’s very different to anything they’ve done before. They see the estate as the embodiment of their brand. They’re really big on sustainability and corporate responsibility, which fits in with the job creation and community stuff. They need a safe pair of hands to make sure it’s properly publicised. Besides, they hinted that there might be bigger work coming our way if they were happy. Maybe this is some kind of test.’

‘Maybe...’ But Alex had entered PR for a reason. She knew when someone was spinning a story and this situation just didn’t ring true. ‘Send me the brief, will you?’

‘I don’t have it. They wanted to talk you through it all in person. But, honestly, they are opening with a whole Christmassy bang. You’ll be kept suitably busy, I promise.’

All Alex’s senses tingled. As soon as she finished the call she planned to find out every last bit of knowledge she could about Hawk and its owner. If it was in the public domain—or semi-public—then she would find it. Maybe she was wrong, and this situation was all absolutely legitimate, but she needed to be prepared for any and every eventuality.

‘Alex, before you go... Dalstone sent over their press release for you to work your magic on and they want it back before nine this morning. Can you take a look now?’

‘Of course. I’ll send it right back. Is everything else okay?’

‘All’s good. Harriet’s working from home today. Deangelo just got back from an oversea trip so she wants to see him. Emilia’s event went really well, but she didn’t get in until after two so I think she’ll be sleeping in.’

Amber sounded wistful. She thrived on the company of others and was happiest when they were all together. It didn’t help that Christmas was so close. For the last few years the four of them had spent Christmas together, but this year Deangelo was taking Harriet back to his native Rio De Janeiro for the holiday, and Emilia would be spending two weeks in Armaria. All three of them expected their friend to come back sporting an engagement ring.

‘I was thinking,’ Alex said with an impulsiveness that surprised her. ‘You and I should do something this Christmas. Skiing, maybe? Or we could have a city break somewhere wintry, like Vienna?’

‘Really?’

‘Absolutely. Why don’t you look into it? After all the hard work we’ve had over the last few months we deserve a short break.’

‘It will have to be short,’ Amber reminded her. ‘Your contract with Hawk lasts until Christmas Eve, and we have the Van Daemon New Year’s Eve charity ball, but we could do three days in between without any problems.’

‘Three days sounds perfect. Okay, I’ll get the press release straight back. Speak later.’

‘Give me a call when you’re fully briefed and settled in. I’m sorry you had to head out on another job without coming home first.’

‘It’s fine. It’s what we’re here to do. It’s a good sign, Amber. A sign we’re where we want to be.’

Alex finished the call and opened her laptop, connecting it to her phone’s data so she could access the press release Amber had mentioned. And then, she reminded herself, it would be time to investigate her new employers and check just why her every hackle was up and sensing danger.

But the press release needed far more work than she had anticipated, and between the pull of her work and the lull induced by the car’s steady process she soon got lost in it, any thought of research flying out of her head.

She didn’t notice the car turn off the motorway long before Swindon, and nor was she aware as they drove through a succession of idyllic villages, more like a film set than real places, with a succession of village greens, quirky pubs and thatched cottages.

It wasn’t until the car slowed and turned in at a pair of elaborate gates that she realised she’d arrived at her destination.

‘Already?’ she muttered, glancing at the time on her laptop.

Only an hour had passed. There was no way they had made it to Swindon in that time. Which meant they were somewhere else entirely; somewhere an hour west of London. Inhaling slowly, Alex looked up. There was no need to worry. She was in control; she was always in control.

Repeating the mantra, she looked straight ahead at the gates, taking in every detail of the ornate gilt-covered iron, the curlicues and symbols, time stilling as she noted every familiar detail. Her breath caught painfully in her throat, and her mouth was dry as the old, unwelcome panic, banished for a decade, thundered through her.

She hadn’t just arrived. She’d returned. She was at Blakeley. Ten years after swearing never to set foot here again. Ten years after renouncing her way of life and starting anew.

Calm deserted her. She couldn’t do this. Wouldn’t. The car would have to turn around and take her straight back to London.

Hands shaking, she began to bundle her phone back into her bag, snapping her laptop shut. But she couldn’t find the words to tell the driver to stop. Her chest was too tight, her throat swollen with fear and long-buried memories.

And still the car purred inexorably on. Every curve of the drive, every tree and view was familiar. More. It was part of her soul. Alex sat transfixed, fear giving way to nostalgic wonder, and for a moment she saw the ghost of a fearless long-limbed girl flitting through the trees.

But that girl was long gone. Lady Lola Beaumont had disappeared the day the Beaumonts’ fortunes had crashed and in her place Alexandra Davenport had appeared. Any resemblance was purely superficial.

Besides, who would recognise flamboyant Lola in demure Alex? Alexandra didn’t party or flirt, she didn’t dance through life expecting favours to be bestowed upon her, and she didn’t try to shock or crave publicity. She worked hard; she lived a quiet existence. Her clothes were fashionable and stylish, yes, but on the sensible side. Her hair was coiled neatly, her jewellery discreet. And it was Alexandra Davenport who had been employed to do a job. The fact that the job was at her old family home must be one awful coincidence.

It *had* to be. After all, no one knew who she once had been. Not even her best friends.

Alex sat frozen, still undecided. Turning tail and running wasn't her style, but she had stayed clear of this entire region for a reason. She might not feel like Lola any longer, might not act like her, but what if someone recognised her?

Her hands folded into fists. She managed the story; she was no longer the story herself. She'd left her tabloid headline existence in the past, where it belonged, but she knew her reappearance at her childhood home would create nothing but speculation and the kind of publicity she'd spent a decade avoiding.

If she turned around now she wouldn't be running away, she'd be making a prudent retreat. She could claim a double booking and send one of her many capable temps in her stead, with a discreet discount and an apology. It was the right—the only—thing to do.

Only at that moment the car swept round the last bend and there it was, gleaming gold in the winter morning sun. Blakeley Castle. Alex could only stare transfixed at the long, grand façade, at the famous turrets, the formal gardens, now autumnal in browns and oranges and red, the trees bare of leaves, their spindly branches reaching high to the grey-blue sky. Her breath quickened and she leaned forward as if in a trance.

Blakeley Castle was beautiful. There was nowhere like it. Nowhere as steeped in myth and legend and history. Kings had fallen in love within its walls; queens had fallen from favour. Dukes had lost their hearts, and sometimes their heads, and the Beaumonts had gambled their fortunes, their titles, their freedom, their looks and their marriages on games of chance, of love, of treason.

Until one had gambled too much and lost it all. His freedom, his family, his home.

And now his daughter, the last Beaumont, was returning to Blakeley. But as an anonymous employee, no longer the spoiled darling of the house.

Alex took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. She might have changed her name and changed her destiny but the old ancestral cry of 'Semper porsum', always forward, ran through her veins. This was just a job. And Blakeley was just a house—well, a castle. But it was still bricks and mortar. There were no ghosts here apart from the few that still haunted her dreams. And she made sure they vanished in the cold light of day.

She wasn't Lola Beaumont. She was Alexandra Davenport. She was calm and capable and she always saw her commitments through. Her life was sensible and measured and it was ridiculous to think of upsetting any aspect of it because of an old link to a mere place. A link that had been severed ten years ago. Nobody here knew her. She would do her job to the best of her ability and leave without looking back once. No regrets. She'd had too many of them.

Mind made up, Alex sat back as the car swept into the parking area at the side of the house, checking herself in her mirror. Her lipstick was in place, her hair neat, her expression coolly inscrutable. All was as it should be. The panic had gone. It was back in the past where it belonged. Nothing fazed her, nothing touched her, and her walls were firmly back in place.

She couldn't help noticing the changes in the familiar. Everything looked better cared for, and the flag flying from the highest turret bore a bird of prey, not the Beaumont crest. The car park was freshly laid, not a pothole to be seen, shielded from the castle by a tall hedge. She glimpsed the grand front entrance as the car turned. Doors stood open, the old faded steps were now gleaming, and the rug half covering them sported the same golden bird as that flying overhead on the flag.

Alexandra Davenport had never been to Blakeley Castle before. She would wait for the driver to open the door and then look around her in curiosity as she exited the car, asking if she should go in through the back door or report somewhere else. All would be unfamiliar, all new. She would be focussed on the task ahead. The beauty of the old house and grounds were of secondary importance, and her curiosity about the new owners confined to a moment's idle speculation before work took over, as it always did.

One deep breath and any dangerous traces of Lola disappeared as Alexandra stepped out of the car, her expression bland, her smile practised, and turned to face the person who had appeared to greet her.

The smile only wavered for one infinitesimal second as she took in the tall, broad-shouldered man, his dark jacket and jeans showcasing lean, powerful muscles, his hair swept back off his face, dark eyes as cold as the December air.

‘Hello.’ Her voice stayed calm and in control as she held out a hand. ‘Alexandra Davenport.’

The man’s gaze only grew more sardonic as he took her hand in his. His clasp was strong, almost too strong, as if he had something to prove.

‘Finn Hawkin. But you knew that. Didn’t you, Lola?’

CHAPTER TWO

FINN LOOSENED HIS grip and Alex withdrew her hand from his in a smooth gesture.

'I go by Alexandra now.'

'I know. Alexandra Davenport, I believe? Of course Alexandra *is* your middle name.'

He noted her slight blink of acknowledgement with satisfaction. Maybe she wasn't quite as calm as she seemed. 'Where's the Davenport from?'

'My grandmother's maiden name.' She stepped back and looked around before her cool gaze rested on him once again, understanding in her grey eyes. 'Hawkin...hawk. Of course. I see. You always did say you'd earn enough to own somewhere like Blakeley some day. I didn't think you actually meant Blakeley itself, but that wasn't the first time I underestimated you. Congratulations, Finn, you've obviously done very well.'

Finn had been rehearsing this meeting for the last few hours. Ever since he'd heard about his Head of PR, Penelope, having an accident. No, longer than that. Since the summer, when he had glimpsed Lola across the ballroom floor and done some digging into the agency which had organised the Armarian Midsummer Ball and its four founders. From the moment he'd realised that Alexandra Davenport was exactly who he thought she was.

Lola Beaumont was unfinished business. Business he needed to resolve in order to move on once and for all—especially now that he was master of Blakeley and all that entailed. He had to focus on the future, on his nieces, and let go all the regrets that still haunted him. And he could only do that by confronting the past—and the woman who dominated it.

And then the fates had aligned, for good or for ill, and he had taken advantage of them. Penelope's accident was more than unfortunate, coming at such a very crucial time. The castle would be opening to the public for the first time in its history this weekend, and he needed an experienced pair of hands to manage all the resulting publicity. Who better than the woman who had grown up here? Who now worked as a PR consultant?

The Lola he'd known would have reacted to her homecoming in some dramatic fashion, with tears or laughter equally likely, but this new version radiated a disconcerting cool calmness. A calmness he hadn't anticipated, hadn't prepared for. Nor had he missed her slight emphasis on the words 'underestimated'.

His mouth tightened. He didn't reply, not at first, taking a moment to observe the woman who had been his oldest friend—and his first love.

'You didn't know I founded Hawk?'

He didn't hide his polite disbelief. Maybe she'd walked away and never so much as typed his name into a search engine or on a social media site, but his business was a global brand, and as founder and CEO he had been extensively profiled.

Alex was a PR professional. It didn't seem possible that she had no idea of who he had become and what he'd achieved.

But her smile was apologetic. 'Sorry. Outdoor pursuits aren't my speciality and nor is clothing. I'm aware of Hawk, of course, but you've never been a rival of any of my clients, so I haven't ever needed to investigate further. That was why I was so surprised when Amber said you had requested me specifically. I have to say I am even more surprised now I'm here. Finn, obviously it's flattering that you would like me to cover your PR. But, given everything, I don't think that our working together is in any way a good idea.'

'Everything?' He kept his voice icily smooth, but she still didn't react, her expression unruffled.

'Our shared history.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Shared history? That's one way of putting it, I suppose.'

He stopped himself from saying anything else, from letting the bitter words he'd been holding back for ten years come spilling out. He was no longer a young man with no idea how to handle his emotions, how to cope with accusations and betrayal and heartbreak.

'However, that's exactly why you're perfect for this job. After all, you know the castle better than anyone else.'

Again, just a blink as her reaction. Finn folded his arms and waited for her to respond, refusing to allow her calmness to throw him. After all, whether she called herself Alexandra Davenport or Lola Beaumont, there was one thing he knew for sure: she didn't just know Blakeley Castle, she loved it with every fibre of her fiery being.

But, he conceded as he studied her, this woman wasn't fiery. Gone was the platinum blonde hair and dramatic eyeliner, the cutting-edge fashion and almost fey wildness. Instead Alexandra's hair was her natural light brown, neatly pinned up, her make-up discreet, her clothes professional. There was nothing wild in the way she stood, nor in her eyes. Instead Finn noted her absolute air of control. Was there any trace of Lola trapped inside this stranger?

'The castle, yes. Your brand, no.'

'But you specialise in short-term jobs, in getting up to speed quickly,' he pointed out silkily. 'I have a whole team who can manage Hawk's PR work. What I need is someone to help me launch Blakeley Castle as a destination. Your expertise and knowledge make you the logical choice. Your colleague, Amber, didn't think there would be any problem.'

'Amber doesn't know that I have any personal connection to Blakeley—or to you,' she added in a low voice. 'So of course she wouldn't foresee any conflict of interest. But there are conflicts, and it's my professional opinion that you would be better off with one of our excellent consultants instead of me. I can think of at least three who would be perfect. I propose I go back to London now and send you their profiles. I can make sure your preferred candidate is with you by the end of the day. I'm sorry you have wasted your time. It's unfortunate that I was out of contact when you called.'

She picked up her bag and took a decisive step back.

'I'm glad to see you've done so well, Finn. I look forward to our companies working together. I'm sure it will be a successful partnership.'

Not so fast. He hadn't got her back just to watch her drive off into the sunset with nothing resolved.

'You've signed a contract.'

Her eyes flickered. 'And we'll honour that contract...'

'The contract specifies you, Alex. That *you* will work here at Blakeley Castle until Christmas Eve. Not one of your consultants, however excellent they may be.'

'Yes, but—'

'It's you I have employed, your expertise I want, and your exorbitant rates I have agreed to.'

'We can, of course, offer a discount to offset any inconvenience.'

'I don't need a discount. Either you fulfil the terms of your contract or I sue you for breaking them. Your choice. I'm sure you'll be happy to stand up in court and tell everyone why you didn't feel able to work for me.'

Her silence and stillness were absolute. 'I see. I'm sorry that you hate me this much, Finn...'

'I don't hate you, Lola. I have absolutely no feelings at all towards you. This isn't personal. This is business. So what will it be?'

He held her gaze, conscious of the lie. Of course it was personal, but his business reasons were more than valid. And he didn't hate her. He never had.

She sighed. 'If you're absolutely adamant that I stay then of course I will, but I'd like to make it clear that I think you would be better letting me assign someone else to this job. Are you sure this is what you want?'

‘I’m sure. Come along and I’ll show you to your desk. Not that you need me to show you anywhere. I’m sure you remember your way around.’

Her eyes dipped briefly and she laid a hand on his arm, her touch light. Even her touch had lost its fire. Or maybe he was immune, their past having inoculated him against any spells she might cast.

‘Finn, I need to get one thing straight. If you really want me to work for you then please forget you ever knew me. Forget I ever lived here. Lola Beaumont is gone. I left her behind a long time ago.’

‘Shame. There was a lot of good in Lola behind it all.’

‘That’s neither here nor there. Do I have your word that you will respect my anonymity? The reputation I have built up? I don’t know how you tracked me down, Finn, but if you really have brought me here to do my best for your business and not to create a whole other kind of publicity then you’ll forget about Lola.’

She fixed her disconcerting gaze on him. Still no trace of visible emotion in their grey depths. No longer could a lovestruck boy compare them to stormy seas or windswept skies. Instead they were more like a glossy pebble, smooth and unreadable.

‘Unless, of course, it’s other publicity that you are after? Not my expertise but my past?’

Finn stared at her, incredulous as her meaning took shape. ‘You think I brought you here to expose you?’

She shrugged. ‘It would be excellent PR. The last Beaumont back at Blakeley... The papers would love it. They’ll rake up the old scandal anyway, you know that—you must be counting on it. Everyone loves the idea of an old, proud family brought down, and now they can stand on the spot where it happened. I am quite happy to facilitate that, Finn, but I am no longer personally part of that story.’

His hands curled once more into fists as he fought to match her calmness. ‘I don’t expect you to be the story. Blakeley is mine now. I prefer to concentrate on the future and on building prosperity for everyone who works here.’

‘Thank you. I’m glad we understand each other.’

Even with the toned-down make-up and hair, the professional clothes, he could still see traces of the vibrant girl he had known in the tilt of Alexandra’s pointed chin, the curve of her cheekbones, her elegant posture. But any resemblance was purely skin-deep.

Lola was gone, and with her all that fire and passion. It might have got her—and all who knew her—into trouble sometimes, but she had at least known how to live. He got the impression that the woman in front of him didn’t really live a single day of her ordered life. Rather she sleepwalked through it, merely existing. Of all the tragedies that had hit the Beaumonts, this seemed like the biggest tragedy of all.

But whether she called herself Alexandra or Lola one thing was clear—she still thought he would use her, expose her for his own personal gain, just as she had believed ten years ago. No matter what he had achieved, to the woman opposite he was still the boy she thought had betrayed her. Well, his word might not have been good enough then, but she would have to believe in it now.

His future awaited him, and once Christmas was over Lola/Alexandra would be out of his life and his memories for good.

* * *

Control had been at the centre of Alex’s life for many years now, but she had never had to fight so hard for it as she did right now. Standing beside her old home, with its turrets reaching up into the skies, standing opposite the man she had once given her whole heart and trust to, only for him to rip them—and her—to pieces, had whipped up feelings and emotions she had long thought buried and gone. Nausea swirled through her and her hands shook, but she fought to keep her voice even and her expression bland.

Finn could never know the effect he had on her. She would never give him—or anyone—that kind of power again.

'I think I'd better get started. Where shall I set up? I would usually arrive fully prepared, but I was told I'd be briefed when I got here.'

She allowed the merest hint of accusation to hang in the air. Finn had deliberately allowed her to turn up unprepared and wrong-footed. Although, she allowed, if she hadn't been too absorbed in her work to do the background check she'd promised herself, then she wouldn't have been quite so unprepared. She couldn't blame Finn for everything. Not this time.

'I'll take you to meet your team and brief you on the way. Leave your bags. One of the staff will take them to your rooms. The Hawk offices are in the stables. This way.'

Finn indicated the freshly laid woodchip path which wound away from the car park into the small copse which separated the newly refurbished offices from the castle. Alexandra hefted her leather laptop bag onto her shoulder and followed him—as if she didn't know the way to the stables just as well as he did.

'Amber said you're planning to open the castle up to the public and the launch is this week—is that right?' She barely waited for his nod before continuing. 'So, will you open all year round or just for Christmas? Seasonally? Weekends? What about the gardens? Will they have different opening hours and prices? Obviously I should have researched this before I started, but I only got off my flight a couple of hours ago.'

Every question was direct and to the point. Information-gathering for her job, no more. She had to treat this like any other job, Finn like any other client. It was the only way she was going to get through this.

'My apartments are in the top two floors of the west wing, and private, but the rest of the castle, including the grounds, will be open every day. Houses like this should be for everyone, not just for the privileged few.'

Alex swallowed, tightening her hold on her bag. Finn was living in her home, her beloved castle. Once she had daydreamed of such a situation, only in her dreams she had been living there alongside him. Was there a woman living with him? He wasn't wearing a wedding ring but that didn't mean anything. Not that she cared. She just hoped he'd learnt loyalty in the last decade. How to love, not how to use.

Although, judging by the way he was using her right now, she wouldn't bet on it.

'I assume all the paintings and furniture are still here? I know the castle was bought complete.'

She fought to suppress a dangerously revealing wobble in her voice. This was a job, not personal. Blakeley and all its treasures meant nothing to her. She couldn't think about the old oak furniture that dated back to Tudor times, or the famous collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. She couldn't remember the old dolls' house or Strawberry, her beloved pony.

Finn nodded. 'Luckily for me the castle was bought by an oligarch who never actually visited the place. Rumour in the village is that he wanted a hunting lodge and didn't realise the estate wasn't suitable for the kind of stag-hunting he'd planned. I don't think he even set foot in the place. Blakeley hadn't been touched since the day you left.'

Alex allowed herself one dangerous moment of memory. One flashback to the desperate girl with tears streaming down her face, the police tape still flickering around the lake, the hardness on Finn's face, the paparazzi pressed up against the gates. And the last look back before she had slipped out of the secret door in the wall and out of her life, leaving Lola in the headlines and her heart in Blakeley's keeping.

And then she pushed that memory firmly back down and picked up the pace. 'So, Finn,' she said as brightly as she could. 'Tell me more about your plans and what you need me to do.'

Work was the answer. Work had always been the answer. And for the next few weeks she suspected it was going to be her salvation.

CHAPTER THREE

ALEXANDRA DREW IN a deep breath and stared fixedly at her laptop screen, refusing to let the letters in front of her blur or her mind wander. She was focussed and busy, just the way she liked it, with all messy emotions kept at bay.

All around was a low hum of activity: the sound of a contented, productive office. Sitting here, it was hard to imagine that this building had once been ramshackle stables. There wasn't a whiff of straw or old leather to be found. When she'd first walked in she'd passed the place where her old mare, Strawberry, had been stabled, and for one terrifying moment had been catapulted back in time. Luckily, the receptionist had spoken to her and pulled her back to the present.

She didn't want to go back. She couldn't...

No, better to focus on the present. And if she concentrated hard she could do exactly that.

It helped that the once familiar room was now so unfamiliar. The architect had done an amazing job of transforming the dark old buildings into a light, airy and modern space. On the ground floor was a spacious reception area, meeting rooms, and what Finn had described as 'creative space', filled with sofas, board games and a kitchen area.

The executive offices were also housed on the bottom floor, but she hadn't been shown them. Instead Finn had taken her upstairs to the general offices, making it very clear what her position was.

Upstairs was one big office area, with pale wood desks blending in with old oiled beams, the walls matt white, the floor gleaming parquet, and wide windows showcasing breathtaking views of the parkland and estate gardens.

Alexandra had barely given them a glance. There was a reason she'd moved to London. Not only did she prefer the anonymity of the city, she also liked the way the noise and hubbub gave her so little space to think. London was overwhelming, and that was exactly how she liked it. There was no space to be an individual. The city assimilated you and you just had to be swept away.

Finn had introduced her to the team and his marketing director before leaving her with a curt nod. For a moment, watching him stride away, she had almost felt lost. She'd swiftly shaken that absurdity from her mind, but now, as she read through her handover notes and began to get to grips with her workload, it began to dawn on Alex just what Finn had achieved. Her childhood playmate, her first crush, the boy she had naively thought she might love, had achieved his dream.

She tapped a pencil absentmindedly on the desk as she looked around at the comfortable space filled with people hard at work. He had always proclaimed that one day he would travel around the world, that he'd own his own company and make a fortune, and live in a place like Blakeley, not just work there. And she'd believed him, that fierce determined, skinny boy with his messy dark brown hair and chocolate eyes. Even though he'd never even travelled as far as Oxford, and his father and grandfather and every generation before them had been born, had worked and died within the castle grounds.

But for a while it had looked as if his dreams had stagnated—a pregnant sister, an alcoholic father demanding all his time and attention. The boy who had dreamt of the world had found himself bound to one place, and meanwhile her burgeoning modelling career had taken her around the globe. How he must have resented it. Resented her.

The pencil stilled and the old questions once more flooded her mind. Was that why he had done it? Betrayed her when she had already been as down as a girl could be? The money from those photos must have freed him. And look what he had achieved with that freedom. Did he ever consider that he'd purchased it with her innocence and happiness? Or did he think that it was a fair trade for the generations of Hawkins who had been trampled on by generations of Beaumonts?

Another inhale. Another exhale. Push it all away. All those inconvenient feelings. Concentrate on the job in front of you.

She'd been Alex for so long there were times when she forgot that Lola had even existed. She needed that blissful ignorance now. She had to treat this as any other job, forget she knew Finn, not allow herself to speculate on how he'd found her and why he had gone to such trouble to bring her here. Forget everything but the task at hand.

She put the pencil down firmly, pulling her laptop closer, and as she did so a pretty dark-haired girl approached her desk.

'Hi, is it Alex or Alexandra?'

'I answer to both.' She smiled in welcome as she desperately searched her mind for the girl's name. Katy? Kitty?

'I'm Kaitlin.' The girl smiled shyly back. 'I doubt you'll remember anyone after that quick introduction. I've never known Finn to be in such a hurry. I thought you might want to get settled in today, but I'll make sure you get properly introduced to everyone tomorrow, so you know what they actually do. I'm the PR Assistant, so technically I report to you. I suggest you ask me anything you need to know and I'll do my best to point you in the right direction.'

Kaitlin's friendliness was disarming—and a relief after the frosty civility Finn had shown. 'That's good to know. Nice to meet you properly, Kaitlin.'

'Penelope asked me to talk you through her strategy and plans so you can go to her with any questions before things get too manic. Is now good?'

'Now's great, thanks.'

Alex looked at her neat notes, perfectly aligned, finding the long to-do list its usual balm. At first she had been at a loss as to why she was so urgently required. Penelope, Hawk's laid-up Head of PR was organised and had clearly taught her junior staff well. Looking through her notes, strategies and task lists, Alex saw that it appeared that there was little left for Alex to actually do, apart from follow instructions. A job anyone with half a brain could manage. It didn't seem worth her substantial fee, and her lurking suspicion that Finn had tracked her down and employed her simply to gloat about their reversal of fortune had deepened.

But as she read on it became clear that the plan Penelope had put together would need careful tweaks and adjustments as the castle was finally opened to the public, and the potential press interest needed to be handled by someone with experience. It was a job she was confident any of the temps on her books could handle, but she could see that Finn genuinely needed outside help, and as it was unlikely he'd manufactured Penelope's accident her presence here was in some way coincidental, even if her concern as to how he had tracked her down remained.

After all, if he could then so could any of those journalists who still ran occasional stories on the fall of the Beaumonts.

Kaitlin pulled a chair up to the desk. 'So, the first thing is the media launch party. May I...?'

Alex nodded permission and the younger woman manipulated the mouse on the PC Alex had been allocated and brought up the appropriate file.

'Here are the notes and the event plan. It's on Thursday night, and the party is for journalists, local dignitaries and VIPs. The castle will then have a soft opening for two weeks and will officially celebrate with a second, bigger party on the twenty-fourth of December. That party will include locals, colleagues, suppliers, partners...everyone, really.'

Alex inhaled as she read the timeline.

The official opening of the castle and grounds will be marked with a traditional Christmas Eve party.

'Christmas Eve?' Somehow she kept her voice calm.

'Apparently it's a real tradition at Blakeley. I hear the parties here used to be wild. Full of every kind of celebrity from pop stars to princes.'

'Right. Then we need to make sure we publicise that angle.'

Her heart began to thump; her hands felt damp. Christmas Eve. Her birthday. More than that, the day Blakeley had always celebrated Christmas.

For generations, friends and lovers, enemies and rivals had descended on Blakeley on Christmas Eve to feast and dance, intrigue and plot.

As a child Alex would spend the afternoon hosting a sumptuously over-the-top party for her friends—and then spend the evening darting through the dancing, flirting adults, sipping champagne from discarded glasses and sneaking canapés. No one had ever told her to go to bed. Instead she had been the spoilt princess of the house, petted and indulged, falling asleep on a chair or a sofa, where she would wake on Christmas morning to find herself covered with some discarded jacket.

In her mid-teens the two parties had been combined, with lithe, knowing teenagers far too at home amidst the glamour and heady atmosphere of the adult affair. At least they'd pretended they were at home. Alex had been very good at pretending. Until the night of her eighteenth birthday, that was, when her world had become real for the first time—for a few blissful hours, until the moment when it had stilled and stopped for ever.

She tried to inhale again, to take those sweet, calming breaths that kept her pulse even, her heart still, her head clear. But her breath caught in her throat.

I can't do this, she thought, panic threatening to flood through the walls she had built so carefully, so painstakingly, solid walls, covered in ivy and thorns, ready to repel all invaders. *I can't.*

But she could. She had no choice. Stay and deal with it or leave and run the risk of exposure.

She was stronger than this. Nothing and no one could hurt her now. Blakeley was just a place, Christmas Eve was just a date, her birthday would go unremarked. She would show Finn that he hadn't won. Not then, not now. And she would do so by making sure his planned launch ran absolutely perfectly.

Gradually her pulse returned to normal, her emotions stilled, and she calmly made another note.

Check the invite list for the Christmas party.

'Okay,' she said, her voice as steady as ever. 'What's next?'

The conversation with Kaitlin was illuminating in several ways, taking up the rest of the morning and lunch. It had been a long time since her airline breakfast, and Alex had had no chance to get anything to eat, but Kaitlin ordered a working lunch, which the two ate at the desk as they finished going through the notes. Alex's to-do list was getting satisfactorily ever longer.

At some point in the afternoon the younger woman finally returned to her own desk and Alex sank thankfully into work. There she could forget that Christmas Eve had once meant something, meant everything, deep in the absorption that working out how to craft and manipulate a story gave her.

As always, she lost track of time, and when she finally stretched and looked up she realised it was now dark outside, the office lights bright against the gloom. The room was almost deserted. Just a few people were left at their desks and they seemed to be packing up. Alex leaned back and stretched again, glad that the weeks ahead looked interesting but achievable.

She would give Finn no reason, no excuse to find fault with a single thing she did. He had the power and the influence now. With one word he could tell everyone who she was—who she'd used to be—and trash her fledgling agency's reputation. She wouldn't have thought him capable once. She knew better now.

'Alex?' Kaitlin hovered by her desk, her bag already on her shoulder. 'I'm off now. Is there anything you need before I leave?'

'No, I'm fine. Thank you. You've been so helpful.'

'I hope so.' The younger woman looked pleased, brushing her thick dark hair away from her face as her cheeks turned a little pink.

Alex looked around at the gleaming new office. 'I guess you haven't been based here very long?'

‘No, Finn’s been here since the summer, but the rest of us moved in October. There’s still a London office, but the plan is to scale it right back. For now some people are splitting their time between there and here. It’s easier for those of us without families, I guess. Finn has converted an old mill into flats and a few rent there. One or two rent in the village and quite a lot of us are in Reading —we’re not ready for a totally rural life just yet!’

‘It’s impressive that so many of you were ready to uproot yourselves.’

‘Finn’s so inspiring...his whole ethos. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.’

‘That’s reassuring to hear. I hope I’ll feel the same way.’

‘I hope so too.’

The deep masculine tones made both Alex and Kaitlin jump, the latter’s cheeks going even redder as Finn sauntered towards them.

‘Loyalty is very important here at Hawk.’

But it wasn’t Finn’s unexpected appearance that made Alex’s pulse speed up, and nor was it the sardonic gleam in his eye as he looked at her. It was the two small girls holding on to his hands. Finn had *children*? He had security, money, her old home and a family? Everything she had lost. Everything she would never have.

The oldest girl looked, to Alex’s inexperienced eye, to be about nine, the other around five. They were both in school uniform, their dark hair so like Finn’s own in messy plaits, and the same dark, dark eyes fixed on Alex.

‘It’s the Sleeping Princess,’ the younger one said, pointing at Alex. ‘Look, Saffy, it’s the Princess from the painting.’

* * *

Finn suppressed a grin as Alexandra’s startled gaze flew to his. Turned out the lady could show surprise after all.

‘Alex...’ The name felt clumsy on his tongue. ‘I’d like you to meet my nieces. Saffron, Scarlett, this is Alex. She’s working here for a little while.’

‘No, Uncle Finn.’ Scarlett tugged at his hand. ‘She’s a princess in disguise.’

Wasn’t that the truth?

‘Nice to meet you.’ Alex smiled uncertainly at the girls. ‘But I’m afraid it’s a case of mistaken identity. I’m not a princess, although it’s lovely to be thought one.’

‘You *are*,’ Scarlett insisted.

Kaitlin nodded. ‘I see what you mean, Scarlett. You’re thinking of that painting, aren’t you? The one of Blakeley Castle and the Sleeping Beauty? She does look a little like Alex.’

Alex’s cheeks reddened, just slightly. Finn was certain she knew exactly which painting Scarlett was referring to; it was a Rossetti, part of the castle’s famed Pre-Raphaelite collection. Alex’s great-great-grandmother was the model: a woman who in her youth had been as scandalous as her granddaughter several times removed.

What would the Pre-Raphaelite muse and late-Victorian It Girl think of her descendant? Would she recognise this poised, apparently emotion-free woman sitting in an office chair as if she were made for it, the very model of efficiency? Finn barely recognised her himself. It was all too easy to think her who she claimed to be.

‘If you say so, but I can’t see it myself,’ he said, taking pity on Alex, even though her resemblance to the woman in the painting had been notable when she was younger and was still remarkable, despite her decidedly un-Pre-Raphaelite appearance. ‘I’ll take it from here, Kaitlin.’ He nodded at the dark-haired girl. ‘You get off now or you’ll miss the last bus.’

‘Bus?’ Alex watched Kaitlin leave before swivelling back to face him. ‘Since when was there a bus?’

‘If I want my employees to come and bury themselves in the depths of the Chilterns then I have to make it manageable for them,’ Finn pointed out. ‘Some live on the estate in the Old Corn Mill, but that didn’t suit everyone, so a mini-bus goes between here and Reading several times a day. It picks up at the train station too. Not everyone is ready to leave London just yet. And when the employees don’t use it, the villagers do.’

‘How very Sir Galahad of you...riding to the rescue with your jobs and renovations and buses.’

Alex’s voice and face were bland, but Finn felt the barb, hidden as it was. The situation was getting to her more than she was letting on, and he had to admit he was relieved. It didn’t seem normal for anyone to be so serene when confronted with their past in the way she had been.

‘The village must be very grateful.’

He shrugged. ‘Relieved more than grateful. Goodness knows it needed a Sir Galahad to swoop in after the Beaumonts’ reign of benign neglect, followed by a decade of an indifferent and absent landlord.’

His barb wasn’t hidden at all, and he saw her flinch with some satisfaction. The Beaumonts had adored being the Lord and Lady of the Manor but they hadn’t been so interested in the people who lived and worked on the estate.

Blakeley might be situated in a wealthy commuter county, but the village itself was very rural, its twisty roads and the Chiltern Hills making even a short journey as the crow flew lengthy. Plus, it was a place where more than half the houses were owned by the castle, but where the jobs that had used to come with the houses had disappeared over the years.

Picturesque as Blakeley village was, not everyone wanted to rent a home where the colour of their front door and guttering was prescribed by the estate, public transport was non-existent and the nearest town a long, windy ten miles away.

‘The locals are just happy to see new life breathed into the place, and enough staff are renting to make the local businesses and the school viable. My village is breathing again.’

‘*Your v*illage? You wear Lord of the Manor pretty well.’

Another barb. Interesting.

Finn didn’t react, simply nodded towards the door. ‘Are you done here? The girls are ready for their dinner and I need to show you where you’re staying.’

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