

## LOVE LETTERS FROM A LORD

A Spindle Cove novella

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*Note: This is an unedited, exclusive sneak peek. There may be typos! The final book may have a few changes! Or many changes! But I wanted to offer a little peek as a thank you to all my patient readers who've been waiting to revisit Spindle Cove. I hope you enjoy!*

## Chapter One

The village of Spindle Cove had a certain reputation. The quiet enclave tucked away on the Sussex coast was a place for well-bred young ladies who were, well, *different*. Some were painfully shy; others were recovering from heartbreak. Others had interests or pursuits considered unladylike by their despairing families—such as scandalous poetry, or natural history, or a bit of light espionage.

If you asked society, Spindle Cove was a dead-letter office for young ladies who didn't fit in.

If you asked the young ladies who didn't fit in, Spindle Cove was *paradise*.

And though the world might deem the village's residents unique, the young ladies were equal in the eyes of Sally Bright. To Sally, they were all customers. After all, a shilling was a shilling—whether it came from the purse of a spinster or a queen. Whatever the young ladies of Spindle Cove wished to purchase, she was eager to sell it in the family shop: Brights' All Things.

Sally took immense pride in the place. She kept the shelves dusted, tidy, and lined with everything a young lady might require, from bonnets to boots. In addition, she stocked the small things a young lady might not strictly *require*, but would purchase anyway. Pear drops, shell buttons, drawing pencils, tiny pots of scented hair gloss, leaflets of poetry. She cleverly tucked these wares into the corners of shelves and displays, so the customer who happened upon them would feel a thrill of a discovery and delight. That hint of magic kept young ladies returning to the shop again and again, never knowing what they might find. And *that* kept the pennies and shillings flowing into the till.

Sally had long ago learned to keep her eye trained on the ledger balance, as a matter of survival. She was the second of eight children. Her father, a violent drunkard and smuggler, had been in and out of jail for as long as she could remember. Their mother had left. Without careful management of the shop, she and her siblings would have landed in the poorhouse ages ago.

On this particular summer afternoon, however, she couldn't make the sale.

"I don't have any sable paintbrushes just now, Miss Newton." She returned from the storeroom, dusting her hands. "Badger and ox hair, yes. But no sable."

"I didn't suppose you would," Miss Newton said, "but it seemed worth asking."

"It's always worth asking. If you can wait until Tuesday next, I'll order some in. My brother Errol's going to London."

Miss Newton's face brightened. "You'd do that?"

“Of course. Don’t you see the sign above the door? Brights’ *All Things*. We live up to those words. If we don’t have it in the shop, we’ll procure it.”

They would also mark up the price a bit and add a reasonable charge for delivery, but that wasn’t avarice. It was business. This was the All Things Shop. Not the All Things Charitable Venture.

The bell above the door jangled. Sally looked up from her ledger to see Pauline, her oldest and dearest friend. “Well, this is a welcome surprise. I didn’t expect to see you today.”

“I ought to be at home,” Pauline replied, “but the children were being such devils this morning. Every time I turn around, Jonathan’s emptying another closet or cupboard, and Rose is at that age where she puts everything in her mouth. I needed to escape.”

Hoofbeats clopped in the lane, announcing the approach of the Royal Mail. “All Things” included the twice-weekly post. Sally took a few shillings from the till and prepared to fetch the letters from the driver.

“I’ll go,” Pauline volunteered.

“Here.” Sally held out the coins. “For the postage due.”

“I can pay. It’s nothing. Never mind it.”

“I *do* mind it. You’ll put my ledger out of balance.”

Pauline relented with a smile. “Far be it from me to sabotage your accounting.”

Sally knew her friend meant to be generous, but she hated any reminder of just how far they’d grown apart. When they were girls growing up, their lives and stations had been similar. Sally was the shopkeeper’s daughter, and Pauline was just Pauline Simms from the farm down the lane. Now Pauline was Pauline York, the Duchess of Halford, to whom a few shillings were

nothing. And Sally was... Well, Sally was still here. Behind the shop counter, counting every penny.

As time went by, they had more and more difficulty finding common ground. Sally told herself that it happened as girls became women, no matter how one tried to fight it. But the struggle was all the more difficult when one's girlhood friend grew up to be a duchess.

When Pauline brought in the post, Sally sorted through the letters. Upon seeing a familiar daub of crimson sealing wax stamped with a lion crest, she groaned. "Another letter for Miss Honeycutt. I suppose I'll add it to the heap with the others."

"Add it to the heap? How many letters does she receive?"

"At least one a week, sometimes two. Always from the same London address."

"Her family?"

"A suitor, I hear."

Pauline's eyebrows lifted. "Intriguing."

"Impossible, you mean. Whoever he is, he apparently never considers that someone must pay the postage on this end." Sally removed the twine-bound bundle of letters from a drawer and dropped it on the counter. It landed with an impressive thud. "She doesn't even collect them. I've been adding the postage to her account, but the debt is mounting, and I worry she never means to pay it."

"Whoever he is, he's persistent." Pauline tapped the letters with a single fingertip. She lowered her voice. "Aren't you tempted to open them?"

"You know I am." She couldn't help a little smile. "Don't think it's been easy to resist, either."

Normally, Sally loved nothing so much as intrigue. She subscribed to all the London scandal sheets and read them front to back—not only for amusement, but for profit. Fresh gossip brought customers into the shop. However, she had a strict policy of discretion when it came to the Spindle Cove ladies' own secrets. Breaking their confidence would be a betrayal—and bad for business, too.

“I wonder at the story behind it all,” Pauline mused. “Maybe they’ve fallen out over a misunderstanding. Perhaps her parents drove them apart, and they’ve forbidden her to write. Maybe he’s been injured in a mysterious accident, or has a wasting disease.”

“What he’s wasting is paper and ink. If Miss Honeycutt’s come all the way to Spindle Cove to get away from him, she must have had good reason. No doubt he’s a worthless bounder.”

“You won’t even admit the possibility of true love? You’re not so jaded as that. I own the subscription library, remember? I know you have a weakness for romance.”

“In *novels*. In real life, my passion is reserved for pounds, shillings, and pence. The only letter that would capture my heart is one scribbled on the back of a banknote.” Sally leafed through the open ledger to add the postage to Miss Honeycutt’s growing bill. “Considering the amount Miss Honeycutt owes the shop, she’s fortunate I’m not tallying interest.”

“What about the gentleman writing her? Maybe he can be made to pay.”

“I don’t even know his name. Just his initials. T.S.” Sally scanned the fine script. “The return address is in Cavendish Street. Rather a fancy sounding address.”

“Certainly not a cheap one.”

“Of course not.” Sally clucked her tongue. “Only the most privileged of gentlemen would keep sending unanswered letters, week after week, heedless of the expense incurred on the other side.”

“Well, the mystery must keep for another day. I don’t dare stay away from home any longer.” Pauline sighed. “I’ll stop by the Bull and Blossom before starting home. I’ve been yearning for some of Mr. Fosbury’s teacakes.”

After bidding her friend farewell, Sally looked askance at the bundle of unopened letters on the counter. In truth, she had nothing against romance, when it happened to other people—but this was growing ridiculous. Obviously, Miss Honeycutt did not intend to answer the man.

Sally, however, had no difficulty saying what needed to be said.

If this anonymous gentleman could not take a hint, she would spell the reality out for him—in bold script and clear terms, impossible to ignore.

She drew out a scrap of paper and dipped her pen.

*Dear Sir...*

## Chapter Two

Thomas held his breath as he slid the key into the lock and turned it. Dawn was starting to seep through the cracks of London's narrow lanes and terraced houses. With any luck, his landlady would still be abed.

Fortune was not on his side this morning.

Mrs. Jones stood waiting in the entrance hall, posed in an unmistakable attitude of matronly disapproval. Hands on hips. Foot, singular, a-tap. Mouth thinned to a line and nostrils flared.

"Lord Stratton," she declared.

An inauspicious start.

He really ought to find new lodgings. Until recently, there had seemed no reason to bother. He was supposed to be married in a few months' time, after which he and Rachel would have taken Stratton House here in London. Now his betrothed had run off to "Spinster Cove," leaving their wedding plans in limbo.

Thomas placed his hat on a hook. "Good morning, Mrs. Jones. You're looking especially robust today."

"When you took rooms here, I told you the same as I tell all the gentlemen. I do not countenance debauchery in this house."

"Let me assure you, madam, I have not sullied this house with any debauchery." He spread his arms, indicating his rumpled clothing. "As you can plainly see, I've been out all night. My debauchery took place elsewhere."

"The washerwoman says your laundry smelled of perfume. Again."

“Yes. I pay a weekly visit to a pampered, indiscreet Frenchwoman.” He allowed himself a moment to enjoy her shocked expression before adding, “The unhappy consequence of being a dutiful grandson. Grand-Mère is fond of rich scent.”

“Lord Stratton, I—”

“Thomas,” he corrected. “We’ve discussed this, several times. I am Lord *Thomas* Stratton.”

“Well, that’s what I said. Lord Stratton.”

Thomas rubbed the bridge of his nose. Perhaps his ninth attempt at this explanation would stick. “The ‘Thomas’ is important, you see. That’s what makes it clear that I am the second son and hold no title. My elder brother holds the title—which is not Stratton, but Kirkwood. He is the *fourth* Marquess of Kirkwood, to be exact. Younger sons of marquesses—of which I am one—are known as Lord Given-Name Family-Name. Therefore, I am Lord *Thomas* Stratton.” He paused. “But as we are such good friends, please do call me Lord Thomas.”

He gave her a smile.

She did not return it.

He climbed the stairs at a trudge. “Certain people of my acquaintance—including the woman to whom I am engaged—might wish I *did* hold a title. However, I am perfectly content to be the younger son. While my brother’s responsibilities keep him at the estate, I am free to take bachelor’s rooms in London. Here. With you.” He reached the landing and fished a key from his waistcoat pocket. “So you see, Mrs. Jones, if I were ‘Lord Stratton’, we might never have met at all. What a tragedy that would be.”

She harrumphed with startling violence.

He regarded her from the top of the stairs. “Good God. Have you been holding that in all this time, like a sneeze? That can’t be good for your health.”

“You had a parcel in the mail yesterday. I took the liberty of putting it inside your rooms.”

“Of course you did,” he muttered, letting himself into the apartment and locking the door behind him. His landlady would take any excuse to snoop. Well, she wouldn’t have found any evidence of...whatever it was she expected to find. An opium habit? Fast women in his bed? A grisly murder, perhaps?

In point of fact, Thomas kept his debauchery rather tame. He’d spent last night at the club. Nothing especially titillating. An old friend from Cambridge had come into Town, and some of the fellows had gathered to reminisce over a bottle of brandy.

He slung his coat over the back of a chair and found the promised package waiting on his table. The return address showed Sussex.

His intended bride had replied at last.

He took out a knife and cut through the twine, then pushed aside the brown paper with impatient curiosity.

Inside, however, he did not find a response from his betrothed.

The parcel contained his letters *to* her. All of them. Unopened.

Thomas rifled through the bundle, cursing at a volume his landlady was certain to hear. Seventeen letters in eleven weeks, and Rachel hadn’t read a one of them? At least this would explain why he hadn’t received a reply.

Beneath the bundle, he found a folded note addressed in an unfamiliar hand—so small, he'd almost crumpled it with the brown wrapping paper. It was labeled in an impatient scrawl, *Whoever You Are*.

He opened it.

*Dear Sir,*

*I don't know who you are or what you're about, but kindly cease writing to Miss Honeycutt. She doesn't want anything to do with you and hasn't read a single one of your letters. Since she's clearly not going to reply, and you clearly have no intention of relenting—I'll be so bold as to say what she won't.*

*Forget her. Abandon any hope of a response. Carry on with your life.*

*Signed,*

*Miss Sally Bright*

*Brights' All Things Shop*

*Spindle Cove, Sussex*

Thomas's body steamed with anger.

An "All Things Shop," did she call it? Well, it appeared there were at least *two* things this shop didn't keep in stock: manners and respect.

Carry on with your life, she had the cheek to write.

Truly. *Truly*. From a shopgirl, no less.

Miss Sally Bright. Perhaps she was not a shopgirl at all, but some sour-faced, shriveled spinster with nothing better to do than stick her craggy nose into other people's concerns. He

could picture her in vivid detail, down to her yellowed snaggletooth and the hairy wart on her chin.

No, the *two* hairy warts on her chin.

Three.

A dozen of them, all over her face.

He crumpled the offensive, impudent missive, intending to throw it into the grate and light a roaring fire to burn it to cinders, despite the fact that it was a warmish summer morning.

*Carry on with your life.*

How dare she. Didn't she know who he was?

Well, considering that the letter was directed to "whoever you are," he supposed she might not. Very well, then. He would inform her.

Thomas pulled out a chair and sat, giving the tails of his coat an irritated flick. Or he would have done, had he been wearing a tailcoat. Damn. The lack of one rather impeded his fit of pique. He got up, went to the closet, and put *on* a tailcoat, just to have the pleasure of flicking the tails as he took his chair.

Better.

He picked up a quill and sharpened it angrily with his penknife until it was keen enough to draw blood, unstoppered a bottle of his blackest, most emphatic ink, and removed a crisp sheet of blank paper from his *escritoire*.

*To Miss Sally Bright—*

*How dare you, madam, presume to advise me on my personal affairs. Your interference is most unwelcome and unnecessary, and if you do not wish to have your establishment shuttered, you will follow the instructions herein.*

*Enclosed is another letter for Miss Honeycutt. Deliver it to her by hand, and stand over her until she reads it. I demand a response. This much is my right as her intended groom.*

*Signed,*

*Lord Thomas Ambrose Merriweather Stratton*

A reply arrived within the week.

It was not the one he'd requested.

*To Lord Thomas Ambrose Merriweather Stratton,*

*No doubt you signed such a lofty name to impress me, or hoping to intimidate me. I am not impressed or intimidated. Your threat to shutter my establishment is as absurd as it is insulting. As for your command that I chase a woman down and force her to read your letter? You are not my employer, sir. I have better things to do.*

*Do not mistake me for an ally. I am not on your side. Miss Honeycutt is close to me in age, and since I am perfectly able to make decisions without a man's help, I trust that she can, too. I respect her wishes. I could not be less interested in yours.*

*This correspondence is at an end. Any further letters will go unanswered.*

*Stop writing.*

*Signed,*

*Miss Sally Bright*

Thomas stared at the letter, speechless with fury. He had to pace the room a few times and open a bottle of wine before he could settle his temper sufficiently to read it again.

So this “Sally Bright” baggage claimed to be the same age as Rachel? He refused to believe it. Accepting this information might require that he lower his estimate of two dozen hairy warts. However, youth didn’t mean she couldn’t have a snaggletooth. Yes, he would hold tight to that.

Her appearance was beside the point, of course. Once again, she’d shown the unmitigated gall to express an opinion on his personal affairs. Not only express an opinion, but tell him what to do. Even now, when she knew him to be a lord. Unthinkable. Unprecedented. No shopgirl would dare.

And what country shopgirl wrote in such a practiced hand, and with such an educated vocabulary, anyway?

He read the letter through again, refilled his glass, and then read it several times more. By the time he’d finished his bottle of wine, a suspicion had begun to form. The truth was clear.

He was corresponding with an imposter.

*Miss Sally Bright—if indeed that is your true name—*

*You are suspiciously well-expressed for a shopgirl. Admit it. Miss Honeycutt herself is dictating these letters.*

*Rachel, your game is up.*

*Signed,*

T.S.

*Lord Thomas Stratton,*

*Yes, Sally Bright is indeed my true name. I am not Miss Honeycutt's secretary, and I am not a shopgirl. I am the proprietress of this shop, in partnership with my brother. And—do be seated to absorb the shock—I am fully literate. We have a well-stocked subscription library in our village, and I use it. The last three books I read were: The Mysteries of Udolpho, Northanger Abbey, and The Young Merchant's Manual of Double-Entry Bookkeeping. However, I don't have much time for reading. I chiefly work with numbers and ledgers. For example, here is a copy of Miss Honeycutt's outstanding credit. You will see that I am out a full ten pence in postage each time one of your letters arrives, and the total has mounted to a significant sum. Not included in this list is the expense of paper and ink to reply, nor the cost of my time and patience.*

*I don't expect that you have many practical skills, but don't you gentlemen of leisure have a few talents? Fox hunting, brandy swilling, money squandering, and the like? I suggest you take on a new challenge: listening to women. Here is a chance to practice. Kindly heed Miss Honeycutt's wishes, and my own.*

*STOP WRITING.*

*With all due irritation,*

*Sally Bright*

*P.S. A three-line letter? Stop wasting paper.*

*I.*

*Will.*

*Use.*

*Paper.*

*As.*

*I.*

*Please.*

—*T. Stratton*

When Sally pried open the crate, this defiant message—eight words, one full sheet of paper!—lay at the top. She shook her head at the wastefulness and set the page aside. Later she would use it for her little sister's lessons.

Reading: Learn these words, Bess.

Writing: Copy them out three times in your neatest hand.

Mathematics: If a sheet of fine paper sells for thruppence in the shop, and allowing a penny for ink and sealing wax, how much did this fool man spend per word?

Declamation: Recite a proverb on the evil of wastefulness.

Housekeeping: Crumple the letter well and use it to light the fire.

Beneath the obnoxious note and a layer of straw, she found a full sheaf of fine-quality paper, two bottles of ink, a pair of quills, a silver penknife, and two sticks of sealing wax. There was also an envelope containing a bank note and a letter.

*Miss Sally Bright—*

*Very well. I will believe you are the shopkeeper you claim to be. Therefore, I write to propose a business arrangement. Be assured, I have no interest in employing you as an advocate. If I wished assistance in swaying Miss Honeycutt's opinions or behavior, I would find someone better qualified. I merely desire news of the woman with whom I entered into a betrothal contract and made plans to spend a lifetime beside. Any decent sort of man would wish the same.*

*I am prepared to compensate you handsomely for the time and effort. Here are my terms: For regular reports of Miss Honeycutt's health and well-being, I offer three shillings per week.*

*If I am sufficiently assured that she has read my letter, I will pay the sum of one guinea.*

*On my receipt of a response to said letter, written in her own hand, you shall have ten pounds.*

*If you are as sensible with money as you claim, you will not refuse such generous terms. I shall send any future letters franked by my brother, and thus you cannot complain about the cost of postage on receipt. The contents of this package leave you well supplied for writing letters in response.*

*I await your first report.*

*—T. Stratton*

*P.S. Another shilling for your thoughts on Northanger Abbey.*

## Chapter Three

In principle, the Bull and Blossom served as Spindle Cove's teashop by day and tavern by night. In actuality, those two purposes were enjoyably mingled, no matter the time of day.

Such was the case when Sally entered this afternoon. Near the window, Mrs. Fosbury was serving fruited teacakes to a trio of ladies. On the other side of the establishment, five men crowded around a table littered with empty pint glasses.

Sally knew them well, all five. Their social classes ranged from that of blacksmith to duke—but since each of them had married a woman of Spindle Cove, they'd become unlikely allies.

"Sally!" they called in unison.

The rousing welcome told her the five dissimilar men shared one quality today—they were, all of them, well in their cups at half-three in the afternoon.

"Look at you all, reunited at last," Sally said. "It's been almost two years since I've seen you all in one place."

"Thorne and Bram have just arrived from London." Pauline's husband, the Duke of Halford—Griff, as he preferred to be called—stood and offered his chair. "Join us, Sally."

"Thank you, but I'm looking for Miss Honeycutt. Have any of you seen her today?"

Aaron Dawes, the village blacksmith, furrowed his brow in concentration. "Which one is she?"

"She's about my age. A bit taller. Pretty. Wears fine frocks. Polished accent, graceful airs... Never pays her bills."

"Is this the young lady with the suitor who keeps sending letters?" Griff asked.

Sally decided to sit down and join them. “Yes.”

“Pauline mentioned it. I thought you’d told the man to stop writing.”

“I *did*. But he didn’t listen. Apparently, he’s Lord Thomas Ambrose Merriweather Stratton, and he doesn’t take directions from shopgirls.”

Bram muttered a curse. “Perhaps he’d take orders from Lord General Victor Bramwell, Earl of Rycliff. I’ll write him a letter myself.”

“No need for a letter,” Thorne said menacingly. “I’ll pay him a visit.”

“We all will.” Colin Sandhurst, Lord Payne, drained his pint and slammed the glass to the table. “Time to reassemble the Lords of Perdition.”

The other men groaned.

“What?” Colin protested. “You lot had the time of your lives that winter.”

“Freezing our arses off in a snowstorm,” Bram grumbled.

“But we held our own in that smugglers’ den.”

Sally cringed. Lord Payne’s wild schemes were the last thing this situation needed.

“There’s no need for foolish antics.”

“I think you mean *manly heroics*,” Colin corrected.

“Right,” Sally said. “No need for those, either. I have the situation in hand.”

“I’d never doubt you do.” Aaron sounded, by far, the most sober of the group.

“I’d best be going.” She rose from the table and straightened her work apron. “I’ve left Cathy alone in the shop too long already. The till’s going to be a full sixpence off, at the least. If you see Miss Honeycutt, send word?”

Bram leaned back in his chair. “Why don’t you tell this Lord Thomas to sod off and solve his own problems? His failed romance is not your responsibility.”

“Oh, I know it’s not my responsibility. It’s an opportunity. You see, he’s quoted me a bounty. Ten pounds for Miss Honeycutt’s reply.” She lifted an eyebrow. “This isn’t a matter of romance, gentlemen. I’m in this for the profit.”

After Sally left, the men looked at each other.

“I don’t know about you lot,” Colin said, “but I’m supporting Team Honeycutt. Lord Thomas Stratton’s made a poor showing.”

“Pauline called it romantic.” Griff motioned for a new round of ale.

“A heap of letters at the village shop, romantic?” Colin swore. “We could teach the man a thing or two about wooing. Take Bram, for instance. If he ever let Susannah slip away—”

Bram swore into his pint. “Would never happen. The devil would have to take me first.”

“Yes, yes. But if you *did*, would you plead your case in a few letters and leave it at that? Of course not. None of us would. We’d do something truly impressive and romantic to prove our love. Any of us. Even Thorne.”

Thorne scowled.

“Naturally, I’d be the most successful,” Colin went on. “But the rest of you would at least make an effort.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Griff said. “What makes you think you’d be the best? That’s bollocks.”

Colin cocked an eyebrow. “Care to bet, gentlemen?”

“Not really,” Bram said.

“Excellent.” Colin lifted his voice. “I hereby declare this summer to be Spindle Cove’s inaugural Most Romantic Husband competition.”

Thorne rubbed his eyes. “Bloody hell.”

“Here are the rules.” Colin leaned forward, animated. “We go in turns. One man a week. That gives us each time to strategize. But no extravagant gifts. And outside assistance is prohibited. No violinists, crooning tenors, acrobats—”

“Acrobats?” Bram echoed, incredulous. “Who would even *want* acrobats?”

“Doesn’t matter, does it? Because they’re disallowed,” Colin said. “Each man’s efforts stand on their own. Most romantic husband wins.”

“How could one possibly judge such a competition?” Aaron asked.

“By results,” Colin answered.

“Results.” Thorne stared at him. “What kind of results?”

Colin rolled his eyes, impatient. “The marital kind of results. Arse-raked-by-fingernails, ears-ringing-from-cries-of-delight, worshipped-as-a-god-the-next-day results.”

“Sounds like an average Tuesday for me,” Griff said.

Colin ignored him. “Self-reported, of course. No lurid details required. We’re gentlemen here. We can take one another at our word. Except for you, Dawes. You can’t join.”

“Why not?” Aaron asked.

“Two reasons. First, your wife’s too easily impressed. Diana already looks at you as though you forged not only the sun, but the moon and stars and any stray comet streaking past. It’s an unfair advantage. You don’t have to work at impressing her.”

“You don’t think I work for my results?” Aaron raised an eyebrow. “I assure you, I put in plenty of hard, sweaty labor. My forge gets steamy. Dirty, too.”

Colin pointed at the man, cutting him off. “That’s the other reason you’re not allowed. Diana is my sister-in-law. I take my brotherly role to heart. Therefore, I do *not* want to hear about your amorous activities.”

“I’m merely saying,” Aaron went on, “I know how to wield my hammer.”

“*No*,” Colin shouted over him. “Not listening!”

“And the anvil in my smithy has seen more than a few—”

Colin clapped his hands over his ears. “FOR HE’S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW, FOR HE’S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW, FOR HE’S—”

Aaron held up his hands in surrender. “Fine. I’ll spare you the sooty details. I want no part of your bet anyway. What man needs to gamble when he’s already won the world?” He folded his coat over his arm. “I’m going to go home to tell my beautiful wife I love her, mend the cupboard door that’s been squeaking, and watch the little ones while she has a hot bath. I expect that’ll earn me results enough.”

After Aaron left, Colin looked around the table. “The rest of you, you’re in?”

“Why does this strike me as an exceptionally bad idea?” Bram asked.

“Probably because you know you’ll lose,” Colin said. “You can decline to participate, but that makes me winner by default.”

“I’m in,” Griff said. “We’re here all summer. Might as well have some amusement.”

“Is there some sort of prize we’re vying for?” Bram asked.

“Pride. And the satisfaction of a job well done. Results are their own reward.” Colin clapped Thorne on the shoulder. “Right, Thorne?”

Thorne shook his head. “Don’t count me as part of your idiocy. I’m only here to finish my ale.”

“Oh, you. We all know that beneath that stern façade lies the tender heart of a poet.”

Colin ruffled the man’s hair.

“A poet, you say?” Thorne’s knuckles cracked as he made a fist. “What rhymes with ‘Take your hand off me or suffer a slow and miserable death’?”

Colin withdrew his hand.

“So.” Griff smacked the table. “Who’s first?”

“I am.” Bram pushed back from the table and stood on wobbly legs. “And afterward”—he drunkenly leveled a finger at his friends—“when you all despair of besting me, I’ll magnanimously accept your forfeits.”